

CHESS KING

A Novel by Chang Shi-kuo
Translated by Ivan David Zimmerman



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FOREWORD

by Joseph S. M. Lau

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It is purely incidental that we have two works of modern Chinese fiction by the same name: *Chess King*. The one by Chang Shi-kuo, now in Ivan David Zimmerman's English translation, was published in 1975. The other by Ah Cheng, a writer from the People's Republic of China, is a short story that appeared in *Shanghai Wenxue* in 1984.

However, beyond the identity of title, there is little in common between these two narratives. Ah Cheng's *Chess King* by the name of Wang Yi-sheng is a true aficionado of the ancient Chinese game *xiangqi*, purportedly invented by Niu Seng-ru (799-847) of the Tang dynasty. Whenever he was at play, Wang experiences a feeling of euphoria which made him oblivious to the realities of the world. It was *xiangqi* that gave Wang a sense of worth and meaning during the harrowed years of the Cultural Revolution.

Chang Shi-kuo's *Chess King*, on the other hand, is a "Wonder Kid" who is able to circumvent his opponents by way of "clairvoyance". That the "Wonder Kid" becomes the reluctant "Chess King" is a deliberate design: for Chang Shi-kuo's work is focused on how industrialization has affected the traditional Chinese concept of values in Taiwan since

the island began to industrialize in the mid-sixties. The schoolmates who warmed to one another while picnicking in the open air in *Earth* (1970) now cool themselves in Taipei's air-conditioned seafood restaurants in the present novel. Rustic China that Taiwan once was, it is now a blueprint of the acquisition society where *homo economicus* looms large.

It is in this context that his novel invites our attention. The people who are supposed to arrange the "talent show" on TV for the "Wonder Kid" are more interested in his gift for stock-market forecasting. Suddenly an ungainly youngster at whom few people would take a second look has become an object of hot pursuit, like the legendary Golden Goose.

Though conceived as a realistic commentary on Taiwan's social changes, *Chess King* is no less powerful as a moral allegory: What has the "Wonder Kid" actually seen that incapacitates his clairvoyance? Is it an apocalyptic vision of the capitalist society? For this reason, this work should command as much attention for readers in Taiwan as for those in the so-called "developing" countries. As the People's Republic modernizes, we begin to hear people in dark stripe suits quoting such exotic terms as L.O.C. and F.O.B. instead of Mao Tze-tung's mottos.

Chess King is a Chinese version of *Comédie Humaine* on a smaller scale, and we are grateful to Mr Zimmerman for making it available to the English-reading public.

1

Zhang Shi-jia flagged three taxis before he finally found one equipped with air-conditioning. He and Cheng Ling crawled into it. Zhang cut in as the driver was about to pull away.

"Take it easy. First, turn on the air-conditioning."

"Sorry, sir. It's not working."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? Let's take another one."

Zhang opened the taxi door; Cheng sat motionless.

"Forget it. The heat won't kill you."

"If there are air-conditioned cabs, what's the point in not taking them?"

Cheng reached over and shut the door.

"Driver. To the TV Towers."

The cabbie turned his head and looked at them.

"Never mind about him, let's go," Cheng said.

Zhang had to give in.

"Well, alright. To the TV Towers."

The driver started up, muttering, "The young generation — all they can think of is comfort. When we first came to Taiwan, we didn't even have electric fans; still, we managed to get by. Now, you have to have air-conditioning even when you're in the car. You people don't know how lucky you are."

Zhang sat straight up but Cheng held on to him and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"Come on, everybody take one."

The cabbie lit up, then continued talking.

"You two gentlemen look like you've been to college. A school has a certain code of conduct, you know. Every profession has its own code. Taxi drivers have theirs too: when you get into a cab, you stay in for your ride. This gentleman here wanted to get out as soon as he saw mine didn't have air-conditioning. Fortunately, I'm a good-natured fellow. Somebody else would have set you straight."

Cheng Ling grimaced at Zhang Shi-jia.

"What time did you fix for the appointment?"

"Four-thirty."

"What kind of chess?"

"Bet you a hundred dollars you can't guess. Three tries ..."

"Go? *Xiangqi*?* Western chess?"

"Gobang."**

"Gobang is hardly a game. The form is too elementary."

"At least it's better than a calligraphy competition, or an abacus contest. I've run out of ideas. Can you come up with better instructions?"

Cheng Ling looked out of the window. Suddenly he shouted, "Watch out!"

The taxi veered right, grazing a motorcyclist. The cabbie shouted, "Do you want to be killed?"

Zhang looked back. The motorcycle was lying by the side of the road.

"It's your fault. You were too far left. You crossed the line."

"It's my fault? You don't know what you're talking about. Motorcycles cannot go into the outside lane. He tried to overtake us and he crossed over to my lane. If there's an accident, it's his fault. What do you mean by saying I crossed the line? You're scholars; you shouldn't

speak without engaging your brains! If you didn't see clearly, then don't make things up!"

Cheng and Zhang shook their heads. Randomly, Cheng whistled a tune. The cab stopped right across the street from the TV Towers. Cheng leaned forward.

"Could you please make a U-turn?"

"No."

Zhang opened the door and jumped out. Cheng paid, and came after him.

"We took the wrong boat. I was going crazy in there."

"It's all your fault. I told you to change cab, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"If you hadn't suggested getting out, he wouldn't have got angry."

"So it's all my fault," Zhang laughed. "We had to listen to a lecture because I wanted to change cab, so I asked for it."

As Cheng Ling pushed the revolving door, a blast of cold air hit them straight on. Zhang opened his collar to let in the cool breeze. Cheng walked towards the elevator where three young women were also waiting at the door. When the doors opened, Cheng went in after them. He pressed '9' before turning to the girls.

"Three, please. Thank you."

At the third floor, the girls got off. Cheng pressed '9' again.

"New crop? They didn't look too bad."

"Probably trainees." Zhang looked at his watch. "Right on the dot. I think we can finish in half an hour."

"Are you going to play Gobang?"

"No. I just want to talk to the little squirt. If it looks like there are possibilities, then I'll go find some expert to test him."

"How have the ratings been for your programme *Wonder Kids* recently?"

"Not so hot. We have our base audience, but we're not getting anywhere. I don't think I'll last long as director. Remember, it was your idea. If I get the boot, I'll settle with you."

"My idea wasn't so bad. It's up to you to find some real child prodigies, though. Who's going to watch your fake ones?"

"Where in Taiwan would there be that many wonder kids? Figure this out: a population of 14 million and one prodigy per 200 000 people. That's seventy altogether. *Wonder Kids* has already featured thirty, so we've used up almost half. What else can I do?"

"You have yet to find one that deserves to be called a prodigy. You get someone good at calligraphy and call him a wonder kid! Now you've sunk to the level of Gobang players. No wonder your programme is being written off."

"Don't be too clever. Just give me an idea. Please!"

There was a piano in the hall on the ninth floor. Ding Yu-mei was seated at it, studying some music scores. At the sight of them, she smiled and waved.

"Hi."

"What are you doing here?" Zhang asked. "Where's the boy?"

"He's in your office. I really didn't have anything to talk to him about. And I can't play Gobang. Ask him about something else, and you won't get any response. A real block of wood. Try talking to him, you'll find out."

"Do you want to come along with us and talk to him?"

Ding Yu-mei wrinkled up her nose. Zhang looked at Cheng who hurriedly added, "I'll wait for you outside, too. I can't play Gobang, either."

Zhang sighed. "No talent for two weeks, then I get this

kid just awaiting our certification, but our dear young lady doesn't like him."

"I didn't say I didn't like him. I just don't know the chess game. Maybe he plays wonderfully. Go in and talk to him."

"Okay. Don't go away, I'll be right back."

Ding Yu-mei waited till Zhang had left, then quietly asked Cheng, "You are serious you can't play Gobang?"

"I can play a little, but I have no desire to take on a prodigy."

Ding Yu-mei laughed and stood up.

"What prodigy? He's just a kid with a streak of talent in him, that's all. The last few times we had singers, violinists and pianists, the so-called musical prodigies. It really was too much. But last month's maths whiz was okay. Did you see him?"

"Uh ... no. I was busy at that time."

"Liar! Of course you wouldn't want to watch *Wonder Kids*."

"How could I miss a programme hosted by Ding Yu-mei? Even if I don't like looking at prodigies, I still like looking at you, eh?"

Ding Yu-mei winked at him, got up, and closed the piano. Cheng Ling took out his cigarettes. Ding Yu-mei picked one.

"Who discovered him, anyway?"

"I don't know. I think it was the kid of some relative of someone in the office." Ding Yu-mei pulled a lighter out of the back pocket of her pants. "At first it was fun. Then everyone started sending their kids over, all swearing theirs was a prodigy. If we didn't put him on, they'd make a scene. It all made Zhang very sad. He always says you caused him a lot of trouble. He's sorry he listened to you."

"That joker treats his friends like stepping-stones. Come on, let's go and have some water-melon."

"Now? Doesn't Zhang Shi-jia want us to wait for him?"

"We'll eat downstairs. As soon as we've finished, we can come up and look for him."

In the elevator, Ding Yu-mei gazed at Cheng Ling. "You look like you've grown fatter again."

"I'm like you girls. That word is taboo."

"Not in my case though. I want so much to put on weight but it's a pity that I just can't make it. My mum has always been afraid I'm too skinny. She thinks there are some parasitic worms in my stomach. She wants me to eat *digenea simplex* to kill them. Isn't that crazy?"

"When I was a kid, I ate too much of that stuff. All the worms were killed, and my digestive system became too effective. Look at me today."

Ding Yu-mei's eyes widened. "Is it really that effective? I guess I ought to try it for myself."

"But first you've got to quit smoking. *Digenea simplex* and smoke don't mix. They'll mess up your system."

"I know you're trying to fool me. I smoke just for enjoyment. I never really inhale. Oh, I want to show you something."

Ding Yu-mei raised her left hand.

"Congratulations. Why haven't you announced the engagement?"

"Dummy! Don't you see which finger it's on? It's a birthday gift from my dad. Pretty, eh?"

"He's back from Singapore?"

"Left again. Pretty, eh? It's half a carat!"

"Could be paste."

"You're really something! One day someone's going to straighten you out, and I'll be glad to hear about it."

Cheng Ling went and ordered two slices of melon. Ding

Yu-mei had met a friend, so he took an extra one back to the table.

Ding Yu-mei graciously did the honours.

"Allow me to introduce you two. Miss Wang ... General Manager Cheng."

"I've already brought you some water-melon, okay?"

Miss Wang munched and laughed.

"General Manager Cheng is most kind."

"My name's Cheng Ling. 'General Manager' is just a title. I only use it to intimidate people. Do I look like a General Manager to you?"

Ding Yu-mei turned to Miss Wang.

"He really is a General Manager. He has an ad agency at Nanking East Road. Cheng Ling, show her your card."

"I don't have a card."

"He does so. I'm sure you've never seen such a pretty one. Cheng Ling, take out a card."

"I don't have a card."

"Come on!"

Cheng Ling reluctantly took a card out of his wallet. Ding Yu-mei seized it, and gave it to Miss Wang.

"Look! A folding card! Original design! His own invention. Cheng Ling is also an artist."

"I am not an artist."

"Nonsense. An ad designer is an artist, too. Cheng Ling can also sketch caricatures. Cheng Ling, do one of Miss Wang."

"Cut it out," Cheng Ling turned to Miss Wang. "Do you work for the TV station, too?"

Miss Wang nodded her head.

"She's the assistant to the city news editor," Ding Yu-mei continued. "Cheng Ling, draw a caricature of her."

Cheng Ling ignored Ding Yu-mei.

"Did you study journalism?"

"No. I was Ding Yu-mei's schoolmate. I am two years her senior." Miss Wang toyed with Cheng Ling's name-card. "You're really quite talented. This card is very well designed." She put the card in her wallet. "Excuse me, I've got to get back. Thanks for the treat. You two carry on with your conversation."

Cheng Ling got up. Ding Yu-mei said, "Next time, make him do a sketch of you. Bye-bye."

Miss Wang laughed and nodded. Cheng Ling sat down, and picked up a teaspoon.

"Why did you scare her off?"

"Huh? I find you a girlfriend, and you're still complaining? With a promoter like me, your ad business would be all set, too."

"Don't take the trouble. Next time you pay for yourself."

Ding Yu-mei said nothing, lowered her head and spit out some melon seeds. Cheng Ling saw Zhang Shi-jia coming towards them.

"Finished already?"

"There wasn't really anything to talk about." Zhang dumped himself down, and yanked open his collar. "God, it's hot in here. Why don't they turn on the air-conditioning? That little squirt only knows how to play Gobang — he doesn't understand anything else. I guess the thing to do is to arrange for him to play a few games and build up a show around that."

"What? You're sure you want him?"

"If we don't take him, then what? Bring on another musical prodigy? Give me a break. That little violinist we last had played so badly that my head aches just thinking of it."

"Didn't you say someone wanted to send him to Vienna to pursue an advanced degree?"

"I most certainly did not! Hey, Fat Cheng, give us a cigarette."

Cheng Ling took out his pack and handed it to Zhang Shi-jia.

"All for you."

"Where are you going to?"

"Yung-ho. I have to see some friends there tonight."

"It's not even five yet. Stick around. Say, Miss Ding, that little squirt is coming over again Thursday afternoon. Gong, you, and I have got some work to do before then."

"Cheng Ling, how do you play Gobang?" Ding Yu-mei asked. "Do you win by lining up five of your pieces in a row — horizontally, vertically, or diagonally?"

"Such a simple game. 'Gobang Wonder Kid'. What nonsense!"

Zhang cut into their laughter. "Don't joke. This little squirt says he's never lost. If he really wins every time, maybe there's something in him."

"It's better to find someone to try him out first. If it turns out that he can't win at Gobang, *Wonder Kids* is a lost cause."

"Of course. The little squirt also says he can play 1 pawn chess, 2 pawn chess, 3 pawn chess, and 4 pawn chess. One, two, three, four, five. Plays 'em all. Count 'em. If he's a champ at each, he'll have convinced me!"

Everybody cracked up. Ding Yu-mei laughed so hard that tears came to her eyes and she had to lean on to the table for support.

"How do you play 1 pawn chess?" Cheng Ling asked. "Isn't the winner the one who goes first?"

"I don't get it, either. We've got to try him out Thursday. You're welcome to join us in watching the battle."

Cheng Ling got up. "I've got to go. Which bus goes to Yung-ho?"

"First go to the railroad station, then take bus no. 5. It's going to be crowded at this time. Better take a taxi ... Oh, I almost forgot. Could I ask you to design a new set of opening credits for *Wonder Kids*?"

"I'll hand it in to you in five days' time, I promise."

The bus-stop in front of the TV Towers was crowded with workers and students going home. Cheng Ling picked a particularly bright-looking child out from the crowd.

"Do you play Gobang?"

The kid shook his head and said no. Everyone was looking at Cheng Ling. He gave it little thought, and decided to take a taxi.

* *Chinese chess.*

** *A Japanese game played on a go board with players alternating and attempting to be first to place five counters in a row.*

2

The traffic on the road to Yung-ho was unusually heavy. Cheng Ling regretted giving Zhang all his cigarettes. He took off his tie, folded it, and put it in his jacket pocket. Why did they always decide to eat at Yung-ho? Next time he ought to suggest that they switch restaurants. Cheng Ling took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. It was goddamned hot. Zhang was even less able to stand the heat than he was. Maybe it wasn't that Zhang couldn't take the heat, but that he was just hard to please...

When Cheng Ling had suggested the idea of *Wonder Kids*, how was he to know that Zhang was going to come up with a TV show, and take all the credit? You couldn't deny that he had talent, though. Don't lose this connection. There was sure to be something he was in for. If *Wonder Kids* flopped, Zhang would have to come up with another programme. The bosses in the TV Station were treating him all right. Don't lose this connection. If he played it right, he could secure some big clients, and be set for good.

The cab was as hot as a dumpling steamer. Cheng Ling stuck his head out of the window. The traffic on the bridge was crawling along. The street behind them was jammed up too. Cheng Ling simply had enough.

"I'll get off here."

He walked across the bridge. There was an accident at the far end. A little three-wheeled truck had overturned sideways across the road. The driver was standing next

to it, fuming. Two policemen were directing the traffic. Cheng Ling walked up to the next intersection and flagged a cab. Within a few minutes, he had arrived at the restaurant.

The hostess led him to a private room upstairs. Feng Wei-min sat alone, cracking seeds.

"So I'm first again."

"The CKS Bridge was jammed. Everyone's going to be late today."

"Did you get in touch with Ji Fei yet?"

"I spent the whole afternoon trying to get him, but I couldn't track him down."

"He's got two numbers. Did you try both of them?"

"I only know his office phone number. Where's the other one?"

"Don't you know?" Feng pushed over a bowl of seeds. "Ji Fei has got a second residence."

"Cut it out. How could he afford side dish? He can't even afford the main course. Double the trouble, and he'd go crazy."

"Maybe you can't really call her a mistress ... a girlfriend, perhaps. And Old Yao said that they're quite a pair."

"Since when did you believe in Old Yao?"

"Never mind. Anyway, Ji Fei has two numbers. Some people spend all their time searching and never find what they're looking for. Some people simply sit around and it falls onto their lap."

"Should we call him now?"

"Forget it. Anyway, I don't have his number with me. How are you doing?"

"Still the same. Lose a little in the company, make a little in the market. And you?"

Feng pulled up a paper packet from beneath the table.
"This is my latest game."

Cheng Ling opened the envelope and looked into it: knife, fork, scissors, utility knife ... a pile of metal utensils.

"For export?"

"I've already drawn up several orders, all made by the Europeans. As soon as I send the samples out, I'll get a letter of credit. This is better than doing business with the Americans who insist on visiting us first."

"Lots of bother for a little profit."

"Actually, it's the same. We give them a C. & F. with the quote. There's no need for any F.O.B. It's a lot easier."

"If your volume increases, I'll design a mail-order catalogue for you."

"We don't play those games. The postage will kill us. It's more profitable to sell wholesale. In business, you've got to think big. Man does not live on small fish alone. Go for the big ones!"

"Not bad in theory. Just like in the market: buy low, sell high. Everybody knows it. It's just a question of timing."

"I've got another theory." Feng blew the seed husks onto the floor. "No matter what you're doing, there are four things that are keys to your success: timing, place, ability to get along with others, and financial flexibility. You've got to have all four just right. And engaging in business is like engaging in study. A businessman will naturally depend on these four variables, and so will a scholar. I never understood this before, which is why I was banging my head against the wall trying to be a scholar."

"Do you still teach at Taichung?"

"Only one Western History class. I go once a week, just for a change of pace. This stuff," Feng pointed to the packet, "is really terribly dull."

Cheng Ling wanted to say something. The hostess pushed aside the screen-divider. Gao Yue-bai, Chen Yi-xiong, and Hong Ti came in. Gao put a bottle of Gaoliang wine on the table.

"Huang Duan-shu is busy, so she can't come, and Old Song's been sent south. The traffic along the CKS Bridge was very slow today."

"Fat Cheng didn't get in touch with Ji Fei," Feng Wei-min said. "So that leaves the two of us."

"Still haven't got in touch with Ji Fei? You ought to be spanked, Cheng Ling."

"It's not my fault," Cheng Ling retorted. "Hey, who picked this place, anyway? We always have seafood. I want to lodge a strong protest."

Gao Yue-bai pointed at Feng Wei-min, who countered, "Fat Cheng likes meat, don't you know that 'meat-eaters are nearsighted creatures who cannot form far-reaching plans?'"* Do you know how awful arteriosclerosis is? To say you can't form any far-reaching plans is quite right."

The hostess brought in the tea. Chen Yi-xiong made the orders. Nobody objected.

The food was fine. The five of them finished off two bottles of Gaoliang and Hong Ti wanted more. Gao Yue-bai said no, he'd rather invite everyone over to his place for a drink. At first, Chen didn't want to go. Feng cursed at him. Then Gao drove all over in his bug. They somehow all managed to squeeze in. Since Cheng Ling was big, they let him sit in the front. Gao drove towards Shihlin. When they crossed the CKS Bridge, the offending truck had already vanished. Cheng Ling wound down the window, and a cool breeze gushed in. He was drunk and a little sleepy. There was a warm feeling in his stomach. Cheng Ling closed his eyes. Someone jostled his shoulders.

"Don't go to sleep!" He heard Feng Wei-min's voice. "All you do is eat and sleep. Do you know what you are?"

"Cut it out!"

"Hey, Fat Cheng. I heard you're going after some girl at the TV Towers. Some M.C.?"

Cheng Ling pushed away Feng's arm.

"No way."

"If old friends can't lay it on the line, what's left?"

"Purely a business relationship. I'm redesigning the opening credits for *Wonder Kids*, so I've gone over there a few times. My main interest is in hooking up with their account. Once I get a toehold, the rest will be easy."

"*Wonder Kids*?" Hong Ti interrupted. "That M.C.'s a real beauty. Fat Cheng's eyesight is okay."

"We're just friends."

"Are you planning to add her to your list of 'sisters'?" Feng asked.

Everyone else in the car laughed, Hong Ti's the loudest.

"Fat Cheng still has the same old problem: inveterate 'sister' collector. You must have two dozen by now."

"To hell with it. Took the wrong boat again. Who are my 'sisters'?"

"Huang Duan-shu will always be your 'sister'. You'll never deny that!"

"We're just having fun."

"Having fun? I wonder why she didn't come tonight. Oh, I get it — you two have already exchanged vows ... pledging brotherhood and sisterhood, that is."

Everyone laughed again. Feng said Hong was a real disgrace. Two cups of Gaoliang and he was already ranting. Hong defended himself by saying that his high school education wasn't good enough; he always mixed up the various vows. Gao said he shouldn't make fun of Huang Duan-shu. She was everybody's sister. This silenced the

whole party. After a while, Feng Wei-min said, "You haven't heard that she has another boyfriend?"

Nobody responded. Feng Wei-min continued, half to himself: "Set her sights too high. Tough luck for her. I heard that there's a professor hot on her heels."

"Who?" Several voices asked at once.

"I'm not sure. A Mr Liu or something. I heard that he plays a mean game of *xiangqi*."

"I know him," Hong said. "He used to be the provincial chess master. Pretty smart chap. The cream of the young crop."

"Huang Duan-shu and a chess master. Do you think he's good enough for her?"

Gao Yue-bai said he had to get some gas. The car pulled into a station. Gao got out. Cheng Ling turned and scowled at Feng in the back seat.

"Cool it about Huang Duan-shu. There are people who don't want to hear about it."

"Sorry. It just slipped out."

On the road to Shihlin, Gao was silent. By the time they had arrived at his apartment, everybody was feeling a little more at ease. Over Hong Ti's objections, Gao read to them from Hong's book of poems. Cheng Ling wasn't sure how he and Feng Wei-min had started up again, but knew they had a heated argument over some theory of historical determinism.

After a while, Hong, Feng, and Gao were drunk. Chen Yi-xiong went out to find a taxi. Cheng Ling helped him take Feng and Hong home.

Hong threw up in the cab, then got very embarrassed by that. Cheng Ling got home at about two o'clock in the morning. His mother and brother had long since gone to bed. His brother had left a note by the telephone — "A Miss Ding called several times." Cheng Ling was

thirsty. He opened the refrigerator and took out a can of beer before lying down on his bed. Then, for no reason at all, his stomach started to bother him. He got up to get some aspirin and washed them down with the beer. His stomach settled a little. Soon, he fell sound asleep.

* *A quotation from the Tso Chuan. In the original context, "meat-eaters" refers to politicians.*

3

"Hey, Cheng Ling. There's a call for you."

Cheng Ling awoke with a start. The living room clock showed seven-thirty. Cheng Ling cursed to himself, and cradled the receiver onto his left shoulder. He was holding his socks.

"Who is this?"

Ding Yu-mei's voice.

"Why didn't you call back last night? Do you know how many times I called?"

"Sorry, I came back too late. The guys from the magazine had a little party, and I didn't get back till two."

"I didn't know you were still with a magazine."

"The old school days' journal. It folded a long time ago. What's up?"

"Zhang Shi-jia asked me to call you to tell you to come over this afternoon."

"Didn't we say we'd see the boy on Thursday?"

"Changed. The expert he found is only free this afternoon."

"What should I come for? Tell him I'll finish the credits within five days, satisfaction guaranteed. But I'll skip the chess prodigy."

"No. You've got to come. I've got some other plans for you."

"Oh, that's another story. What is it?"

"Remember yesterday you treated a Miss Wang to some

water-melon? Well, she wants to return the favour today at noon."

"What are you talking about?" Cheng Ling buttoned his shirt. "Hey, don't try to make a fool of me."

"Who's trying to make a fool of you? I find you a girlfriend, and that's how you thank me. Remember. Noon. Chung Shan North Road. The Yum Yum Tree Cafe."

"Umm, I'm busy at noon ..."

She had already hung up. Cheng Ling called Ding Yumei's number a few times. Busy. Damn it. What was she playing at? Play every angle you know, and she still treats you like her big brother. Another introduction to a girlfriend. And each time with a tragic ending. Why? Cheng Ling angrily slammed down the receiver. He thought of what Feng had said, "Some people spend all their time searching and never find what they're looking for. Some people sit around and it falls onto their lap." His brother was lounging at the kitchen door.

"Have some congee."

"Eat it yourself."

"Jilted again?"

Cheng Ling didn't reply. His brother followed him into the kitchen, and watched him put on his tie.

"This weekend some of the guys are having a party. Want to come join us?"

"Mind your own business." Cheng Ling pointed his finger at his brother's nose. "Let me tell you, when I started playing the field, you were still crawling around on the floor. You've still got a lot to learn."

His brother shrugged his shoulders, and strolled out.

"They say failure is the mother of success. When you get burnt once, you'll know how to handle the fire the next time. Your approach is too old-fashioned. You don't change with the times, so naturally you're left behind."

Cheng Ling chased him out. "One more word from you and ... "

Mother opened the door, and stared at them.

"So early, and already at each other's throats? What children! Aren't you ashamed? Cheng Ling, who's the girl who called you yesterday?"

His brother made a face. Cheng Ling restrained himself and answered, "She's the M.C. of *Wonder Kids*."

"I've seen her programme. She's not bad at all. Very high class. Was that just her?"

Cheng Ling decided he had better set the record straight.

"We have a strictly business relationship. I'm designing the opening credits for them. It's strictly on business."

"You said on the telephone the kid's a chess prodigy," his brother put in. "How's that?"

"None of your business."

"They asked you to go over and watch him play. Can I come, too?"

"What prodigy? He plays Gobang. Big genius!"

"Playing Gobang well isn't easy. Let's go together."

"Bug off!"

"Cheng Ling, take your brother."

"All right. Come by the agency at two for me."

Cheng Ling lived on the fourth floor. The tenant on the first floor had a little Toyota. He had sewn a cover for it. Every night he and his wife scrubbed their car and covered it up. They treated it as if it was their child. The day before last, someone had stolen their cover. The man almost went crazy. He told his wife to sew another one.

Cheng Ling opened the front door and saw this fellow standing beside his car, in grease-stained pyjamas, staring at the engine.

"What is it now, Mr Lin?"

"My battery's been stolen." Mr Lin looked like he was about to cry. "Everything else is intact. But my battery's been stolen."

"What nerve! Mr Lin, you ought to buy a lock for the hood the next time."

"My battery. Who would have stolen my battery?"

"Probably some kid's idea of fun — stealing a battery and then selling it off."

Mr Lin clenched his fists. He looked heavenward, then towards his neighbours, and roared: "I'll get you, god-dammit!"

Cheng Ling saw that Mr Lin wasn't in a mood to chat, so he slipped away. He stopped by to have some sweet bean milk at the end of the lane before hopping onto a bus. There was a muddy field near his house. No one had planted anything in it for a couple of years, and now it was overrun with grass. Someone had brought over a water buffalo and let it graze there. Every morning, as the bus passed by, the water buffalo would lift up its head from the clump of grass it was munching on as if it was about to bellow at them. Cheng Ling had never actually heard it utter a sound. It would stretch out its neck and looked as if it might but never did. Cheng Ling assumed that it was an old beast, though he really couldn't tell its age. But certainly it was a handsome creature. In fact, it had the bearing that he thought all water buffaloes should have. All it needs was a little effort on Cheng Ling's part to imagine that it was a rhinoceros, hiding in the tall grass, silently, greedily, eyeing the cars that passed by. These thoughts made him rather happy, and he soon forgot the business about Ding Yu-mei. On the morning bus, Cheng Ling was never really upset. He liked the sun, and the dawn sky. He did his best to pull in his stomach, and felt his spirits revive.

The client's secretary brought in tea. Cheng Ling sipped it and opened some files. The agency was showing signs of recovery. The day before yesterday, Zhou Pei had landed a small account. It wasn't much: designing some colour slides for some company's advertising campaign. But their client was a big businessman. If this worked out, there could be more coming. Cheng Ling decided to handle it personally. He would let Little Dong bother with that private school exhibition account. The *Wonder Kids*' credits? Cheng Ling already had an idea. He unfolded some paper, put together some notions, and came up with a rough sketch. At ten Zhou Pei and Little Dong finally came in. As soon as he arrived, Zhou Pei shouted, "Hey, Fat Cheng, did I get any calls?"

"No."

"Nothing from a Manager Song?"

"Nothing the whole morning, from **eight** till now." Cheng Ling made sure they caught the "eight".

"Strange."

Zhou Pei went straight for the phone, and crouching in the corner, whispered into it. Little Dong ambled over and glanced at Cheng Ling's work. Cheng Ling explained his idea, and asked Little Dong to come up with a few more drawings. Little Dong scratched his head, then sat down and buried himself in his work. Cheng Ling gingerly took up his teacup and walked over to the window. Zhou Pei was still on the telephone. There was no denying that Zhou Pei was a sharpie. There would be no business without his hustling. The only thing Cheng Ling resented was that Zhou Pei was so secretive. There were some things which Cheng Ling was kept completely in the dark. While they called themselves the Three Musketeers — "all for one and one for all", Cheng Ling had the seniority. And yet, although he was general manager of the company,

there were a lot of things going on that he was unaware of, a fact which always irritated him when he thought of it. But actually, aside from the TV account, Zhou Pei had been responsible for all their contracts. After all, he was the business manager, so he should be the one with the connections. And if he hadn't got into the market in the first place, the whole business would have folded long ago. Cheng Ling gave it some thought and decided that it was better not to get mad with Zhou Pei over a small matter. If he could hook a big fish, Zhou Pei wouldn't be able to look down on his abilities. Old friendships were one thing. But where business was concerned, it was best to have a situation of mutual indispensability. Cheng Ling lifted his cup, there were only some tea leaves left, stuck to the bottom.

"Where's the girl? Hey, Miss!"

Little Dong looked up.

"She's gone downstairs."

"Gabbing again. What do we pay her for?"

Cheng Ling found the hot water thermos, and refilled his glass. Zhou Pei hung up, then did a little Zorba dance, right down to the three claps.

"Fat Cheng, we're saved. The big fish are going to chase away the small ones. If we follow them, it's a sure thing ... Absolutely reliable information. Well, do we want a piece of the action?"

"Which stock?"

"Top secret. First, tell me, are we in or out?"

Cheng Ling shied away.

"Better not do anything foolish. If business is looking up, why mess around on the side?"

"Fat Cheng, if it weren't for 'messing around on the side', we wouldn't have made it through last month. In business, you must adapt to changing circumstances.

Steady work in the agency is fine, but when you get the chance, play the stock market a little. You're too conservative."

"It's not that I'm conservative. It's just that we can't afford to buy long. What will we do if share prices drop?"

"If it drops, at worst the company goes bankrupt, and we start all over again." Zhou Pei danced over to Little Dong's desk. "We can't afford to buy long, but we'll follow the lead of our friend, Song. Perfect! Right, Little Dong?"

Little Dong pushed his glasses further up his nose, and slowly responded.

"I think ... we've got several items of business up this month. Let's get them out of the way first before talking about stocks."

"I agree with Little Dong."

"Two donkeys!" Zhou Pei slapped his forehead. "I talk myself silly trying to talk business to you lot. Once a donkey, always a donkey. Times two. Why can't I get through to you guys? Money doesn't grow on trees. And here I am with absolutely reliable information. If you don't take it when it's given to you, you'll be sorry later."

"What's your relationship with that General Manager Chen?"

"Song. Not Chen."

"Then what's your relationship with that General Manager Song?"

"I just have had some contact with him ... Don't worry, he can't harm us."

Cheng Ling knew that Zhou Pei didn't want to talk. It made him mad.

"All's fair in love and war. How do you know he's not just setting us up? We fall for it and we take the big dive."

"Forget that I even said it." Zhou Pei's voice rose. "Christ, what a bunch of sissies. If you don't want to do

it, we'll drop it, okay? How did Onassis become the Onassis of today? In business you've got to take risks. When you have to bet, you bet. You win a lot, or you lose a lot. What a couple of sissies. Let's forget the whole thing."

Cheng Ling looked at Little Dong. Little Dong took off his glasses, pulled out his handkerchief, and wiped his lenses. Whenever Little Dong had nothing to say, he'd go through this routine. Cheng Ling's self-confidence had been shaken. Zhou Pei had said it was almost a sure bet. Why not let him give it a go? Cheng Ling thought about Zhou Pei's super-secret attitude, and that uncomfortable feeling returned.

"Since this General Manager Song has made a gesture of good faith, let's see him and talk it over. Everybody understands what's what. Buddy-buddy. Then afterwards we all look out for each other. Zhou Pei, what time did you set for the appointment?"

Zhou Pei faltered a beat.

"Okay, then, it's set. If you don't trust me, go and talk to him yourself. But one thing: when we go see him, let's at least put on a united front. No need to be laughing-stocks. I'm going for it whether you're in or out."

Zhou Pei started dialling again. Cheng Ling suddenly remembered his noon date. He muttered something to Little Dong, patted Zhou Pei on the shoulder, and ran downstairs. Their secretary was, as usual, gabbing and laughing in the trade company office. Cheng Ling glared at her. She seemed not to have seen it, and turning her back against him, continued laughing. Cheng Ling felt he had 'lost face'. He was still snarling in the taxi. Pushed around like a donkey. Can't even keep a little girl in line. No wonder Zhou Pei didn't listen to him.

Maybe Zhou Pei's up front, and you're just being petty.

Why be so suspicious of close friends? Cheng Ling thought about what he had just said. He would have to apologize to Zhou Pei. Little Dong didn't have enough resolve. If Zhou Pei insisted on investing in a stock, let him give it a try. At least, this would help to avoid any bad feelings. Anyway, Zhou Pei was right: the whole business barely amounted to some pens and calling cards. Even the furniture was rented. If they went broke, they could easily start up again. What was there to be afraid of? The loss of his reputation? Why, when he started up, all his artist friends said, "Cheng Ling in business is like *Li Ao** opening a noodle stand. It's almost unimaginable." Well, artists have to eat, too. After six months, he had got used to it. The others also had accepted it. They even admired his business acumen. "Cheng Ling is both a painter and a businessman. How about that!" Cheng Ling had become an inspirational figure. He was prominent in the art circle. The General Manager cum Artist. Cheng Ling sat in the cab, smiling to himself. If he could swing it, he would stage another exhibition. It would not be the paintings of a man of letters but rather, of a man of wealth. He would only paint one thing. Money. All sorts of money from all over the world. Of course, there would be an uproar. Cheng Ling mused at it contentedly, and almost forgot to tell the cabbie where to stop. He got off a few hundred feet past the restaurant and hurried back towards it. He was about to enter the Yum Yum Tree Cafe when someone slapped him on his back. Cheng Ling turned around. It was Zhang Shi-jia.

* *Li Ao was a famous Chinese writer in Taiwan with a rebellious spirit, who opened a noodle stand when the government blacklisted him for his political activities and prevented him from getting any decent job. Subsequently, he was arrested and jailed for several years.*

4

"What are you doing here?"

Cheng Ling's startled expression made Zhang laugh.

"Why shouldn't I be here? Didn't Ding Yu-mei tell you it's my treat?"

"Your treat? Who are you treating?"

"You, Ding Yu-mei, that reporter Miss Wang, and a Professor Liu. I'm waiting for him. Do you want to go in and wait with the two young ladies?"

"Okay."

Ding Yu-mei and Miss Wang were seated in a corner. Cheng Ling sneaked up on them from behind.

"Why are the two of you whispering?"

Ding Yu-mei let out an 'ah!' Then, on seeing that it was Cheng Ling, she wrinkled up her nose.

"Speak of the devil! Zhang Shi-jia insists it's his treat today, so Wang Ruo-fen will just have to take you out some other day."

Miss Wang munched and laughed. Cheng Ling felt somewhat embarrassed.

"I haven't done anything. I don't deserve any reward. Miss Wang is too kind."

"If someone is willing to take you out, you shouldn't refuse her. Do you understand?"

Ding Yu-mei was wearing a casual outfit with a red pullover. Her hair was drawn up, and tied with a blue satin ribbon. Cheng Ling thought she looked great. He wanted to say something nice, but all that came out was, "Zhāng

Shi-jia is a real tightwad. This is quite an occasion, his treat. And I hear there's also a Professor Liu?"

"He's our expert; the one for the chess prodigy. Oh, by the way, yesterday when I went home, I did as you suggested and had some *digenea simplex*. It tasted awful."

"It's not so bad. After a while it tastes fine." Cheng Ling remembered that Feng had said something about a Professor Liu who was courting Huang Duan-shu. "Is this Professor Liu the *xiangqi* champion?"

"I don't know. Ask Zhang Shi-jia." Ding Yu-mei took something out of her purse. "You say it tastes okay. Here's a packet of it. Eat some and let's see."

"If it is him, that will be just the thing for him."

"Do you want to try?"

"I ate too many once. I can't have them anymore."

"I knew you weren't going to eat them. Why try and trick me?"

The people at the next table all turned and looked at them. Cheng Ling changed the subject.

"Look, here comes Zhang Shi-jia with the chess master."

Zhang brought in Professor Liu. Cheng Ling stood up. The professor was half a head taller than he was. His handshake was solid; his voice an octave lower than his. Cheng Ling said he had long admired the professor. The professor muttered something back. Zhang asked everyone to be seated. Cheng Ling and the professor sat on one side, facing the two girls. Zhang brought over another chair.

"We are very fortunate to have Professor Liu agreeing to take on the prodigy. Professor Liu used to be a *xiangqi* champion, a superstar."

Professor Liu smiled slightly.

Ding Yu-mei opened her eyes wide and asked, "Can

you play *xiangqi* and Gobang?"

Zhang Shi-jia interrupted. "Gobang is much easier than *xiangqi*. To Professor Liu, it's child's play."

"Then that kid won't be a match for you. What will we do?"

Professor Liu smiled again, showing his teeth.

"Not true. When I play chess with a youngster, I may not necessarily win. I've got to consider developing the younger talents. If I win, it's no big deal. But if they can beat me, then they're instant celebrities. So I would rather let them win."

Ding Yu-mei cocked her head and looked at Professor Liu.

"You're not so ancient. Why do you talk like an eighty-year-old? Always saying 'the youngsters'. You're young, too."

"In fact," Zhang chipped in, "Professor Liu is a highly respected young talent. Not only is he a chess whiz, he's also a water-conservation specialist."

Professor Liu self-effacingly lowered his head.

"I could hardly be considered that. What Miss Ding says is correct: you teach for a long time, and it's easy to get smug and look down on the younger generation. Please forgive me."

No one had anything to say. Cheng Ling felt somewhat uncomfortable. He took a quick glance towards Ding Yu-mei and Miss Wang's direction. As luck would have it, Miss Wang was looking at him. Their eyes met. Cheng Ling quickly averted his gaze. He cheered up, and made a joke. Miss Wang laughed with her mouth closed. Ding Yu-mei seemed to have missed it. Instead, she asked Professor Liu what a water-conservation specialist was.

Professor Liu patiently explained. He went on and on, but Cheng Ling had no idea what he was talking about.

Cheng Ling looked at Zhang Shi-jia, who shrugged his shoulders helplessly. The two girls, meanwhile, listened attentively. Ding Yu-mei even asked a few questions which Cheng Ling thought were rather stupid. Professor Liu answered each one in turn. After lunch, Zhang suggested that they all go over to the studio. Since there were five of them and a taxi could take only a maximum of four people, Cheng Ling excused himself and said that he had to go back to the agency to meet his brother. Miss Wang surprised him by saying she wanted to go along with him. Cheng Ling went out to flag a cab. He turned around to see Ding Yu-mei coming out after him.

"Say, it looks like she's interested in you."

Cheng Ling said he didn't see it that way. He felt rather pleased, though. Ding Yu-mei added, "Don't forget to thank me."

She got into her cab with Zhang and Professor Liu. Cheng Ling opened the door of the other cab for Miss Wang, and got in after her. He told the driver to go to Nanking East Road, Section III. He was still kind of surprised at Miss Wang's brashness.

"Mr Cheng, I heard you're also a very well-known artist. How absolutely marvellous!"

Cheng Ling laughed self-effacingly. Too bad Professor Liu wasn't there. Professor Liu would make a good rival for Gao Yue-bai, he thought. Professor Liu, Gao Yue-bai, and Huang Duan-shu. How would that be for an eternal triangle?

"You probably know many artists. Do you know Gao Yue-bai?"

Cheng Ling started, but quickly composed himself.

"Know him? We're good friends."

"Perfect. Then there's something I want to ask you. I hope you don't think it strange: Does Gao Yue-bai have

a steady girlfriend?"

"What! Girlfriend?"

Miss Wang was afraid that he might misunderstand her. She quickly continued, "Mr Cheng, I'll speak frankly. My little sister likes to paint. She really respects Gao Yue-bai. In fact, she wants to be his, uh ... friend. My parents object. They're old-fashioned. They don't think an artist has any future. Oh, sorry, Mr Cheng, you're an exception. I sympathize with my sister. But I hear Gao Yue-bai has loads of girlfriends. I'm afraid my sister will get hurt. So I thought of asking you ..."

So that was her game! He suddenly felt contempt for this Miss Wang. Gao was really rather lucky. It looked like the only girl he wasn't going to catch was Huang Duan-shu. Every predator was someone else's prey. Miss Wang continued her tactless questioning.

"Do you know if Gao Yue-bai really had a close girlfriend?"

"Well, that depends on your definition of 'close'. Is holding hands 'close'? What about kissing? Or does sleeping together make it 'close'? Or are you talking about platonic love?"

Miss Wang's face went from red to white, and back again. She was speechless.

"Gao Yue-bai has had the three kinds of girlfriends, but he has never experienced platonic love. Perhaps your sister could fill in the gap."

The taxi was at Nanking East Road, Section III. His brother had already been waiting for quite a while. Miss Wang had finally shut up. Cheng Ling introduced his brother to her. She pulled in her face and nodded. His brother turned around from the front seat.

"Zhou Pei wants me to tell you that he's arranged to meet General Manager Song tomorrow at noon at the

Xiongji Restaurant. And Feng called. He wants you to call him at home tonight."

"He didn't say what it was for?"

"No. Who did they find to play chess with the wonder kid?"

"A Professor Liu. I hear he's a chess master."

His brother squirmed with delight.

"It must be Liu Le-yi. He's my teacher. So they got him. Great."

"Professor Liu has taught you?"

"Lots of classes. He's an excellent teacher. He treats his students very well. I really respect him."

"I have never heard you mention him before."

"You never asked."

At the TV Towers, Miss Wang got right out without saying goodbye. Cheng Ling's brother watched her go.

"A really sociable young woman. What did you do this time?"

"Mind your own business. Let's go."

There was a crowd idling outside the Towers. Cheng Ling forged ahead. His brother also squeezed his way through. They went up to the ninth floor. Zhang and the others were all packed into his office. Professor Liu and the wonder kid were in the centre. Everyone was talking at the same time. It was incredibly noisy. This was the first time that Cheng Ling had had a chance to size up the wonder kid. The boy wasn't very tall; he came up to chest level. Standing next to Professor Liu, he looked even smaller. Triangular-shaped eyes. Small features. The head sure was huge, though. He was wearing his high school uniform, and sneakers without any socks, while standing silently in the middle of the room, oblivious to the noise around him. His head was down, he was apparently lost in thought. Cheng Ling stooped down to ask him a

question.

"Say, my boy, what's your name?"

The boy muttered his reply. Cheng Ling didn't hear him clearly, so he asked again. The boy pointed to the name embroidered on his uniform, as if he was too lazy to repeat it. Cheng Ling noticed a slight swelling behind the boy's right ear, and the general bumpiness of his head — probably a real bother for the barber. He sure looks peculiar, Cheng Ling thought. You couldn't see any signs of genius, though. Cheng Ling felt sorry for him.

"Is it true that you've never lost at Gobang?"

The boy's head hung down; it seemed he hadn't heard. Cheng Ling saw he wasn't going to find out much, so he patted the boy on the crown of his head.

"Keep it up. Don't lose now."

The boy still didn't look up. Professor Liu had heard them, and came over to size up the boy for himself. He patted the boy on the head, too.

"You won't lose, my boy. Don't worry. We're just playing for fun. It doesn't matter who wins or loses."

By now, everyone was settling down. Zhang asked them all to keep to the sides. He asked Professor Liu and the boy to sit down. He brought over a tea-table, and put the board on it. Professor Liu smiled, showing his teeth. He was very cool. The boy lowered his head, and rubbed his hands together. He didn't look at his opponent at all. Cheng Ling was beginning to feel a little apprehensive. Ding Yu-mei sidled over to him.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

Cheng Ling shook his head and put his finger to his lips. Ding Yu-mei looked at him, quizzically. Zhang asked Professor Liu to guess for white, and the professor graciously agreed. The boy hid some markers in his hand. Professor Liu guessed the wrong number. Cheng Ling

caught a glimpse of the boy grinning; a noiseless laugh. The boy put a white piece on the board. Professor Liu calmly responded. The boy immediately added another. They were playing very quickly. Cheng Ling wasn't quite sure what had happened when Professor Liu cast down a piece and laughed.

"You win, my boy. Very good. You play very well."

Cheng Ling looked. There were four white pawns in a diagonal line. Everyone applauded. Ding Yu-mei took the chance to turn to him.

"Let's go out and chat."

"Wait for one more game."

Professor Liu went first this time. But the boy still won. By the time it was three in a row, the professor was visibly uncomfortable. He put out his big mitt and rubbed the boy's head.

"You play quite well. It's not easy to play so well. You have lots of potential. You ought to study the more complex types of chess, my friend, like *xiangqi* and Go. You would be able to take full advantage of your talents. We'll stop here today."

Zhang thanked him effusively. Professor Liu modestly put up his hands.

"Professor Liu, why not play a couple of more games?" Cheng Ling loudly suggested, "The boy isn't so bad. And you can certainly play better. Two more games, okay?" The others seconded him.

"Gobang is just a matter of practice," Professor Liu countered. "Wait till the boy can play *xiangqi*, then I'll be glad to instruct him. You can't do anything if all you can play is Gobang. You have to know how to play *xiangqi* or Go."

"But it's such a rare privilege to watch you play. If you could just take him on for real for a few times — just

to show us how it's done."

Professor Liu looked at his watch and stood up.

"I've got some business to take care of."

"Why, Professor," Cheng Ling put in, "Don't go. We would be so disappointed."

"I'll play with the boy," Cheng Ling's brother squeezed through from somewhere. "Professor, let me give it a try."

"Here's my student. He'll take over for his teacher. I hope that's acceptable. Ha, ha."

Zhang went out with Professor Liu. Cheng Ling watched indifferently as his brother and the boy played. Ding Yu-mei pulled him over to a corner of the room.

"How did it go?"

"Nothing went." Cheng Ling was unhappy. "We just met, so what could go?"

"She's very interested in you. Yesterday, after you left, she came to look for me. She wanted to take you out for a bite to eat."

"Thanks a lot for your help."

Ding Yu-mei was waiting for him to suggest they go downstairs. Instead, he went back to the game. Fuming, she followed him.

"You're really something! It looks like Miss Wang's is a one-sided love. You just don't have any class. Look how classy Professor Liu is!"

"What 'one-sided love'? I'll take you out for lunch some day ... thanks for your thoughtfulness. But let's drop this Miss Wang business, okay?"

His brother was still playing with the boy. Old Gong was the only one of the audience left. Cheng Ling was thinking that Gobang was hardly a great spectator sport. If Zhang decided to air a match, he might have a problem finding an audience. His brother looked up, and grimaced at him.

"He's really sharp. I can't beat him."

The Gobang prodigy sat composed, his head down. They played a few more games. Cheng Ling stood to the side. His brother lost every time. But at least he seemed to be playing better than Professor Liu. Eventually, he sighed and said to the boy, "Let's quit. I give up."

For the second time, Cheng Ling caught the boy grinning, and laughing silently. Ding Yu-mei and Old Gong had already sneaked away. They were the only three left in the room. Cheng Ling remembered hearing Zhang say that the boy could also play 1, 2, 3, and 4 pawn chess.

"Say, my boy, can you also play 1 pawn chess? Doesn't the one who goes first always win?"

The boy promptly put away the markers, leaving only one out. Then he looked up. Cheng Ling was struck by the gleam in his eyes. It was a little startling. The light in his eyes seems to tell of some deep, unfathomable wisdom. It was hardly an ordinary sparkle. The boy couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen, but the look in his eyes made Cheng Ling shiver with terror. It reminded him of the hollowed-hole pupil in a statue of an ancient Roman. A lifeless statue, that, animated by its eyes, seemed to have lived forever, and witnessed the exploits of countless ancient and modern heroes. The gleam quickly left his eye and the boy muttered a reply.

"Shoot for it. Whoever wins goes first."

His brother was delighted.

"Well, that's easy enough. Okay, we'll shoot for it."

He rolled up his sleeves, scrutinizing the boy. The boy didn't look at him. He said, "One, two, three," and shot out a 'rock'. The boy had put out 'cloth'. But he wasn't in the least discouraged.

"Again! One, two, three!"

This time he put out 'scissors', and the boy put out a

'rock'. Cheng Ling watched as they did it ten times. The boy won all ten. His brother was mystified.

"Your luck is rotten," Cheng Ling consoled him. "Watch me ... One, two, three!"

He tried ten times. Each time he lost to the child. His brother murmured to himself: "I don't get it. He's even got some technique to this ... Once more. One, two, three!"

The boy won another ten straight. Cheng Ling and his brother stared at each other. The boy's head hung down, as usual. He didn't seem to be in the least excited. Cheng Ling racked his brains. He couldn't understand this. It was simply impossible. He could deal with a Gobang champion. But there was no way that anyone could always win at a game that was pure chance. His brother seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"Have you ever lost at 1 pawn chess?"

The boy shook his head.

"Really? Not even once?"

The boy shook his head again, grinned, and laughed behind sealed lips. Cheng Ling saw that this game was a source of unrivalled delight for him. The boy didn't seem to care about anything else. There was only chess, 1 pawn chess. And he won each time. Cheng Ling thought of something.

"Well, then, let's change the rules. We'll still play 1 pawn chess. But now, whoever loses 'Rock, Scissors, Cloth' goes first."

The boy seemed not to have understood. Cheng Ling explained it to him again. The boy nodded his head. They shot it out ten times. Naturally, Cheng Ling won all ten. His brother watched them play, then caught on to his line of reasoning.

"So when you want to win, you win; and when you

want to lose, you lose. My God, you really are a wonder kid!"

"So now you finally believe there's such a thing as a 'wonder kid'?" Ding Yu-mei and Zhang walked in. "What are you doing? Playing 'Rock, Scissors, Cloth'?"

Cheng Ling quickly cut in to prevent his brother from explaining.

"Nothing. We're just fooling around. So, Shi-jia, Professor Liu turned tail."

"He had some business to attend to. He was my guest, why did you make fun of him? You embarrassed me."

"I didn't do anything. He brought it upon himself. He couldn't beat the boy, but he still wanted to brag about it. The Venerable Master act. It really makes me sick."

"Maybe he was right. There's nothing to Gobang. In order to really test a genius, you have to play *xiangqi* or something."

"But listen to him brag. He's just so perfect. If he loses, it's because he let you win. He puts himself in a no-lose situation. Who can beat him?"

Ding Yu-mei was getting a little impatient.

"Let's not argue about who's the best. Professor Liu hasn't offended you. Cheng Ling, didn't you say you were going to take us out? Do you want to make good on that?"

Cheng Ling said he was willing, and asked who else wanted to go along. Zhang said he and Old Gong still had some work to do. His brother muttered something to the boy, then said he was going home with him. When Ding Yu-mei saw that no one else was interested, she changed her mind. She wanted to go home, too. Cheng Ling could take them out some other time. Cheng Ling insisted on treating her now, and dragged her out. They went downstairs, where she got catty. She blamed him for bullying Miss Wang. He stood by dumbly while she

cursed at him. He still didn't know what Miss Wang had told her; it would be best to play safe and apologize. At the end of her tirade, she still wanted to go home, and no, she wouldn't let him see her back there, either. Cheng Ling was upset with himself. He took the elevator up to find Zhang Shi-jia. He was out. His brother and the boy had left, too. There was nothing to do there, so he figured he might as well go back to the agency.

By the time he got back there, Little Dong and Zhou Pei had already left. The girl was on the phone with some friend. Cheng Ling cursed her out, and threatened to send her packing. She sobbed and sniffled. Then, to make up for it, she swept the whole office before she left.

Alone in the agency, Cheng Ling calmed down. He found the drawings which Little Dong had finished, and added two more. He worked until eight. He was famished. He went out, and had a bowl of fried noodles with cabbage at a stand in a lane. When he had finished, his stomach started racking up again. He was sure he was going to be sick. He struggled onto the bus, and rode home in cold sweat. As the bus turned into the street near where he lived, everyone pressed to the windows and stared. Leaping sheets of crimson rose up behind the paddy field next to his house. "Fire!" someone shouted. Cheng Ling forgot about his stomachache, and ran towards the conflagration. He saw several people running down the lane next to the field. He got in behind them and joined the people who were crowding around the fire. He squeezed his way through the end of the lane, turned the corner, and saw the roof of the burning house. It was still two lanes from his apartment. He relaxed, and slowed his pace. The people who had come to watch the fire pushed at him, though, and he had no choice but to continue onward.

5

Cheng Ling climbed onto a low wall. There were already seven or eight people standing there, watching the fire. He was separated from the burning apartment by a brick house. Two wooden shacks next to it were also on fire, but the apartment burned the fastest. All the other wooden shacks in the area had already been converted into apartment buildings. Cheng Ling saw people crowded on the neighbouring rooftops. The residents of the lane below were out on the street, carrying furniture, cabinets, even blankets. Two families had even brought out their rice-crock. Several children were crying in fear. Their voices were, however, drowned in the crackle of the fire. The walls of the apartment were already burned out. Cheng Ling could see a sheet of flame — a firedragon — licking along the floor. Several had already reached the rafters. One was snarling down from the roof. The roof collapsed and fell with a roar. Several tongues of fire spat up into empty space. The spectators all gasped with fright. Across from Cheng Ling, black images of firefighters appeared on a roof. A white blast of water shot down. Then another blast from the right side of the house described a graceful arc and landed on the burning building. Each time a white streak of water would hit in the middle of a fire-dragon, the latter would roll over and retreat into the cracks in the floor. When the water was spent, the fire would roar up again, and swallow the dark peripheral areas of the building.

Now another water streak had appeared from the left side of the building, and three other streaks revealed themselves from their hiding places around the apartment. The building had already burned to a white shell. The fire-dragons had all climbed up to the beams. The shell finally collapsed, and the fire-dragons tumbled down with it, and writhed on the floor, as if they had suffered painful sprains.

A blast of hot air burst towards Cheng Ling. Two people next to him jumped off. The water was now getting the upper hand; the two burning shacks were emitting black smoke. The flames were too small to be seen. The water had subdued the fire-dragons. Cheng Ling jumped off the wall, and squeezed through the furniture-filled street. There was still a stream of onlookers pushing into the lane. It was all he could do to manage to squirm out.

His own street was filled with people, too. His mother and brother stood at the entrance to their apartment, watching. The entire Lin family sat in their car. Mr Lin was nervous and white as ghost.

"It's nothing," Cheng Ling reassured him. "Just some illegal shacks. The fire's already been put out."

Mr Lin breathed a sigh of relief, and told his family to get out. He took the cover and carefully laid it over his car. Cheng Ling and his mother and brother returned to their apartment on the fourth floor. His mother started prattling about how the building was not safe. It did not even have a fire-escape. If, God forbid, there were a fire, they would all be trapped inside. Cheng Ling promised that he would talk to the other tenants the next day. After this false alarm, maybe all of them would be willing to pitch in and buy a fire-escape. His mother went in to her bedroom to rest. Cheng Ling looked at his brother.

"Did you see the kid home?"

"Of course. And I wrote down his address. Why didn't you let me tell them about 'Rock, Scissors, Cloth'?"

"Let them find out for themselves. I still can't figure it out. How could he guess right every time?"

His brother furrowed his brows.

"I had an idea. Maybe he could tell from the muscles in my arm or my palm what I was going to put out. You know, boxers can tell by the slightest twitch of your muscles which direction you're going to punch."

"I don't believe it. How can anyone guess so accurately? And anyway, I was wearing long sleeves, so he couldn't have seen my arm muscles. Your theory is wrong. The boy is simply uncanny. He's nothing short of clairvoyant."

"Maybe he really can foretell the future."

Cheng Ling shook his head.

"No one can do that. I don't understand science. But you scientists, you ought to be able to think up a scientific explanation."

Suddenly, his brother's jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wide.

"I just thought of something. Oh, my God!"

"What is it?" His brother's reaction scared him. "What's got into you?"

"The fire! Just before it started, we were playing a few games of chess at his house. When I was about to leave, he said it was too bad his father wouldn't let him come with me, because he wanted to see the firemen. At that time, naturally, I didn't think anything of it. You know, he's always muttering something or other ... My God! He knew about the fire!"

"Are you saying he knew about it before it happened? Are you sure you heard it right?"

"He didn't actually say there was going to be a fire. He just said that he wanted to see the firemen."

"Maybe it was a coincidence. A while ago, there were a lot of firemen practising in Taipei. The kid likes excitement, so he remembered it."

"That's too far-fetched. We don't have any firemen around here. And I hadn't mentioned firemen. How did he know there was going to be a fire tonight?"

"Coincidence. It must be a coincidence," Cheng Ling was pacing in the living room. He stopped and looked at his brother.

"Don't tell anyone what happened tonight."

"I won't talk. But his family probably has some idea. And the people at the studio are going to find out sooner or later."

"Maybe they still don't know. All they know is that he likes to play Gobang. We ought to figure out something ... we've got to figure out something ..."

Cheng Ling resumed his pacing.

"... We've got to figure out some way to prove it. Maybe it's all coincidence. But if he really is clairvoyant ..."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know." Cheng Ling thought of the boy's thin figure, his big bumpy head. He was confused. "The boy is certainly extraordinary. We ought to figure out a way to protect him, to make sure no one takes advantage of him."

"What advantage?"

"I don't know. I'm just talking. Do you get along well?"

His brother nodded. Cheng Ling knew his brother had a way with children. All the children in the neighbourhood adored him. His neighbours used to call him the 'Big Child'. Their mother was always upset with him over it. She would say that a boy who had already graduated

from college had no business playing with little kids. Cheng Ling clapped his brother on the shoulders.

"Go talk to him tomorrow. We've got to think of some way to prove all this."

"I'll think of something. It's very interesting. We ought to tell Professor Liu that he's a champ. The professor is going to lose."

"Don't you dare tell him!"

"Why not? He's my teacher. He's alright."

"You just shouldn't tell him. Get it?"

A smile flitted past his brother's face.

"He's your rival, right?"

"Bullshit. Today's the first time I've ever met him."

"So why do you hate him?"

"I don't hate him. I'll be frank: he's my friend's rival. Okay?"

"Your friend's rival?" His brother was skeptical. "And you're telling me that you're capable of holding a grudge for someone else? Don't give that crap."

"Mind your own business. You simply shouldn't tell him."

Cheng Ling slammed the door. He heard his brother close his. The radio in his brother's bedroom suddenly got louder. Cheng Ling lay in his bed. The programme was coming across loud and clear: "*Oh, oh, oh. Beautiful Sunday.* Jia-jia, An-an, and Ping-ping dedicate this song to Ling-ling, Little Han, and Little Wen. The pupils of Normal University High School's Class 28 dedicate this song to the pupils of Girls' Number Two High School's Class 4. *Oh, oh, oh. Beautiful Sunday.* (The next number:) 'I'll Never Fall in Love Again'. Ling-ling, Little Han, and Little Wen dedicate this song to Jia-jia, An-an, and Ping-ping; Girl's Number Two High School's Class 4 dedicates this song to Normal University High School's Class 28.

What do you do when you fall in love? I'll ... never fall in love again. (Next tune:) 'You are My Sunshine'. Lingling and Jia-jia dedicate this one to Ping-ping and Little Han. The other night dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamt I held you in my arms. When I awoke, dear, I was mistaken, so I hung my head and cried."

"I can't stand it!" Cheng Ling opened his door, turned on the living room light, turned on the television, but the volume all the way down, and made a phone call. The set had warmed up when someone answered.

"Is Feng Wei-min in?"

"Just a moment."

Cheng Ling watched a commercial for a pill to help mothers lactate. A young girl in a bikini was doing a back dive into a pool. Cheng Ling couldn't understand why she would want to do a back dive. It was one of those things he could never figure out. He heard someone cough into the receiver.

"Feng Wei-min here."

"Old Feng. This is Cheng Ling. You're looking for me?"

"So you've condescended to call back. I am indeed honoured."

"You were looking for me?"

"Yes, I'm looking for you! First of all, didn't you say something about designing a mail-order catalogue yesterday? I'm not interested in it myself, but a friend of mine heard me mention it yesterday, and he wanted to ask you to design one for him. But let me warn you, this guy is a real skinflint. He never pays on time. Otherwise, he couldn't pull off this mail-order business. Do you want to get in touch with him? I can give you his number."

"Sure. Wait a minute." Cheng Ling grabbed a pen and some paper. A couple of girls selling gum looked at each other and laughed. Sisters? Lesbians? Another thing he

would never figure out. He fumbled with his address book. "525410: General Manager Mao. Where's this guy coming from?"

"He doesn't have much money himself. But he probably has a lot of backing. Making some money off him shouldn't be that hard. That's one thing. The other thing has to do with the great event of your 'sister's' life."

"Who?"

"Huang Duan-shu."

"Oh, yes. I met that Professor Liu you mentioned yesterday."

"What do you think?"

"He's your classic talented handsome young gentleman. Is he really interested in her?"

"Looks like it. Where there's smoke, there's fire. Forget about him. Gao called me up this morning, and explained the situation to me. Now I know that Huang had her reasons for not coming last night."

"What's that got to do with us? You want to be a mediator again?"

"Of course. How about it? Call her up tomorrow, and make a date for this Saturday afternoon."

"Do it yourself."

The two girls selling gum looked at each other and laughed. Then they fed each other with sticks of gum. Cheng Ling turned off the set.

"She's your 'sister'," Feng said. "You ought to arrange a time."

"She's my 'sister', so I shouldn't help them get together. Gao has become a real Casanova, how can we be mediators again?"

"Great literati have always been Casanovas — especially you artists. Go and arrange a get-together."

"All right. But this will be the last time. I won't do it

again. Look, Feng, when Gao wants to make his move, he'll make it. And Huang doesn't seem to be in any hurry, either. What's your hurry? I don't get it."

"Of course you don't. See you."

"Wait a sec. Where are we going to meet?"

"Doesn't matter where. Let me know when it's arranged. Bye."

When Cheng Ling finished gargling, his brother handed him a piece of paper. There was a string of numbers written on it: 001101101011100001011011110101001.

"What's this?"

"Random numbers. Lifted from some book. The list was of real numbers between zero and one. I've changed it a bit. Anything over 0.5, I called 1, and the rest I rounded down to 0. So now they are binary random numbers."

"Random numbers are numbers without any system or order at all. If the boy can guess this list, then he really is clairvoyant."

Cheng Ling put his cup of mouthwash down on the shelf. He rubbed his chin, decided to be lazy for the day and skipped shaving. His brother was still standing at the bathroom door.

"Do you believe there are really people who are clairvoyant?"

"No. Yesterday I argued about it with Feng Wei-min. I don't believe in historical determinism. Those historians. They say everything has to do with the progress of history. I don't buy that line. I'm not a pawn. I do what I want. No one can predict what I'm going to do."

"You misunderstood him. Historical determinism doesn't preclude individual choice. The point is that your choice doesn't matter. It's like the motion of the waves, see? Like air molecules — Brownian motion. It doesn't

matter how they move around; the air pressure is still the same. Historical determinism is like thermodynamics: the free movements of all bodies mutually cancel each other out. All that's left is a conglomerate which indicates direction. No matter how you run around, the net result is still the same."

"I'm not going to discuss philosophy with you." Cheng Ling threw on his pyjamas. He still wasn't tired. "Let's go and sit on the balcony."

There were two families, one of them Cheng's, and on the fourth floor they shared the rooftop balcony. The other family had built an attic, and leased it to a rich merchant who kept his mistress there. It was only two rooms, but they pulled in three thousand a month.

Cheng's mother had wanted to build an attic, too, but could not do so for lack of money. Last year, they had joined a couple of savings groups. Originally, they had hoped to use the money for the extension. As it turned out, it was used to help keep Cheng Ling's business afloat. This year, the price of building materials had gone up, so it was even less likely that they could swing it. Fortunately, the rent they got from the Sung Kiang Road apartment had also gone up, so they could still make ends meet. His brother got a scholarship every semester. And ever since their father's death, their mother seldom went out. So their only expenses were for food, water, gas, and electricity bills. If Cheng Ling didn't paint, there might even be some money left over. Every time he thought about this, he was ashamed. The money he had spent these few years on canvas and paints was enough to build that extension. His brother had wanted a new bicycle for several years, but neither he nor his mother had ever said anything about it to Cheng Ling. And when he didn't succeed as an artist, and switched to business, they didn't say any-

thing, either. His business had failed once, and it was only now that it was beginning to recover. Cheng Ling had often thought that, although he liked to paint, he had inherited his mother's business acumen, while his scientifically-minded brother had inherited his father's scholastic temperament. Maybe he really had a future in business, and his brother would become a great scientist. They might even bring great honour to the family name. Who knows?

The balcony was cool and breezy. Smoke still rose from the area around the fire. Cheng Ling saw the people on the third floor diagonally across from them playing mah-jong. The cacophony of the falling tiles cut through the air. The ground-floor clinic across the street was still open. A fat barechested man was fanning himself in front of it. Cheng Ling looked around him. There were apartments everywhere. He felt the buzz of voices from each of them. Every place he could see was occupied by people. Even at the places he could not see, there were people, too. All were in the rat race. Everyone was looking after his own interests. Who would have time for anyone else? Taipei at night was like a giant beehive. The buzz of voices suddenly made him uncomfortable. He shook his head.

"Too many people. What will happen to us if this keeps up?"

His brother sat at the foot of the stairs, lighting a cigarette.

"Don't worry over nothing. They say Taiwan has room for thirty million people."

"Thirty million? Says who?"

"An economist. He also says that Taiwan has a labour shortage and that everyone ought to have more kids."

"Nonsense. The Chinese word for 'population' combines the characters for 'person' and 'mouth'. Every person

is another mouth to feed. How can we continue at this rate? One more child means one more place at the table. With one additional person, everyone will have less to eat.”

His brother remained silent, smoking in the dark. He waited for a while before he spoke.

“Cheng Ling, you don’t really believe in clairvoyance, do you?”

“No.”

“If that kid guesses the numbers right tomorrow, what will you say?”

“I still won’t believe in it.” Cheng Ling laughed. “Maybe he can guess other people’s intentions, but knowing what someone thinks and foretelling the future are two different things.”

His brother flicked his cigarette over the balcony.

“I for one hope he is clairvoyant. I’ve got a lot of questions to ask him. I’d like to know why I’m alive. Why is man alive? What’s to become of man? I really want to know.”

Cheng Ling looked out. There were many more apartments besides those he could see. Taipei was a dense thicket of television antennae. However, no birds rested in this bush. After a long time, Cheng Ling stood up, and straightened his clothes.

“It’s cold; let’s go in.”

6

Cheng Ling hurried over to the Xiongji Restaurant. Zhou Pei had not arrived. He waited at the door for a while, then remembered that there was an entrance on Heng Yang Street, too. He walked over, but Zhou Pei wasn't there, either. He came back to the front, and waited for another five minutes. He felt it stupid and decided that he might as well wait for them inside. Zhou Pei and Little Dong were, naturally, already seated in a corner. There wasn't any trace of their General Manager Song.

"Mr Song seems to have forgotten our appointment."

Cheng Ling was angry.

"How easy it is to forget about the appointment. What does he take us for? Morons? At his beck and call? So that's your good friend?"

"Calm down. It turned out that Mr Song was busy. Sorry, it's my fault."

"You fool. Christ! We're all goddamned poor, and here we are about to impress each other with a meal we can't afford. Let's go elsewhere and eat beef noodles."

Zhou Pei was silent. Little Dong made the peace.

"Since we're already here, let's just each order an egg-fried rice. It wouldn't be proper to go off now."

Little Dong ordered three plates of egg-fried rice. Cheng Ling wolfed down his portion and drank a few glasses of tea. He still wasn't quite full. There weren't many people in the restaurant, just several couples whispering to one another. The girl who was supposed

to be playing the organ was sitting on her bench, staring blankly. Little Dong poked Zhou Pei and said mysteriously, "I know that girl."

Zhou Pei looked a little stiff. He had something to smother his sorrows. Cheng Ling could see he wasn't too happy. Little Dong waved the hostess over. He took out his pen and wrote a note which he gave to her.

"Please give that young woman over there a glass of tomato juice."

The hostess took the drink over to the girl at the organ. She turned around and smiled at Little Dong, and started to play 'The River of No Return'. Cheng Ling laughed.

"You'd never know it by looking at him, but Little Dong's an operator."

"I used to go out with her."

"Ask her to come over and have a chat."

"There's no need to. There's nothing between us now; just 'The River of No Return'."

Zhou Pei walked out of the restaurant. The sunlight was oppressive. Cheng Ling put on his dark glasses. Little Dong kept his head down. Zhou Pei seemed to be still fighting with himself. Cheng Ling felt bad. He clapped him on the shoulder.

"As far as stocks are concerned, you're the boss. We'll do whatever you want."

"The situation has changed again. Song didn't show up because he was busy. We'll just have to wait, now."

The three of them were in front of the Bank of Taiwan.

"Well," Cheng Ling said, "We had better concentrate on the agency. I'll finish the accounts we have, first."

"That's the way it will have to be, for now. I'll keep poking around."

Cheng Ling told Zhou Pei the tip Feng had given him the night before. Zhou Pei said he would get in touch with

General Manager Mao. Cheng Ling knew that all that Zhou Pei was thinking about was stocks. He really didn't want to bother with the courting of some ad account. Suddenly, he had an idea. He turned to Zhou Pei.

"If I can get a good tip, we'll give it a try, okay?"

"Where are you going to get any information?"

"I just might have a way." Cheng Ling mentioned that he knew of someone who was clairvoyant and could predict the market for them. He felt sorry as soon as he said it. He had warned his brother not to tell anyone, and here he was bringing it up. But at least he hadn't told everything. His brother shouldn't blame him. Zhou Pei was indifferent.

"Fat Cheng, there is only one kind of person who can predict the market, and that's someone who's got bundles of cash up front; a wheeler-dealer who can manipulate prices. Aside from him, anyone who tries to outsmart the market is going to get burnt. If you don't have inside information, don't start playing fancy. You're bound to lose, and badly too."

"But if someone could actually predict the future, wouldn't that be a different story?"

"Perhaps," Zhou Pei said. "But we're on the sidelines for now. We'll wait for Song's tip. If the majority wants it, then we'll go for it. But let's not do anything stupid now."

"What stock is it, anyway?"

Zhou Pei whispered the name in Cheng Ling's ear. Cheng Ling raised his eyebrows.

"How could we? Aren't all the shares controlled by a few major stockholders?"

"It looks like that. But not really. It's all very complicated. You'll see. In three months' time, some people are going to be in a lot of trouble. But you absolutely mustn't tell anyone."

Zhou Pei left by himself. Cheng Ling and Little Dong walked back up to the front of the restaurant. Little Dong started his 50 c.c. motorbike. Cheng Ling somehow managed to sit down behind him. As he didn't have any place to put his feet, he had to let them drag along. He poked Little Dong.

"Take me to Chung Shan North Road, Section II, okay?"

Little Dong's motorbike could only go in the slow lane. It weaved in and out of the traffic. It was no small achievement to make it to Ching Tao North Road. Cheng Ling's feet hung in the air. He was tired, and dripping with sweat. Little Dong's bike was old, but it had a life of its own. They veered left and right. Cheng Ling clutched Little Dong's clothes as he was about to fall off.

"Take it easy. You don't have to show off. I can't digest my food."

"You're too heavy. The centre of the bike is unstable."

"Then I'll drive. You'll sit at the back."

"Don't bother. I'll be a little more careful. Hey, Fat Cheng, the next time Zhou Pei wants to play the market, don't encourage him. Just a minute ago, he had already given up. Then you fanned the fire. What for? I really don't understand your way of doing things."

The bike shook, and Cheng Ling's foot almost kicked into a street lamp. He quickly pulled back his right leg.

"Slow down! You really don't know how to drive."

"Sorry. We really ought to clear things up with Zhou Pei. The agency's business comes first. If he wants to play the market, he can go and do it himself. There is no need to take us all down with him."

"Zhou Pei's intentions are good. Everyone is a little ambitious. If we didn't let him invest from time to time, he probably wouldn't care so much about the agency."

"You said it yourself that everyone has ambitions. Well, everyone is interested in different things, too. It's better for us to break up. In that way, nobody gets angry. There's no point in pulling Zhou Pei along, is there? Sometimes you get too worried about maintaining friendships. You are a real pushover."

Cheng Ling hadn't imagined that Little Dong could talk so sensibly. He concentrated on keeping his mind straight, and thinking. Little Dong was right, but why was he unwilling to confront Zhou Pei himself? Little Dong always had Cheng Ling playing the bad guy, while he managed to stay out of confrontations. Cheng Ling wiped the sweat off his face.

"There are only three people in the company, yet they still can't work together. What a joke. At least, we shouldn't fight among ourselves. If we really can't work it out, then we'll see. I get off here."

Little Dong stopped the bike. Cheng Ling struggled off. His legs were completely numb. Little Dong turned down the intake with his right hand. The noise subsided.

"I've already finished that design for the school exhibition. Do you want me to show it to you?"

"Don't bother. I have already taken a look at it last night. Not bad."

"Then I'll send it over this afternoon. You're coming in today?"

"I'll come back. I have finished correcting the credits for *Wonder Kids*. They're in your right-hand drawer. I'm afraid we're going to have to design a few more."

"When's the due date?"

"Sunday. Today's only Thursday. I'll be able to make it on time. See you."

Cheng Ling went into the airline ticketing office. Huang Duan-shu was on the phone. She beckoned him

to wait. He sat down on a leather chair in front of the air-conditioner. He felt rather comfortable, though a little hungry. After the ride with Little Dong, he had almost digested his egg-fried rice. His eyes wandered around the room. The walls were adorned with a wonderland of travel posters: Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York, Bangkok, Sydney. One in particular caught his eye: a golden beach, a supernaturally blue sea, and behind the beach were snow-capped mountains rising into the distance. The Caribbean. He suspected that no one could really afford to spend their vacation there. Not even the richest people in Taipei were wealthy enough. The beach really intrigued him. Cheng Ling thought to himself that, if he had money, that would be where he would go. The golden sands of the Caribbean didn't have any lions. No, no lions at all. The sea that Hemmingway had dreamed of was along the African coast. Cheng Ling had never dreamed of Africa. He knew a girl. She went to Tanzania as a nurse. And that was the last he had ever heard of her. A single Asian girl going to Africa to be a nurse. Who knew how she was doing there? Cheng Ling thought that he still might have her address. He ought to write her a letter and ask her whether there were lions on the African coast. He sneezed twice.

"Don't catch a cold, Cheng Ling."

With these gently mocking words, Huang Duan-shu stood in front of him. Cheng Ling looked her up and down. She had cut her hair.

"I was busy Tuesday night, so I couldn't come to your party. Was everybody there?"

"Ji Fei, Song Ping-he and you weren't. It was decided that your membership would be forfeited if any of you decided to stay away again."

"Sorry. I was really busy on Tuesday night. Get in touch with me a little earlier the next time."

Cheng Ling was trying to figure out how he ought to respond to this one. The telephone rang. Huang Duan-shu excused herself. Cheng Ling walked over to the next counter, and watched her take the call. She pulled out a blank ticket. She wrote as she talked. "Hong Kong. Round trip. July 10th. No, we can't give you a seat number yet. You have to come over yourself. Yes, you can send your visa over here. Thank you for flying with us. Goodbye." She looked up and smiled at him.

"How come you're the only one here?"

"Everyone else has gone out for lunch. Say, I saw a couple of your paintings at Jie-xi's house. Why do you insist on painting like that?"

"You don't like them?"

"Of course I don't." She became serious. Cheng Ling was alarmed.

"Why do you insist on painting like that?"

"I just paint for fun. Jie-xi said that maybe some foreign customer would like them." He continued quickly. "Anyway, they were all done last year. I haven't painted anything this year, nothing at all."

Huang Duan-shu pursed her lips. Cheng Ling didn't like this look of hers. He thought it made her look ugly. He knew what she was thinking of. He wanted to say, "What's the big deal? Gao paints like that, and you seem to be able to stand it." The telephone rang again. This time it was for a Miss Bai. Huang Duan-shu said that Miss Bai wasn't in. Cheng Ling watched her replace the receiver.

"I've got to go back to the office. Are you free on Saturday?"

"I'm still not quite sure. I might have to go to my aunt's house."

"Feng and I would like to take you out. Make up for

that time Tuesday. We haven't sat down to chat for a long time. And bring Gao Yue-bai too."

Huang Duan-shu considered their proposal, but said nothing.

"I've got to go back to the office. I'll call you again to tell you where we'll go."

"I might have to go to my aunt's house."

"I'll call you right back."

Several girls had returned to the airline office. Cheng Ling said goodbye. Huang Duan-shu saw him out.

"Don't paint those kind of pictures," she said softly, "I've talked to Gao, also. Why are you two doing it?"

Cheng Ling looked at her. So she knew. Maybe that was why they had argued. He remembered how, when he had first started to paint ads, she hadn't objected. But when Gao started to move in that direction, she became upset immediately.

"I'll call you right back."

He took the bus back to the agency. The girl was downstairs talking again. When she saw that he had come back, though, she actually went out to greet him.

"Mr Cheng, there's a young lady waiting for you upstairs." Then she flounced back to the trade company.

Cheng Ling swore to himself, and dashed up the steps. Ding Yu-mei was seated on the table, cross-legged. She was holding his T-square.

"Hi."

To his surprise, he found her alone in the office.

"You haven't seen Little Dong?"

"Isn't he the one with the glasses? When I came, he was just leaving. Oh, yes, I took some calls for you. Here, I wrote them all down. You ought to take me on as your secretary."

"That girl's got some nerve. Chatting all day. Sooner

or later, I'm going to tell her to take a walk."

"Then you can hire me as a secretary." Ding Yu-mei was wearing a ponytail. When she talked, the ponytail bobbed back and forth. "Your company is such fun. It's like little kids playing house. Tell me, are there many of your kind of companies in Taipei?"

"I think there are quite a few." Cheng Ling poured out a couple of glasses of tea. The water was cold. "Don't laugh; if you want to make it on your own, there's bound to be a period of temporary hardship. Wait till we've expanded a bit, then it won't be so funny."

Ding Yu-mei put down the T-square, and picked up some drawings from the table.

"Are these the credits you did for us? This egg-headed kid looks like the prodigy. How cute!"

Cheng Ling loved to hear her use that phrase. She bent her head slightly, breathed in deeply, shook her ponytail, and said, "How cute!" You couldn't help but believe her.

"The one that looks like a cartoon might not be to Zhang Shi-jia's taste," he said. "I've got two other designs; you can choose one."

"I like this one. We'll use it next Friday when we put on the boy."

"Friday? Why so quick?"

"There just aren't enough convincing prodigies to go around. I'll tell you a secret," Ding Yu-mei lowered her voice. "The girl wonder kid on tomorrow's show is a fake."

"A fake wonder kid?"

"Yes. A fake wonder kid. Zhang Shi-jia and I are the only ones who know. Even Old Gong isn't aware of this. Don't you dare breathe a word of this. Zhang Shi-jia was determined to use her. I objected, but that didn't change anything." Ding Yu-mei sighed. "I don't like to deceive people. We cheated the audience. It's bad, but Zhang Shi-

jia said he had his reasons."

"What reasons does he have?"

"He wasn't willing to say. The girl could play the piano. We switched two of the soundtracks. She actually played for one of the pieces, so it wasn't all phony."

They must be trying to get something from someone, Cheng Ling thought. Zhang was in it too. This could spoil his reputation. He sympathized with Ding Yu-mei. Anyone who worked with Zhang was bound to suffer for it. If the story came out, she would be in a real mess.

"Fortunately, our chess wonder is a real prodigy."

Cheng Ling thought of the boy's strange, bumpy head. He didn't know whether his brother had met him or not. A clairvoyant wonder kid. Better not let Zhang know for now. Who knew what other tricks he had up his sleeve? These days, while you shouldn't be out to hurt anyone, you still had to defend yourself. If the boy was really clairvoyant, then he is certainly a valuable piece of merchandise. Cheng Ling felt the boy ought to have the opportunity to develop freely. If he were exploited by TV, he would become a pawn of society. It wouldn't be fair to him.

"What are you thinking of now? You still haven't asked me why I came looking for you."

"Why did you come looking for me?"

"Because I want you to come with me to see Professor Liu's factory. Remember Professor Liu? You weren't too nice to him."

Cheng Ling couldn't figure out what she was up to. Yesterday she was still mad at him. Today she wanted him to go with her to look at Professor Liu's factory.

"I don't understand. Since when are you interested in looking at factories?"

Ding Yu-mei pursed her lips.

"I really don't want to go. But he absolutely insisted.

I thought you might be interested, too."

"Well, I'm not interested."

So our Professor Liu is a real clown, Cheng Ling thought. When he courts a girl, he has to invite her first to see his factory. That's his strategy. Ding Yu-mei wanted him to chaperone — or did she want to go with two guys at the same time? Either way, he wasn't willing to play along.

"You are interested, I know."

"I'm not. I've got a lot of things to do."

"Come with me." Now she was beginning to implore him. "He's coming to pick me ... us, up soon. I told him you wanted to come along."

Cheng Ling firmly shook his head. He picked up the telephone on the first ring. Sorry, lady, there are certain things a gentleman would not do. His brother's voice was trembling with excitement.

"Cheng Ling?"

"What?"

"He guessed them all! All the random numbers! Not one wrong! I believe he's really clairvoyant. You ought to have seen him read them out. It was so incredible!"

"Where are you?"

"At an ice fruit stand. Don't worry, nobody else knows what we're up to. You want to come over?"

Professor Liu's tall image appeared at the top of the stairs. Cheng Ling turned his back.

"No good. I'm busy now. Talk to you at home."

"Okay. I've got to go to school this afternoon to look at my marks. What's next."

"First figure out a way to explain things to him. Don't tell anyone else."

"What should I say?"

"Anything you can think of. See you."

Cheng Ling invited Professor Liu to sit down. Professor Liu grinned and stared at Ding Yu-mei without paying any attention to him. Ding Yu-mei said that Cheng Ling wanted to look at the factory. Only then did Professor Liu seem to notice Cheng Ling's existence. He kept on saying, "Very good, very good." Cheng Ling saw he didn't mean it and felt even more reluctant to go. Ding Yu-mei didn't sense anything, she insisted they all go together. Professor Liu had a '72 Chevrolet; red, fully automatic, factory A/C. Cheng Ling squeezed into the back seat. He watched as the professor closed Ding Yu-mei's door, then casually flipped on the air-conditioning. The temperature plummeted. Cheng Ling felt like Snow White in her glass coffin. Cold on the outside, parched on the inside.

"What kind of factory is it?"

"Several friends and I opened a factory manufacturing electric capacitors. And we also have an electronics factory in Patu. Very small scale. In a year we only do a few tens of thousands U.S. dollars' worth of business. It's really nothing much."

"You seem quite extraordinary," Ding Yu-mei said. "You can play chess, and teach, and you even run a factory. How do you do it all?"

Professor Liu laughed with a modest air.

"The factory is for the most part, in the hands of others. I just give a little advice from time to time. If you're looking for a truly remarkable person, take Mr Cheng. Artist and businessman. Does your business influence your painting? Making money, but not forsaking art. A rare feat."

Cheng Ling sneezed. He was afraid he was catching a cold.

"You're flattering me! All I do is design ads. But you

are a water-conservation specialist, and on top of that, you run an electronics factory. Now, that's really unusual."

"Actually, it wasn't my idea. I was dragged into it. I had a high school classmate. Very intelligent fellow. For six years, he was always number two, and I was number one. In those days, we were fierce competitors. But after graduation, we got along quite well. When he started up the factory, he naturally asked me for help. He said that business is like chess: they are both games of the mind. If you can play chess, you can succeed in business. I didn't understand him, then. Now I've found out that business is indeed much the same as chess, only more stimulating. So these days I'm playing less *xiangqi*. I've given up my title so someone else can take over."

Ding Yu-mei turned to Cheng Ling.

"Speaking of chess, what do you think of that prodigy?"

"He's sure got something. Too bad all he can play is Gobang. Most people probably aren't too interested in that."

"You're right," Professor Liu said. "The boy has got potential. You ought to teach him *xiangqi*. See if he can do even better."

"Are you willing to teach him, Professor? After he has learnt the ropes, you could play with him and see how good he is."

Professor Liu didn't reply.

"Too late," Ding Yu-mei interrupted. "We're going to put him on *Wonder Kids* next Friday. He couldn't learn *xiangqi* in a week."

"Since he is a prodigy," Cheng Ling put in, "maybe he'll take to it right away. If he can learn it in a week, will you be willing to pay three games with him on TV, for his benefit?"

The professor laughed heartily.

"I'm afraid that you are underestimating the complexity of *xiangqi*. It's easy to learn, but difficult to master. Forget about a week. Even if one has ten years, one still might not be good at it. I wouldn't say that I've completely mastered *xiangqi* yet."

"Do you mean to say that you will be willing to play with the boy?"

"If Miss Ding wants me to, I'd be only too delighted. I'm only afraid she would feel it inappropriate."

"If you would play with the boy, it would help our ratings of course," Ding Yu-mei said. "And how could he beat you?"

"Don't worry about that," Cheng Ling said. "I'll teach him *xiangqi*, and in a week's time, I promise you that he'll be ready to take on the professor."

"Mr Cheng, in addition to being an artist and businessman, you are also a skilled chess player. You have my deepest respect. But, if I may say so myself, I'm no pushover. No, not a pushover at all. Ha, ha."

Cheng Ling sneezed again. Ding Yu-mei looked at him.

"Let's just play Gobang, okay? Almost all the recent *Wonder Kids* have been musical programmes. All we want is a change of pace. If the audience gets to see something new, we'll be satisfied. Oh, yes, Cheng Ling, did you get to play 1 pawn chess with him yesterday?"

"1 pawn chess is fine, and so is Gobang. But what would be best would be a real challenge between the professor and the boy. That would be really sensational."

"It seems you won't let up. Well, I don't object. One word from Miss Ding, and I'd go to hell and back, so why not play chess with a little prodigy?"

The professor slowly pulled up his car. They were already at Huan Ho South Road, and there certainly

weren't any factory buildings around. Cheng Ling thought it was all rather odd. The professor pointed to a grey apartment-like building, and said that his factory was temporarily located on the second and third floor. As soon as the new factory in Tamsui was completed, they would move in. Cheng Ling and Ding Yu-mei followed him up the stairs. The girls on the first floor looked up. As it turned out, there were altogether six rows of women workers seated at tables. In front of each girl was placed a wooden tray. A screw stuck up out of the centre of each of these trays and the girls would paste one end of a wire onto the end of a long slip of paper before turning the tray. The paper would then wind up. Next they were pasted on another wire, and the paper was cut. The little strip of rolled-up paper became an electric capacitor. Apart from the girls, a couple of toaster ovens, and several oscilloscopes, there was nothing else in the room. Cheng Ling thought it was all very comical. He turned to Ding Yu-mei.

"You said our company looked like a playhouse. This place is worse."

Professor Liu looked seriously at Cheng Ling.

"You shouldn't belittle our factory. We produce about one quarter of all the capacitors manufactured in Taiwan. And don't think that our equipment is unsophisticated, either. In fact, every piece is the latest model. A trained worker can produce over one hundred capacitors in an hour."

"I never knew that one could make electrical parts by hand," Ding Yu-mei said. "Are they reliable enough this way?"

"No problem. We have the best, most able workers in the world. That's why we've been a success." Professor Liu invited them up to his third floor office to rest. "Please

sit down. I've got to go see someone. I'll be right back."

Ding Yu-mei took out a little handkerchief and wiped the sweat off her nose. Cheng Ling found an empty tea glass, but he couldn't find the teapot. The two office desks were covered in a thick layer of dust. Someone had written something in English on the filthy windows with a finger. Several small banners and name-cards were tacked randomly onto the wall.

"Why would the professor want to bring you to see a factory like this?"

"Maybe because I mentioned that Dad had opened an electronics factory in Singapore," Ding Yu-mei smiled. "What an interesting person: he met me yesterday, and wants to take me out today. Why don't you like him?"

"It's not that. But I've got to hand it to him, he's very adept at blowing his own trumpet. I hope he is as good at chess."

"Do you think the boy has a chance against him? Can you guarantee the boy will win? Or at least not to be slaughtered?"

"I'll do my best. All he needs is a little guidance. The kid ought to be able to win."

"You're just as much a braggart as the professor. If they really are evenly matched, I'll go and ask Zhang Shi-jia to invite Professor Liu to participate in the show."

The professor returned with a middle-aged man. The middle-aged man was carrying three glasses of Coca Cola.

"Excuse me, this is really no way to treat your guests. You probably don't think much of our factory, Mr Cheng. Well, if I may say so myself, we small capitalists are the true pillars of the economy. Where would the export market be if it weren't for us? You are a businessman ... do you agree?"

"You go too far. How can I be considered some kind of capitalist? I shouldn't be mentioned in the same breath as you."

"I am not speaking of the present, I'm talking about the future. Twenty years from now, we might all be captains of industry. All you need is the drive to do it. These days, there is plenty of opportunity for the self-made man. For me, the money isn't a consideration. I personally don't like money. But when you have money, you don't have to demean yourself. Do you agree with that?"

"In your esteemed opinion, if you have money, you don't have to demean yourself. However, in order to get money, you have to demean yourself. So in the end it's still the same."

Professor Liu laughed heartily.

"You are a real artist, and you talk like one, too. 'Not demeaning yourself is the end, demeaning yourself is the means'. It's just like playing chess. In order to win, you have to sacrifice a pawn or two. But you do win. In business, the goal is to make money. So if you demean yourself now, it doesn't really matter, because twenty years from now, you won't be someone else's punching bag. Of that much, I'm confident."

"In twenty years' time, you'll be doing the punching."

"I'm not a cut-throat capitalist. Our factory might be small, but the pay isn't bad. My engineers are all young fellows, eager to learn. I told them to go to night school, and learn a little about the principles of electrical engineering. Recently, business has been bad, and we've lost several overseas clients. But I haven't laid off any of my girls."

"Nowadays, it's not so easy to find girls. If you lay them off, they won't come back." Cheng Ling thought about the girl in his office who wouldn't follow orders. "They're

really darlings."

"So you've also had that experience? Then we're brothers of the same cloth." Professor Liu turned to Ding Yu-mei. "Miss Ding, this certainly isn't a factory you can appreciate. Wait till we move to Tamsui, and I'll invite you over for another tour."

Ding Yu-mei wrinkled up her nose.

"Thanks. Can we go home now?"

Professor Liu gave the middle-aged man some instructions. They walked over to the car. Professor Liu turned on the air-conditioning. Ding Yu-mei let out a sigh of relief.

"It's so nice and cool. I really can't take the heat."

"Miss Ding ... the girls in there all recognized you ... have you ever been in a television serial?"

"Last year I did a cameo. I really can't act."

"Then that was it. They remembered you."

"Nobody knows that I am the M.C. of *Wonder Kids*. Evidently, our audience isn't very big. Too bad! Cheng Ling doesn't even watch it."

"Yes, I do! I watch it every time."

"Liar! You didn't see the maths whiz last week."

"I saw the maths whiz," Professor Liu said. "I like your programmes a lot. Your style is so unpretentious, so natural. Unfortunately, I was born twenty years too early. Otherwise, I could have graced the set of *Wonder Kids* myself. Ha, ha!"

Cheng Ling couldn't help sneezing again.

"There's still time," Ding Yu-mei said. "If we actually invited you to play with the boy, you would accept, wouldn't you?"

"Is there any doubt in your mind? I await your command."

"Cheng Ling, hurry and teach the boy to play *xiangqi*."

"Don't worry. The little wonder will be more than a match for the big wonder."

Ding Yu-mei wanted to go back to the studio. Cheng Ling asked Professor Liu to let him off at Hsi Men Ting. Cheng Ling hadn't taken enough for lunch, and that, along with an afternoon cooped up with them, had combined to make him feel a bit lightheaded. He ran into Dessert World and ordered some fried cake and a bowl of green bean congee. He ate, and worked things out for himself : since Professor Liu wanted to put on such an impressive front, if the boy won a few games of chess from him and made him lose face on TV, that might just chop him down to size. If the boy really was clairvoyant, then winning a game of chess shouldn't be any big deal. All they needed to do was to have him predict what moves the professor would make, and then he and his brother would figure out how to beat him. So then the boy could just play according to the script, and there would be no danger of losing. Also, this Mr Liu's intentions with Ding Yu-mei were less than honourable. Just a moment ago he had forgotten to point out to Ding Yu-mei that Professor Liu was also supposed to be courting Huang Duan-shu. He was betting on two horses in the same race. He would have to pay for that. Furthermore, he was merely a young college professor trying to make a fast buck. Everyone wanted to make money. It was hardly fair to blame him for that. Huang Duan-shu had always been very exacting with Gao and himself. Professor Liu was right. Money is freedom. When you have money you don't get pushed around. Cheng Ling looked at the bustling crowds of Hsi Men Ting. He noticed that people in Taipei were walking faster these days. He didn't remember how he used to walk in high school or college. It couldn't have been so fast, though — so full of gusto! Full of gusto? Cheng Ling

unconsciously rubbed his stomach, and sighed, and licked his bowl of congee clean.

He went into a book store and bought a chess board and copies of *Mei Hua Pu* and *Ju Zhong Mi*, two classic textbooks on *xiangqi*. The boy wrapped them up, handed him his package, and jokingly asked, "Do you like to play *xiangqi*?"

"I want to take on the champ," Cheng Ling answered. "But first I've got to do a little research."

"These two books should keep you busy for several years."

Cheng Ling smiled.

"Wait and see, the chess world will be bustling with activity soon ..."

"It won't work. How can we ask him to predict every move?"

"Why won't it work?"

"I just don't think it will. Until now, he's only been predicting one move at a time. He's never had to predict a whole string of them."

"But isn't it the same principle? If he can predict one move, why can't he predict ten, or twenty?"

"It's not the same. I just don't think it's the same." His brother took off his shirt. Their house didn't have air-conditioning. Since they were on the top floor, it was still rather warm as late as seven or eight in the evening. His brother's room was especially hot with only one window. His brother gave him a cigarette. The two men faced each other, smoking silently. After a while, his brother spoke.

"Look, the average person who can't really play chess can only see two or three moves ahead. If an expert can see five or six moves ahead, he's doing fine. Seeing one move ahead is simple, there isn't going to be much of a change on the board. With two moves, the possibilities are much greater. When you get to three or more, the situation becomes extremely complex. If you talk in terms of considering every possible alternative, then you are dealing with a geometric increase in the number of choices. There's no way the kid could make sense out of such a complicated set of circumstances."

"But the kid isn't an average person. Didn't you say he guessed those random numbers? There's probably nothing he can't predict."

"He knew them all right. But random numbers are just a string of digits, a very elementary composition. Sure, the kid can predict a set of random numbers, but that just proves he is capable of analyzing an extremely simple situation. Here, I'll show you what I mean."

His brother switched on the light by his bed.

"Look at this light. The rays are concentrated in a small area, and you can see everything that the light illuminates. If I do this," his brother lifted up the lamp and shone the light across the room, "See, the rays are scattered over a larger area, but you can't see the objects they hit as distinctly. If we concentrate our knowledge on a small realm, then we can understand all about a specific phenomenon within it, but only at the risk of completely neglecting everything else. On the other hand, if we allow our knowledge to diffuse itself and obtain a general understanding of the world, we will never be able to thoroughly comprehend any particular phenomenon. I suspect that the boy's ability to predict is like these rays. He can accurately predict simple things, like 'Rock, Scissors, Cloth' or some random numbers. But I don't think he can expand his power to predict more complicated things, like how many people there will be in the world in twenty years."

"But *xiangqi* isn't so difficult. If the average person can see two or three moves ahead, a prodigy ought to be able to see much further."

"But he has to be able to predict what Professor Liu's mental state will be next Sunday in order to predict what moves he will make." His brother shook his head. "It's too complicated. How can you know what someone's

mental state is going to be? Maybe the professor will decide to lose? How do you know that he'll give it his all? How do you know?"

"The professor's mental state should be clear to even the most casual bystander; the man has a swelled head. If he has a chance to win, there is no way he is going to give it up. If he lost, he would say that he let the boy win. So much for his mental state."

"You've got him all wrong. He might like to brag a little, but he's not a bad sort. Today you blew it. All girls like to be the centre of attention, that's just a fact of life. If I were you, I would never have gone along with them to be the odd man out. No class."

"You're hardly in a position to advise me."

His brother gave him another cigarette.

"You ought to step back for some perspective. Take it from me. You lose, then lose again, and still you come back for more. 'A' for effort. But what's the point in continuing like that? Why don't you change your game?"

"I didn't want to go in the first place. But she put me on the spot."

"You're a real pushover," his brother said. "You've fallen for Ding Yu-mei, and she doesn't even notice you. You ought to try being your own man. There's no harm in showing what you're made of. If you don't believe me, try it yourself."

This was the second time today Cheng Ling had been accused of being a pushover. Furiously, he dragged on his cigarette, without saying anything. His mother opened the door, saw the room full of smoke, and started fanning about with her hands.

"Smoking again! One doesn't know enough to set a good example, and the other blindly follows his big brother's lead. Look at this tray of butts! How many

sticks did you smoke? I forbid further smoking."

"Are you going out, mom?" His brother hastened to clean the ashtray.

"I'm going to church. You two are not allowed to smoke anymore. And don't empty the ashtray directly into the wastepaper basket or you'll set the house on fire. Did you bring home your report card today, Cheng Li?"

"Not yet, but the grades of the majors have all been posted. I didn't do so badly. There shouldn't be any problem about next semester's scholarship."

Their mother was very happy. Cheng Ling accompanied her downstairs. He watched as she walked out of the lane. He ought to call her a cab. But his mother would refuse to take it. She was like their father. They both used to run. Until he got sick, Father had run five miles a day. He could remember his father taking him out for a run in the morning. They would run all the way down to the Kung Kuan bus lot and back. Once, however, his father almost had a stroke. They said at the clinic that if he kept running he might rupture a blood vessel. Of course, no one knew for sure. When you were old, your blood vessels harden, and that is the end of that. He switched to jogging. The doctor was always worrying about his father's arteries, he never suspected that it would be his liver that would give way ...

Fortunately, their mother had recovered fairly quickly. Initially, Cheng Ling and his brother had been worried about her. She had spent her whole life living in her husband's shadow, she had never decided anything on her own. Without him around, she might well have fallen to pieces. But she proved to be stronger than they thought her to be, and soon adjusted to her new circumstances. At one time, Cheng Ling had seriously considered having to resume the responsibilities of head of the household.

But it turned out that their mother didn't need him to take over their father's position. In fact, she still treated them both like children. She became head of the house, and quite willingly took over their father's responsibility of looking after them. Cheng Ling sometimes thought that the obligations of her new role were what motivated her to continue on so steadfastly. He had talked it over with his brother, and they had decided that, in the unlikely event that either of them left the country, the other would stay home to look after her. They wouldn't both leave her at the same time. In those days, it had been Cheng Ling who had wanted to move on, but his ambition had gradually faded during these last two years, and now he only hoped that his brother would go, and maybe be able to take their mother over to enjoy her old age. He himself didn't care. Time passed. His only problem now was finding a girl. Actually, though, it wasn't something he had to have.

The Lins were all sitting outside enjoying the breeze. Cheng Ling didn't understand why they wouldn't turn on their air-conditioner. Mr Lin angrily told him that his gas-cap had been stolen. Now he was certain that someone was deliberately sabotaging his car. He wasn't going to let the culprit get away.

Mr Lin's fists hammered the air. Big-bellied Mrs Lin sat oblivious to it all, in a rattan chair to the side, blissfully asleep. "I'm going to catch him, and let him know who he's dealing with!"

Mr Lin's theatrics made Cheng Ling want to laugh. However, he felt that that wasn't the proper way to treat his neighbours, so he muttered some excuse and went upstairs. His brother had turned the rock music up to a deafening decibel level.

"How about turning it a little softer?" Cheng Ling

roared in his ear.

His brother shrugged his shoulders. Cheng Ling turned down the volume of the stereo.

"You talk about philosophy all day, then you close your door and listen to rock. Isn't that a little inconsistent?"

"The Tao is in piss.* Even shit has a philosophical basis. Rock is much more sophisticated than shit. The Beatles are even more extraordinary. Listen." (The Beatles were singing 'Nowhere Man'. The main theme actually sounded a little like the New World Symphony.) "Just see what he wants to see.... Doesn't have a point of view. Isn't he a bit like you? Have you heard 'Yellow Submarine'?"

"Yesterday's songs, yesterday's philosophy. Brotherhood. Love. What's the use of love? After all the talk, it's still a foreigner's philosophy. What use is it to you?"

His brother turned off the record player. The room suddenly became quiet. The only sound came from the fan of their neighbour's air-conditioner.

"Once upon a time, there was a Dutch philosopher. His name was Leibniz. He said that this world wasn't completely good. It was full of evil and sufferings. However, this world was the best of all possible worlds."

"Superficial optimism. Voltaire laid his theory to rest long ago. I really give up on you. No matter what you do, you can't escape your rationalist framework."

"You want me to follow you? I got tired of your line a long time ago: 'Since there's no hope, just sit back and accept your fate.' Well, we've still got to live, right? Voltaire had a soul; so did Camus. How about you?"

Cheng Ling stood in front of the window. The noise from the air-conditioners was somehow discomforting. How many air-conditioners were on in Taipei at this

moment? How many in the whole world?

His brother continued.

"I once read a really strange mathematical biology thesis. All it did was analyze the formation of sunflower petals. Do you know what the ideal number of spirals is? Often, it's a Fibonacci number. Sometimes it's twenty-one spirals, sometimes it's thirty-four spirals. You can mathematically explain the formation of a sunflower. Even the angular measure between the petals is in a fixed proportion explainable by the golden section. Imagine, a flower is governed by all those internal laws. Do you think history doesn't have internal laws?"

Cheng Ling absent-mindedly lit another cigarette.

"I don't want to debate with you. All I want to do is paint. I only wish I can still paint."

"Of course you can still paint." His brother laughed. "As long as you are willing to paint ads, you can paint to your heart's content. What's the difference to you?"

"There's still a difference."

"There's no difference. You ought to understand that. There is absolutely no difference."

"There's still a difference."

Cheng Ling's voice was very soft. He was almost talking to himself. Pearls of sweat slithered down his head and onto his chest. He could hear the whirr of the air-conditioners. It ushered in cool visions and urged him on to sleep.

* *A quotation from Chuang-zhi.*

8

The chess prodigy sat uncomfortably in the middle of his chair. His scraggy neck didn't seem strong enough to support his over-sized head. He couldn't help but draw in his neck and try to transfer the weight of his head onto his shoulders. He was pulling at the threads of his yellow-khaki shorts.

"Try again," Cheng Ling coaxed him. "Think hard. What's his next move?"

The chess prodigy looked at him, then looked at his brother. Cheng Ling urged him on.

"What's his next move?"

The child was getting more and more uncomfortable; he squirmed in his chair. Finally, he thrust his arm forward, and moved a pawn. Cheng Ling felt as if he had been relieved of a great burden. He turned to his brother.

"Write it down. Pawn three up one."

His brother wrote "Pawn three up one" in a notebook, then threw down his pen.

"It's no good. Let's forget it. It's too illogical."

"What's so illogical? He's already predicted five moves. We move, then he moves for Professor Liu. Isn't that perfectly logical?"

"I just don't think it makes any sense this way. He is now playing as if he were Professor Liu. But the professor's moves depend on ours. If we didn't play this way, if we had made some other moves, the professor's

responses would change, too. Isn't it?"

"Okay ..."

"So if we change our moves, he'll predict differently."

His brother bit his lip. "In other words, he can conceivably have several different predictions about the future. It's all too illogical."

Cheng Ling thought over what his brother had just said. The boy sat silently, impassively listening to their discussion, as if they were talking about something happening on Mars. Cheng Ling mulled things over, and eventually figured out an explanation.

"It's still perfectly logical. You're just forgetting that man is a key factor in his decision. The boy can't simply predict the future based on nothing. First he has to weigh all the elements of a fluid situation, then he can decide what the result will be. It's just like what you said yesterday about the light. If his own action is one of the elements, he naturally has to first decide what his own actions will be. Then and only then can he predict a result. If his actions change, then so will the result."

His brother stared at him.

"Do you know what you are saying? If what you are saying is correct, then history is not pre-determined. Our actions can influence history."

"Of course. I never believed in historical determinism. The kid's gift is that he can predict the outcome of given actions. But that's not to say that his actions are not a factor."

"So he is able to select appropriate actions. That's why each time he guesses, he guesses right." His brother was getting excited.

"Right, right. But my theory is right, too. He still can't deal with extremely complex situations, so he can only play Gobang. That's because he's sure to be able to think

of the correct responses, a way to win at Gobang, himself. If we play for him in *xiangqi*, then we are simply delineating one of several possible paths for him. We can find out a way to win, too, if we try."

The boy listened silently. He looked at Cheng Ling's brother, then at Cheng Ling. Suddenly, in a little voice, he spoke.

"I like to play Gobang. Why won't you let me play Gobang?"

Cheng Ling calmly explained the situation to him.

"We'll play Gobang in a little while. Those people at the TV station want you to play three games of *xiangqi* with Professor Liu. Three games, that's all. You can win. All you have to do is think about what moves the professor will make. We'll help you decide how you should respond. Then, as long as you remember the game, you'll win."

"But I just want to play Gobang. Why won't they let me play Gobang?"

"They are also going to let you play Gobang. Just as long as you first play three games of *xiangqi* with Professor Liu. Afterwards, you can play Gobang to your heart's content. Then you'll be the Gobang champion, and everyone will know you're Number 1. Happy?"

The boy lowered his head. A wearied look spread over his triangular-shaped face.

"I'm scared. Gobang is a lot easier. I get scared just thinking of playing with Mr Liu."

"See," his brother said. "I told you he can't consider problems that are too complex. All this predicting must really be wearing him out. We shouldn't push him too far."

Cheng Ling was feeling a little tired, too. He poured the boy a glass of orange drink which he gulped down

quietly. Cheng Ling looked at the clock. Ten-thirty. He ought to go over to the agency. His plan for the *xiangqi* challenge of the century between Professor Liu and the boy was just a wild idea. Actually, it didn't matter. He was hardly the professor's mortal enemy. It was best to forget about the whole thing. Then he thought of Ding Yu-mei saying she hoped the boy would play some 1 pawn chess. If they put that on air, the response would really be amazing. However, maybe he ought to persuade the boy just to play *xiangqi*. Perhaps they would all decide he was just a *xiangqi* whiz. Then nobody would get suspicious, and nobody would be the worse for it, either. Cheng Ling was hesitant. His brother seemed to read his mind.

"Go to work now, Cheng Ling. If he can play *xiangqi*, that will be great. If he can't, though, we won't force him, okay?"

Cheng Ling gladly agreed. He left, then decided to run back up to the fourth floor. His brother was showing the boy his model airplanes. Cheng Ling pulled him over to the side and whispered, "Could you ask him to predict some stock for me? Just one stock, next week's quote. I won't ask again."

"I had expected as much. You're a real money-grabber. Well, on the wild chance that he says yes, don't you dare breathe a word about it."

"I wouldn't." Cheng Ling was ashamed of himself. He had already told Zhou Pei and Little Dong yesterday. Fortunately, they didn't believe him. "I just want a general idea of the prospects. I won't be greedy. It's just that I need a little cash."

Cheng Ling went over to the agency. Little Dong said that Zhang Shi-jia had already called three times. Cheng Ling called the studio. Zhang Shi-jia sounded excited.

"It's not easy to track you down, Fat Cheng. Ding Yu-mei told me everything. I think your idea is great. I was worried nobody would want to watch Gobang. Professor Liu is a very well-known man. A challenge like this would be a real draw, a real draw."

"Slow down. Don't count your chickens before they're hatched. I don't even know if the boy will be able to play *xiangqi*."

Cheng Ling's words were wasted on Zhang Shi-jia.

"You have absolutely got to pull this off. The fate of *Wonder Kids* is entirely in your hands. When this is all over, I'll be forever in your debt."

"We're close friends; what's the big deal? I'm only afraid the kid won't be able to take on Professor Liu."

"Well, that would tear it. Fat Cheng, my job is in your hands. I've already been to the top brass. They are behind me one hundred percent. We've already started advertising it. Our ratings have been slipping. We've got to turn things around. Fat Cheng, I'm up against the wall, you've got to help me out. You're not going to stand by while I get executed."

"Oh, yes, we're going to finish the credits tomorrow. Do you want to take a look at them first?"

"With a professional like you in charge, how could I have any objections? Just a minute." The receiver was muffled, there was a moment of confused voices, then Zhang Shi-jia returned to the line. "Ding Yu-mei is here. She wants to speak to you."

"Hi, Cheng Ling. Do you want to come with me to Yeliou Sunday?"

"I'm not sure if I'll be free. Who else is going?"

"Nobody special. Just Miss Wang you know ... and there is also Professor Liu."

"Count me out."

"But I have already accepted the date on your behalf."

"Is it going to be the professor's treat again? Excuse me if I sit this one out."

"Dolt. We're just going to have some fun. Why get so worked up?"

"Excuse me. I've still got some business to discuss with Zhang Shi-jia. Please put him back on."

Another moment of silence, then Zhang's voice.

"Miss Ding is boiling mad, Cheng Ling. You had better be a little more careful of what you say in the future."

"Look, Shi-jia. I'm not so sure now whether I can make the kid play *xiangqi*. Can you hold up your ads a couple of days?"

"Too late. The fuse has been lit. I'm going to let it go off. You've got to come through for me, Fat Cheng. I'll erect a tablet in your honour."

Cheng Ling hung up. Now he was really in it up to his ears. There was no turning back. He paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back. Wonder kid, wonder kid, you really got me in a mess this time. He was sorry he had ever suggested anything. If the boy choked, then they would all look bad.

Around noon his brother called: this boy had already finished predicting the first game. They had tried out several responses, and were now trying to figure out the winning moves. Cheng Ling finally relaxed. His brother said the boy was tired, they were going to save the next game for tomorrow. And as for the stocks, the boy had come up with a figure, but, considering how tired he looked, it was hard to say how reliable it was. Cheng Ling wrote down the price and picked up the day's paper. He turned to the financial page. The market was in a slump. Sellers were begging. Everyone was unloading. The stock's quote was only half of what the boy had predicted.

Cheng Ling's hands started to tremble, his palms got sweaty, and his throat went dry. Little Dong watched as his expression changed. He came over and looked at the paper in Cheng Ling's hands.

"Financial page again? Always thinking about the market."

"He who hesitates is lost. If I don't make my move now, I might as well forget about it," Cheng Ling muttered to himself. "Where's Zhou Pei? Tell him to come back."

Little Dong took off his glasses, took out his handkerchief, and carefully wiped the lens. Cheng Ling couldn't restrain himself any longer. He grabbed Little Dong's hand and shook it violently.

"Little Dong, this time we've got it made. Go and find Zhou Pei. We have to get a piece of the action. Buy in!"

"Calm down. Is this your final decision now? First you're against stocks, now you're for them. You're driving me crazy."

"Never mind. Just go and find Zhou Pei."

Zhou Pei was in the stock exchange, of course. Cheng Ling told him to buy all the shares of X stock he could get his hands on. Zhou Pei was scared, and refused. He still hadn't got General Manager Song's tip. Aside from a few private transactions, things were slow, and there was no sign of an upswing. He wasn't willing to take the plunge. Cheng Ling told him not to worry. First buy ten thousand shares, then see what happens. Little Dong sat fretting and fuming. He had written "Ten thousand shares is \$1 000 000" on a piece of paper. He was waving it in front of Cheng Ling's nose. Cheng Ling pushed him away, and shouted into the receiver. He guaranteed the stock was a winner, they absolutely couldn't throw away such a golden opportunity. They argued for ten minutes,

then Zhou Pei finally gave in. Cheng Ling and Little Dong stayed by the telephone, skipping lunch. They stared at each other, silently. After almost an hour, Zhou Pei called back. He said he had only bought five thousand shares. Cheng Ling was furious. "I told you ten thousand, not one less."

"Listen, Fat Cheng, ten thousand shares would be 1.2 million. How could I absorb it?"

"You're not selling that much out. Buy it on margin. Buy it, then you'll see."

"You're a real clown. And don't waste your breath. Do you think I'm stupid enough to listen to you?"

"I've got absolutely reliable predictions."

"You and your predictions. This is the twentieth century, Fat Cheng. Relying on ESP to buy stock? Christ!"

"Just go and buy another five thousand, please. We'll argue about it later."

Another interminable hour. Cheng Ling was chained to the phone. Zhou Pei finally called back. Cheng Ling's heart jumped with the first ring.

"Did you get them?"

"I can't buy any. A miracle is happening: they're on the rise. The other stocks are unchanged, but this one is climbing steadily. I've never seen anything like it. Jumping Jupiter! Today will be a day to remember."

"Buy! Buy!"

"Where?" The voice on the phone was being drowned out. The market must be in an uproar. "They've posted the latest prices!" Loud noises. "They've suspended trading on it! What's happening? Why did it go up? Fat Cheng, your goddamned ancestors must be looking after you. A blind bull's-eye. We were the first. Now everyone is in on it. It's crazy here."

Cheng Ling slowly replaced the receiver, and the noises from the stock exchange ceased. He sat down. The excitement had drained him. He shook his head.

"Too bad we only bought five thousand."

"Man is so greedy. If we make a little less, it's no big deal. And if we lost a little it wouldn't kill us either. Hey, where did you get such accurate information, anyway? Was it that crazy wonder kid?"

"Don't tell anyone," Cheng Ling covered his eyes, "but there is a certain wonder kid who is actually clairvoyant. But I only want to pull this one off, and then I'll wash my hands off the whole business. It was wrong. I know it. Don't tell anyone."

"I won't. But you had better watch out for Zhou Pei. When he gets back, he'll grill you alive. If he talks, we're in for it. I don't want the agency to become a brokerage house."

"That's not my intention, either," Cheng Ling said. "I just want to paint. I can still paint. We'll pull this one off, then wash our hands off it."

The afternoon clatter came in through the window. People were getting off from work. The streets of Taipei were crowded with cars and pedestrians. It was so dirty that you could see the air. Cheng Ling cracked his knuckles. Five thousand shares. Doubled in price. They would clear \$500 000 plus. \$200 000 per person. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to last the company a couple of years. He could still paint. Money was freedom.

9

Cheng Ling told his brother about what had happened in the stock market that afternoon. His brother completely believed that the boy was clairvoyant. Cheng Ling was a little circumspect. Zhou Pei had known that there might be a rally for a long time. He himself had thought there might be one, too. He had asked the boy only as a way of checking on the reliability of Zhou Pei's information. The boy had agreed to it. But that might just be coincidence. After all, there were only three possibilities: up, down, or unchanged. Ask the man in the street, and he had a 33.3% chance of being right. His brother thought differently. He said that the boy had struggled, and with his eyes closed, for half an hour, before he finally came up with his stock predictions. It didn't look like he was just guessing. When the boy was predicting *xiangqi*, he barely spent ten minutes on each move. But it had taken him thirty minutes of intense concentration to consider all the factors surrounding the movement of the stock. He had to consider the decisions of many people. It was much more complex than merely guessing how one person was going to play chess. Cheng Ling couldn't really argue with his brother's theory. Anyway, they had bought the stock, and he wasn't going to bother the kid with any more predicting. He didn't want to make things too hard for him.

After dinner, as usual, they sat out on the balcony to cool off. Cheng Ling remembered how he had fought

with Ding Yu-mei. He was sorry. He racked his brains for a way to make it up to her. His brother's voice interrupted his train of thought.

"Do you remember yesterday, when I mentioned Leibniz's philosophical proposition, that we all live in the best of all possible worlds? Well, last night I was thinking about it again, and I came up with an excellent explanation. Want to hear it?"

"Go ahead."

"Every possible world, according to my explanation, is like a soap bubble. All you need is a bottle of bubble solution and a straw, and you can blow an infinite number of bubbles. Each bubble is a possible world. I believe that all these worlds exist simultaneously — just like when you blow soap bubbles. Now, when something happens, it can have different outcomes in different worlds. For example, let's say you get hurt in a traffic accident on Earth. In some other world, you might have been killed. Yet these worlds really have only very subtle differences. For example, while you are still living in one world, and just died in another, everything else about these two worlds is the same. Which of these two worlds would you choose? Perhaps the first one — if you wanted to continue living at all costs, that is. But if you were tired of living, you just might choose the second one, and let yourself be 'extinguished'.

"These are the possible worlds. At first, their differences are minimal, like bubbles that have just left the mouth of the straw. Afterwards, they grow apart. In one world, you may have a great number of descendents, but in the other one, you may be the last of your line. The two worlds were initially only different by your presence. But, many years later, two distinctly different worlds have evolved. Do you see?"

Cheng Ling grunted lazily. His brother continued.

"There are an infinite number of these possible worlds simultaneously in existence, just like a sky full of floating soap bubbles. Some worlds are eventually destroyed, just like bubbles that burst when they hit the floor. I believe that in the pool of all possible worlds, there is one that has already destroyed itself in World War III. That soap bubble has already popped. But we just don't happen to know that, because we are in another soap bubble.

"According to Leibniz, we are in the best soap bubble. If there weren't any other soap bubbles, his philosophy would be meaningless, so you have got to accept my interpretation. There are an infinite number of worlds in existence simultaneously. Although you can't see him, of course, there is, on another similar world, a Cheng Ling. He also lives in Taipei, and is an artist. The only difference between you two is that he paints better. He is already well known. Do you believe in such a world? Do you believe in such a soap bubble?"

Cheng Ling smiled. Maybe, in that other soap bubble, he had already caught Ding Yu-mei?

"So, if you are disappointed in this world, don't give up. Maybe, in some other world, you're extremely successful. What do you say? Is my explanation sophisticated enough? Wait, it gets even better. How do I know what world I'm in? I believe that man can choose his world. Of course, it's not something the average man is able to understand. But, if you are unhappy in this world, who is to say that your soul couldn't decide to jump to another world? Your soul is like that; it can transcend time and space, and flit between probable worlds.

"You don't believe me? Well, answer this: Have you ever experienced a feeling of *déjà vu*? Even when the experience you were recalling was something you

absolutely couldn't have done before? Of course you must have. I have, often. So have many of my classmates. I used to think I was repeating something I had done in a former life. But now using my theory of pluralistic worlds, it's even easier to explain. *Déjà vu* is experienced when your soul has recently flown over from another world. In reality, you are just duplicating an experience you had in another world.

"The infinite number of probable worlds are like the infinite number of soap bubbles: they exist simultaneously. Man's soul goes from world to world. Some worlds have no human inhabitants, so they burst like the soap bubbles. Other worlds are only patronized by a few people. Hitler must have his own world all to himself. But there is one world which is the most popular, and on which the large majority of people's souls eventually decide to settle. That world is our world, which is also Leibniz's so-called 'best of all possible worlds'. Although there are an infinite number of probable worlds, the one in which we are living is the most suited to the rules of historical development, as it has the most glorious future. That's my interpretation of Leibniz's theory."

"Not bad," Cheng Ling said. "A reasonable explanation. I've heard it before, but never put forth so completely. There is only one flaw in your theory: if what you say is correct, then, while I can't speak for anyone else, I know that my soul at least would want to go to another world, where I can create to my heart's content."

"That's okay. I'm not denying the possibility. How do you know that your soul hasn't already left?"

"Is yours still here?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"Well, how do you explain the Gobang whiz?"

"That's easy," his brother replied. "My explanation was

conceived entirely with him in mind. Most people, although their souls are free to flit between probable worlds, still can't see the future. The future is like an invisible barrier, blocking off their field of vision. Since they can't see the future, they are completely blind. So naturally they can't use any logical method to choose their world. This perhaps, is the most sophisticated part of Leibniz's theory. Most people can't see the future, so all they can do is believe they have already landed in the best world.

"You're always planning: what am I going to do tomorrow, or next week? Constantly planning, but you never consider the possibility that you might be killed by a taxi tomorrow. You live for the sake of a future you don't know. But even if there's nothing in the end, you still have to cherish some hope.

"But maybe the universe intentionally left a little opening, a window in the barrier that blocks off the future. Some exceptional people, like the kid, can stand by the window and look through. They can tell if the future of the world is more beautiful, or more ugly, or maybe just emptiness. These are the only people who can actually choose the most beautiful world. It's not often that we see or hear of these kind of people. But I don't think that these exceptional people are so few. It's just that they are too clever. Perhaps they have already chosen a different world, and they have left an empty body to move about here. The only reason the kid is still around is that he's still young. He doesn't understand what he sees through that window in the barrier. He just wants to play Gobang. He relies on his insight, so naturally he always wins. But when he gets older, perhaps ..."

"Perhaps he won't be here," Cheng Ling continued for him. "But wouldn't that be counter to Leibniz's theory?"

Our world ought to be the best one."

"You still don't get it. Leibniz only said that, logically speaking, our world, as far as most people are concerned, is the best. Other soap bubbles are more fragile. But there will always be a minority with a different viewpoint."

Cheng Ling threw his cigarette butt over the balcony. He thought of how, when he was young, he had often had the same dream. He would dream that the sky would open up, then a strange apparition would appear, and a voice would intone, "Everything is clear." Then he would be scared awake, and run to his parents' bedroom. In those days, he went to church every Sunday with his mother. She would let him sit in the last row. While the congregation sang psalms and the minister preached, he could concentrate on reading the Bible. He still remembered the pipe organ, the mouldy smell of the curtains, and the fresh flowers in front of the pulpit.

During those countless Sundays of the pipe organ music, he read the Old Testament, book by book: Genesis ... Leviticus ... Esther ... He loved them all. A pile of unfamiliar and ancient names, all jumbled together in his head. He couldn't finish the Psalms, but he feared Jehovah's almighty power as much as David had. Trembling, he had read:

"I am Alpha and Omega; the Beginning and the End; the First and the Last."

It wasn't till much later that he found out that Alpha was the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and Omega the last. In those days, they were meaningless sounds to him. But he loved those two words. He felt that they had a terrifying, awe-inspiring power. They lived in Shindian then. His father's work unit was also in Shindian. Their dormitory had ten families to one outhouse and a shower. Cheng Ling was afraid to go out alone to the bathroom

at night. He always needed an adult with him. Sometimes his mother didn't want to go, so she would just sit on their doorstep. Cheng Ling would call for his mother as he ran to the bathroom. If she didn't reply, he would head straight for home, crying. Later on, when he got braver, he would take his brother with him. At the pitch-black area near the outhouse, he would solemnly intone, "I am Alpha, I am Omega." His brother would intone it after him. But his brother couldn't quite say it well. The best he could manage was, "I am ga, I am ga." Then, arm in arm, the two of them would enter the bathroom. Often, Cheng Ling would sneak away first. His brother would run after him, but he couldn't catch up. He would fall and cry. Then, when they got home, Cheng Ling would get a beating.

Cheng Ling's knowledge of religion had started with the Old Testament. By the time he read to the Revelations, he started to have a recurring vision. It was then that he had started to dream about the opening of the sky, and the apparition, and he finally understood the secrets of the universal man. But he could never see the apparition clearly. Before it came out, he would stare at it, and then run to his parents' room. When he thought about it now, he still had mixed feelings about what had happened. When his father was transferred, and they moved to Yangmei, he stopped going to church with his mother, and his dream occurred less and less frequently. Then, in high school, he became interested in religion again. This time, his fanaticism was sudden. Cheng Ling, who had already started to read Walter Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, was in a psychologically vulnerable state. He had been stirred by an evangelical minister in a group organized in Yangmei. Crying, he had come up and knelt before the pulpit, and admitted that he was a

sinner. A classmate of his had been present, and word of his performance quickly spread through the school. The humiliation had been so great that for three months he was so ashamed, he could not walk with his head held up. It was only through reading Hu Shi's diary, when he found out that even Hu Shi had had a similar experience with Jesus, that he felt at ease.

Several years later, when his self-analytical powers had increased, he came to believe that he was more the romantic type. Then he had to restrain himself even more strenuously. From his self-conception as a romantic, he determined that he had the fibre of an artist. Against his parents' wishes, Cheng Ling majored in art at university. He fooled around at it for four years before he figured out what he was up to. Then there was a spurt of activities. He held an exhibition, wrote articles denouncing the May Artists Group, and opened a gallery with Gao Yue-bai. He was both in the avant-garde and the traditionalist camps. He made a name for himself. But his self-reproach increased daily. He couldn't make himself lead an upright life. Everything was clear. Even if he could work himself up into more fits of pseudo-religious fanaticism, he still wouldn't be able to paint something that could satisfy him. Finally, he made up his mind to change professions. It wasn't as if he had been a pedicab driver; no one was forcing him to get out. But one cool autumn evening he simply saw the light. He threw out all his art supplies. The next morning he went out and got a box of name-cards printed with the title of General Manager. He had never imagined that it could be so easy.

Naturally, he bought back his art supplies later. He could still paint. In fact, he still wanted to. That sudden urge, that wild happiness, would now and then come and enthrall him. But he also had a form of psychological

self-protection. He wouldn't reproach himself. He had discovered that it would be very easy to continue with it if he admitted that he was a second-rate painter. Now that he had a "legitimate business concern", nobody demanded anything of him, and he didn't demand anything of himself. He continued to paint, but he constantly had to remind himself not to take it too seriously. At last, he had managed to cultivate the attitude of the "amateur" artist.

Cheng Ling thought of the prodigy's strange behaviour. He felt he understood the poor child's feelings. The boy didn't want to see the future, he just wanted to play Gobang. If he knew the future, the burden of history would probably crush him. Once he knew what was going to happen, he would have a responsibility to history. Once you know exactly what you have to do, there is no escaping from it. You don't have any excuse just to put things off. You have to do your best towards the realization of the future. Cheng Ling knew the boy couldn't deal with this kind of obligation. Perhaps he hadn't thought about this or it could be his instinct of self-preservation that told him to shut the window. He was just going to permit himself to win a few games of Gobang. He wasn't going to hurt anybody, and he wouldn't hurt himself. The boy just wanted to lead a peaceful life.

His brother was half right: the boy didn't understand what he saw. But it would be best if he didn't see at all. He would still be a fine Gobang player, Cheng Ling thought. Nobody was going to hurt a boy whose big talent was in Gobang. He was a little sorry that he had pushed things too far and made the boy play *xiangqi*. And as for asking the boy to predict the future, that was really wrong. Cheng Ling swore to himself that he wouldn't

force the boy to do anything stupid like that again. He mustn't destroy him.

Cheng Ling suddenly remembered that *Wonder Kids* was on. He rushed downstairs and turned on the television. It had just started; Ding Yu-mei was introducing the piano prodigy. The Ding Yu-mei on the screen wasn't as pretty as she was in person. Soon the prodigy was tinkling out a piece by Chopin. Cheng Ling knew it was dubbed. The child put on quite a show; it sure looked real. Too bad it's all fake, he thought. Then he reflected that, actually, no one could tell the difference. If no one could separate the real from the unreal, then where was the difference? After the first piece, there was Ding Yu-mei in a toothpaste commercial! Cheng Ling didn't know that she did commercials as well. He watched despondently as Ding Yu-mei waltzed around with a giant tube of toothpaste. "The Toothpaste Prince is a real hero. Everybody loves to use him. Ha, ha!" Ding Yu-mei and the "toothpaste" were all smiles. Then she led in a group of kids who hopped, skipped, and departed. The picture changed, and he was returned to *Wonder Kids*. The piano "whiz" started playing the second piece. His brother walked over to the television.

"This programme is really fascinating."

"Don't turn it off!"

"Oh, I forgot you want to see Ding Yu-mei. Excuse me." Ding Yu-mei and her "toothpaste" danced another waltz. The "prodigy" finished her third piece. The judges' scores flashed up: 99, 100, 100, 99. The judges' decision were unanimous — she was a child prodigy. Ding Yu-mei came back on stage pulling the piano "prodigy" by her little hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this brings to a close this week's edition of *Wonder Kids*. Thank you for watching.

Next week on *Wonder Kids*, we will be honoured with the presence of the well-known *xiangqi* champion Professor Liu, who has consented to play three exhibition games with a young chess whiz. This is the first *xiangqi* prodigy we have discovered. We'll be back again. Bye."

"*Xiangqi* prodigy?" Cheng Ling's brother shook his head. "So they've already started advertising it. What happens if the kid loses? I don't like their way of doing things."

"The kid can't lose," Cheng Ling said. "If he loses, he won't be a chess master. We have got to make him win."

"Who's a chess master? Why bother to help the station with their promotional gimmicks? The kid should never become a celebrity."

"You ought to tell him to go to another soap bubble."

"What? Oh," his brother laughed. "Yeh, he ought to go to some other soap bubble. I bet there is a world in which everyone likes to play Gobang, and that's all. There aren't any politicians, and there aren't any soldiers. Whoever is best at Gobang is the king. Do you believe in such a place?"

"I believe so," Cheng Ling replied.

10

On Saturday, the stock they had bought was still the only one doing well in the market. Soon after the opening bell, trading was again suspended. Zhou Pei was ecstatic. He had got a tip from General Manager Song: A certain consortium was planning to buy up a particular issue. The news had been leaked, and the price was going up. Cheng Ling didn't know whether to believe him or not.

"Why buy now? What's their game?"

"There is obviously more to this than we can see," Zhou Pei said. "Probably some ownership struggle. Remember the story of Company X? The market had been bullish, but several operators were trying to fix things. They figured they could manipulate the prices. What they hadn't figured on was that, while they were swallowing the little fish, there were other bigger fish waiting to swallow them. Some people were getting in line to swindle them. This first group was caught napping, and when they wanted to buy back in, there suddenly wasn't any stock to be had. So, when a stockholders' meeting was called, all the power already lay in the hands of this second group. Nobody could object to anything; they all had to follow along. This became a legendary coup."

"And you think it's going to be the same story this time?"

"Not necessarily. I'm just guessing." Zhou Pei was

really excited. Cheng Ling had never seen him so pleased. "Anyway, what we will do is wait till they've gone up almost to where they're supposed to, then we'll unload. We won't be caught with our pants down. The trick is to sell when the market is still good. If you're too greedy, you get burned. Fat Cheng, your mystic friend is hot. Ask him for another tip, okay?"

"No way," Cheng Ling said. "After this, we're out. We're going to clear several hundred thousand; that should hold the company for a couple of years."

Zhou Pei's eyes narrowed. He laid a hand on Cheng Ling's shoulder.

"Sounding the retreat already? With several hundred thousand dollars' worth of capital, we could shoot the moon. Between your friend's predictions, and my battle plan, we ought to clean up. You can't pull out now."

"No way. Little Dong and I are definitely out. You agreed it was a temporary measure. But now we're making some money. Let's see it through and quit while the going is good. Once we have a little capital, the agency can think big. No need for any more monkey business in the market."

Zhou Pei made a "Come on, Cheng Ling" gesture. Cheng Ling didn't pay any attention to him. He turned to Little Dong, who shook his head. He shrugged his shoulders.

"All right. Two against one. The majority wins. You two guys are out. But I'm going to give it a try myself, nothing to do with the business. Any objections?"

"No, of course."

"Just one thing. Your clairvoyant friend ... I'd like to talk to him. I'd like to check out his opinion, okay?"

Cheng Ling hesitated, and remained silent. Zhou Pei's face changed colour.

"Hey, we're old friends. Why be so selfish? You don't want to drag the company into the market? I agree. But since you are out of this, there's no harm to you if I talk to your friend. Why be so selfish?"

"I'm not being selfish. It's just that my friend doesn't like predicting stocks. The last time it was under duress. I don't like putting him in a difficult position."

"Is he really in such a dilemma? Let me talk to him first. If he is dead set against it, I won't say another word. What's the big deal if you let me talk to him directly? At the worst, I'll give him half the profits."

Cheng Ling was in a spot. If he didn't tell Zhou Pei, it would look like he was letting his friend down. But he absolutely couldn't let out the boy's secret. He couldn't destroy him. He shouldn't have forced the boy to do something he didn't want to do. Cheng Ling was contrite.

"Zhou Pei, it's not that I don't want to tell you. It's just that it wouldn't be fair to my friend. I don't want to destroy him."

"For Pete's sake, stop playing games with me!" Zhou Pei was red with anger. "Fat Cheng, I've always respected you. I've treated you like my best friend; I've never hid anything from you. The last time, when you wanted to see Song, did I stop you? True, he broke the date, but I did all I could. Now I want to ask your friend for a little help. You refuse. Friends? I should have known better."

"Zhou Pei," Little Dong mediated, "Cheng Ling doesn't want to keep you in the dark. He has his reasons. Close friends shouldn't act like this."

"So you know who this friend is, too?"

Little Dong hesitated for a moment.

"I ... uh, I don't know."

This just added fuel to the fire. Zhou Pei got even angrier.

“Good! In cahoots to keep me in the dark. What sort of ‘all for one’ is this? You see a way to get rich, and step on your best friend’s face in your rush to get to it. Christ!”

Cheng Ling figured he couldn’t keep it from Zhou Pei. He would have to explain the situation to him. He stressed over and over again that the boy’s body was weak, that he only liked to play Gobang, that he wasn’t interested in anything else. That he was willing to predict the stock this time had been exceedingly uncharacteristic of him. Since they had already profited off him once, they shouldn’t bother him anymore. Little Dong also asked Zhou Pei not to go looking for the boy. Zhou Pei simmered down, and agreed not to. But after thinking it over, he couldn’t help making a final plea: “If we don’t use the boy, somebody else will. Wouldn’t that mean that we have lost out for nothing? Fat Cheng, since it was you who first discovered his special ability, why should others benefit from it? We’ll take care of him, occasionally ask him a few questions, then everybody gets rich ... What could be wrong?”

“We already made some money off him,” Little Dong said. “Why don’t we leave him alone?”

Zhou Pei said he wasn’t greedy. It was just that these days it was hard to judge people. There was no guarantee that other people would not make use of him. In fact, it might just result in their losing out. Nice guys finished last. Anyway, the boy would get rich, too. Everybody gets rich, everybody is happy. Little Dong talked himself blue in the face. Zhou Pei was adamant. Cheng Ling saw that it was no use continuing with the argument as they each held different views. He warned them to keep their secret, and said that they would discuss the issue later. Zhou Pei disagreed with him and even accused

Cheng Ling of being loose-lipped. Cheng Ling didn't want to start up with him again, so he just said he was going to take the completed titles over to the TV studio. Little Dong said he would go along with him. They crossed the street to catch a bus.

Though it was mid-summer, there was still a morning breeze. It was a comfortable day. Several wisps of cloud rolled away to reveal an immense blue sky. Cheng Ling breathed deeply. A few urchins were playing marbles in front of a shrine by the side of the road. Cheng Ling had never noticed that there was a shrine there. It was made of red bricks, one foot high, and two feet wide. An idol was somehow squeezed into the tiny altar. Behind the shrine was the office of a car dealer. There was a single incense stick in the censer in front of the shrine. A thread of blue smoke curled upward. Cheng Ling somehow felt at ease in this world; he was inexplicably moved.

Zhang Shi-jia was in the director's booth. He cordially invited them to sit down. Cheng Ling gave him the packet with the credits. Zhang Shi-jia took them out and as he skimmed over them, he talked.

"Very good. Very good. You're a real artist. We've got to engage you again." He put the leather packet to one side. "Did you see last night's *Wonder Kids*? I asked Ding Yu-mei to mention the boy and the chess master. Today we're preparing to send out some press releases. I've been trying for two days to get in touch with the kid for some live rehearsals. I sent some people out to find him, but had no luck. His family said a Mr Cheng comes every day to take him out. Is that you?"

"That's my brother. The kid practises with my brother at our home."

"So, that's it. We're really imposing on you, I know. How's his chess?"

"His progress has been miraculous," Cheng Ling said. "With a couple more days of practice, he shouldn't have any trouble with Professor Liu. By the way, has the professor formally accepted the challenge?"

"He's so conscious of 'face'." Zhang Shi-jia lowered his voice. "As soon as the news got out, he couldn't refuse. I have quite a knack for persuading people to put their heads on the chopping block."

"The professor probably isn't too pleased that you've decided to sacrifice him. We're going to offend him."

"I'm only going to use him once. I won't ask anything of him afterwards."

Cheng Ling looked around, he couldn't help asking Zhang Shi-jia, "Where's Ding Yu-mei?"

"Didn't come in today. Probably out having a good time. Professor Liu has been looking pretty closely at her. I don't know what he's after, but he sure is pushing it. Ding Yu-mei can't take it, all this attention."

Cheng Ling wasn't feeling so hot. He saw that Little Dong was bored, so he decided to leave. Zhang Shi-jia was very polite today. He even showed them to the door.

"Look, Fat Cheng. I'll let you keep the kid for a couple more days. He has got to come over on Tuesday for a rehearsal, though. Also, can't he play 1 pawn chess or something? I'd like him to demonstrate for us. We'll use the *xiangqi* challenge as the main event, then add a few preliminary bouts. It will be even better."

"First we'll get *xiangqi* down pat," Cheng Ling answered in an even tone. "1 pawn chess is just guess-work, it's not so interesting."

"He guesses right all the time? That's pretty interesting."

"He doesn't always win," Cheng Ling quickly explained. "It's mostly a matter of luck. Guessing is, of

course, mostly a matter of luck."

"Well, then, forget it. I'll notify the accounting department to send the payment over for your designs. Where's the bill?"

"It's all in the leather case."

Cheng Ling and Little Dong left the studio. Cheng Ling was distracted. He wasn't paying any attention to where he was walking. If Little Dong hadn't pulled him back, he would have been hit by a motorbike.

"Watch out! Still thinking about the kid? Relax, Zhou Pei and I can keep a secret."

Cheng Ling hastily said he wasn't thinking about the boy. They found a little place for lunch. Cheng Ling had a sip of oily tea which was tasteless. They ordered hot diced chicken which had only a few strands of chicken hidden among the peppers and *mapo* beancurd which had only the slightest hint of meat. There was a vat of weak soup with yellow-green leaves floating on it. There was no limit on the rice consumption, and Cheng Ling wolfed down five bowls. Little Dong watched him in amazement and laughed.

"You certainly get your money's worth."

"Before the price of meat rose, I was a real terror at Mongolian barbecues. All the restaurants were forced to raise their prices."

When they had finished, the manageress came over with the bill: forty dollars.

"The signboard states fifteen dollars per person," Cheng Ling protested. "How did you arrive at forty dollars?"

"Sorry sir, but we raised our prices yesterday. We haven't had a chance to change all our signs. Look over there, the price has already been changed. I wouldn't cheat you, sir."

Cheng Ling looked over at the wall across from them. She was right. He and Little Dong each took out twenty dollars and threw the notes on the table. The manageress picked up the money and wiped the table. Several grains of rice fell down into the soup vat. Little Dong frowned. Cheng Ling muttered, "You won't get sick in a filthy place." And the two hurried out to the street.

Cheng Ling asked Little Dong where he was heading next. Little Dong said he wasn't going anywhere. Cheng Ling had a date with Gao, Huang, and Feng at four. As it was still early he suggested that they go play a little pool. Little Dong said he wouldn't mind playing a game. Cheng Ling knew the neighbourhood well. After a few twists and turns, he found a pool hall, but it was crammed with people. They looked on for a while, then decided it was ridiculous to wait there. They continued walking down the lane, and found another hall which was empty. They went in and played a couple of racks. Someone came over and challenged them. He wanted to make the game more interesting. Cheng Ling knew that Little Dong could never resist a bet, so he let him play. Little Dong was very steady at the game and hardly made a mistake. He didn't seem spectacular, but he had hustled quite a few sharks in his time. They played three racks. The stakes went from one hundred dollars to three hundred dollars a game. Little Dong was walking all over his opponent. He was winning too easily. Cheng Ling saw that the guy was leading Little Dong on. Sure enough, he decided to stake everything on the fourth game, and raised the stakes to two thousand dollars. Including the six hundred dollars they had just won, Cheng Ling and Little Dong had slightly over one thousand dollars between them. They threw in their two wristwatches, and asked the scoregirl to act as notary.

As soon as he picked up his cue again, the other fellow's

level of play increased incredibly. Cheng Ling couldn't help breaking out in a cold sweat. Little Dong was still losing halfway through the game. Cheng Ling was sure he was going to lose, but Little Dong came back. He would get good position, then leave his opponent with nothing to shoot at. He pulled out all the stops. His opponent stared straight ahead, silently watching as Little Dong cleaned the table. Little Dong wanted a rematch, and so did his opponent. Cheng Ling decided he had better drag Little Dong away. A couple of toughs stood in the doorway to cut off any quick escapes. Fortunately, Cheng Ling was a big man. He shielded Little Dong as they charged through. Out on the street, Little Dong spat in disgust.

"Out for the fast buck, a swindler. No one who loses to them would want to come back. Now I understand why that place is so empty."

Cheng Ling couldn't help laughing. It was late, so they parted at the head of the lane. It was afternoon, and the wind had stopped and the heat lay in blankets over the city.

Gao Yue-bai's studio was in the attic of a nearby store. Feng Wei-min had first rented it and proclaimed himself a garret philosopher. When he went into the army, he turned the place over to Gao. Then, Gao came into an uncle's inheritance, bought an apartment in Shihlin, and planned to give up the attic. As Cheng Ling felt that it was located in a good neighbourhood, he talked Gao into renting it. They planned to open a mini-studio. Miss Lin, who was Gao's girlfriend at the time, had worked hard to straighten up the place. When Gao and Miss Lin broke up, the studio idea was slowly neglected. Then, Cheng Ling went into business, and Gao took over the rental of the place. Fortunately, it wasn't too expensive. Gao Yue-bai still kept it as a studio, though he could also paint at home. Cheng Ling figured that Gao was somewhat of

a sentimentalist for he still had everything arranged the way Miss Lin had left it. Huang Duan-shu, of course, knew about this; she would see the place, and think of Miss Lin. No wonder she didn't trust Gao. For one minute, Miss Lin was known as Gao's "unmarried wife"; and the next minute, he had split with her. Huang Duan-shu wasn't going to stand for that! Cheng Ling thought of how girls these days always talked of being modern, but when it came to marriage, they would always fall back on traditional morality. And yet, Huang had a point. Miss Lin suffered because she spoke her piece. Who could say that it was easy to be Gao's "unmarried wife"?

The garret was sweltering. Gao Yue-bai was wearing a red nightshirt and a green woollen cap. He looked like a giant tomato. Cheng Ling always flaunts his Western clothes. Very often he feared he'd be strangled by his only tie. But not one girl bothered to look his way on their account. Gao Yue-bai, despite his casual outfit, still had women swarming after him. Evidently, he had sex appeal. Cheng Ling glanced at Gao's hairy legs. He felt that men would find it difficult to explain what the attractive attributes in their own sex were. Gao threw a packet of photos at him.

"Check these out."

"Since when is this in your line?"

"Take a look. I've got some from Japan, Hong Kong, Denmark, America all kinds. After a while, you can tell the difference between them. Each has its unique qualities."

"You want to draw this?"

"First I'd like you to tell me what you think of those." Gao motioned to a stack of drawings in the corner. "I've got a subject: 'One Hundred and One Postures of Legs'. I put a great deal of work into each pair."

Cheng Ling scrutinized the one right on top.

"You even included the pores," he said. "It must have taken you quite a long time to draw them in. But you'll never get it right, anyway. Why not just enlarge a photograph?"

"I used to think that way. But after you have drawn for quite a while, you realize that the truth lies in these." Gao took the drawings from Cheng Ling and threw them up in the air. They floated down like snowflakes. "This is the most beautiful thing in the world. You could die for this. The great work of God, not tampered with in the least; but, rather, faithfully recorded. We're always trying to paint something real. What could be more real than this?"

Cheng Ling pulled out his cigarettes. Gao shook his head.

"I've got a subject, too," Cheng Ling said. "Paintings of money. Paint what everyone likes: currency bills. All kinds of bills. You can buy whichever paintings you like with the money you have. Therefore, I consider cash as real as life itself."

"You're wrong. Sex is the most real. Sex is life."

"Money is the most real. Money is freedom."

Somebody outside laughed at them.

"You're both wrong. Love is the most real. Life is precious, and freedom even more so, but you would give up both for love."

Feng Wei-min walked in. He picked up a drawing from the floor.

"You'd better watch out, Gao, or the cops will nap you for dealing in smut. Huang Duan-shu will be here any minute, so shouldn't you clean up a bit?"

The three of them busied themselves picking up the drawings. Cheng Ling found a few sheets of old newspaper.

"Hey, Gao. Want to cover up your 101 pairs of legs?"

"She already knows about them But you might as well cover them up."

Gao changed out of his nightshirt, and hid his woollen cap. He looked considerably more presentable. The drawings were covered up: 202 legs reclined under the old newspaper. Everything was put in order. They waited for thirty minutes, during which they nearly died of heat. Finally, Huang Duan-shu strolled in.

Cheng Ling wasn't too pleased; Gao Yue-bai didn't mind at all. Gao asked her if she wanted to go out and have a steak with them. Huang Duan-shu said she wasn't interested. They talked it over and decided to go to the usual place in Yung-ho and have seafood. Cheng Ling and Feng Wei-min squeezed into the back seat of Gao's Beetle.

"Cheng Ling," Feng laughed, "would you rather indulge your carnivorous instincts today?"

"It doesn't matter. I also like seafood."

"I hear you made a 'killing' in the market."

"Who said that?" Cheng Ling was somewhat surprised. He hadn't realized that Taipei was so small. "News sure travels fast."

"So it's true," Feng said. "There was a rumour that an ad agency had led yesterday's rally. I guessed it was you. Your luck is turning."

"We didn't make too much. We should have moved faster." Cheng Ling sounded a little sorry. "We didn't have enough capital. If you want to rake in a lot, you have to get organized first and lay down a bigger stake."

"These days, anyone who makes any money in the market has someone looking out for him. You don't have anything to complain about."

Huang Duan-shu interrupted Feng. She asked Cheng Ling if he had seen any of the new artists' exhibitions. Cheng Ling said he hadn't. Gao Yue-bai, however, had.

Both Huang Duan-shu and he had a common topic to discuss. Cheng Ling didn't bother to put in his opinion. Feng Wei-min was lost in thought. At dinner, he and Cheng Ling talked about stocks. Huang Duan-shu and Gao talked about the exhibitions. They were on two tracks. Actually, Cheng Ling could have talked about something else. For some reason or other, he felt that Huang and Gao were being a bit pretentious. He wasn't too happy about it. He had never felt this way before. He analyzed it carefully, and decided it was just jealousy. Suddenly, he felt like calling up Ding Yu-mei. He couldn't stay seated. He made up some excuses, and ran to the counter to call her. Her mother answered the phone. Ding Yu-mei, as usual, was out. Cheng Ling's heart sank. He cursed himself for being so hopeless. He left his name. There was no need to leave his number — she would know. He hung up, paused, and called home. His brother hadn't left yet. With his mouth filled with food, he asked Cheng Ling, "Do you want to come dancing with me? Lots of girls, and not too many guys. They're desperate."

Cheng Ling declined. He asked his brother how the boy had fared in the third game. His brother said there hadn't been any problem, and that the boy had gone home long ago. Cheng Ling returned to their table. Feng was fighting to foot the bill. Gao won the last round. As they left the restaurant, Feng pulled Cheng Ling over to the store next door to buy something. Gao and Huang stood in front of the restaurant, chatting. Suddenly, Huang flagged a taxi. Gao didn't stop her. Feng was startled.

"A cooked goose can still fly. We've been wasting our time."

"I told you to mind your own business, but you wouldn't listen."

"Let's go and ask Gao what the story is."

Gao didn't feel like talking, but still he invited them home for a drink. They went to his Shihlin apartment, and drank from nine to one. Gao was the first to throw in the towel: he simply lay down on the floor. Feng cursed him, but got no response. It was Feng's practice to curse when he got drunk. He grabbed Gao by the collar.

"I've always respected you as a man of talent. I never expected you would regress. Now all you do is paint this crap. When I first saw your drawings, I thought they had something. What could be better than this? But, after a month or so, when that was all there was, I knew it wasn't enough. There are other things in this world. I can't always do this kind of thing. There must be something more worthwhile painting."

Gao was in a drunken stupor. Feng let go of him.

"I'm nothing. I studied it, but I'm going nowhere. I have confidence in my friends. I take better care of them than I do of myself. Why are you painting this stuff? Why?"

"He's drunk," Cheng Ling said. "You can talk all you want, but he won't be able to hear a word of it."

Feng got up, tottering from right to left. He meant to get to the wine, but he fell into the sofa instead. And he decided to remain there.

"I saw Mr Fang yesterday. They wanted him to retire. Yesterday morning, he gave his last lecture. In the afternoon, I went to his house. I asked him what he was going to do when he retired. He said he would write. He wants to rewrite his 'History of Qin Thought'. The guy is more than sixty years old, and he's planning a book! When I left him, I thought to myself, if I ever live to be sixty, I'll be completely washed out by then. I won't even be able to read books, much less write them. I'm already too distracted to read; too much petty business, you know. By the time I get home, I'm exhausted. My brain is obsessed

with business, I can't calm down ... writing something would be even more impossible. It's as if my pen weigh a thousand pounds. We all make fun of the old style scholars: they're too conservative, they've read all the Classics, but they have no idea as to how to apply them. Well, maybe that's right. But you have to hand it to them for sticking it out. I couldn't keep up that pace, could you?"

"Times change," Cheng Ling said. "I bet Mr Fang never worries about money. He doesn't know how to make money, and he doesn't want to. That's the older generation for you. Their values are different. We have got to make money."

Feng Wei-min closed his eyes and sighed.

"Our lifespan in this world isn't long.
Why not then follow the inclinations of the heart?
Why be so agitated?
Where would we go?"*

You're as bad as Gao. If you want to paint reality, why not take your cue from Toulouse-Lautrec? Paint prostitutes, paint bar hostesses. They all have their truths. You should be ashamed to paint this crap."

"Foreigners like it."

"Look, the reason foreigners like something is quite simple: they want things hand-made, the more energy expended on it, the more they like it. They won't buy anything machine-made though. When they buy this kind of painting, all they care about is how much work was put into it. They couldn't care less for its artistic value. You can paint this if you want, but you would do better to go weave a straw mat."

Cheng Ling lowered his head and said nothing. He struggled for a reply.

"You mentioned Toulouse-Lautrec. Well, his father was

an aristocrat. He himself was crippled, he was psychologically unbalanced. What's the use of your social conscience? It's for the birds."

Feng pointed his finger.

"We've got a responsibility to history. The historical trend can decide the worth of our existence."

"I don't give a damn about any historical trend. What I want is my freedom. I just want to make money. Money is freedom."

Feng sat up on the sofa.

"Do you really believe that money is freedom?"

"Who cares what I believe in?" Cheng Ling pointed to Gao, who lay on the floor, snoring. "Don't ask me. Ask him. I've already given up. I admit I'm a second-rate player. Do you hear me? I admit I'm a second-rate player. All right?"

Suddenly, Feng laughed.

"Christ. If you're a second-rate player, what am I? Don't complain. The historical trend will determine the worth of our existence."

"There is no need to rely on history. There are people right now who can predict our future."

Cheng Ling told Feng about the Gobang prodigy. Feng listened to some of it. But the wine took its toll and he ran to the bathroom to throw up. He came out with more of a clear-head. Gao was still in a stupor. Cheng Ling and Feng managed to get him to bed. Gao's bedroom walls were adorned with several versions of beautiful legs. Feng tore them down. They took a taxi back to town. They were met on Sung Kiang Road by a thick white fog. Cheng Ling told the driver to stop. He walked into the mist. Feng called to him from behind. He walked to the traffic light. Feng staggered out into the mist to join him. Cheng Ling's neck was chilly. He felt his neck, but it wasn't damp. He thought

of the little shrine he had seen that morning. Taipei still had its share of quaintness: the fog, that temple. Cheng Ling really wanted Ding Yu-mei to be there. Maybe she would sigh and say, "How lovely!" Then everything would be perfect. Cheng Ling continued walking; Feng didn't follow him. Cheng Ling didn't wait. He passed through the lane. There wasn't any more fog. He found a noodle stand, and ordered a bowl of beef noodles and a plate of dry beancurd. The table was piled high with dirty dishes. Cheng Ling pushed them aside, and buried himself in his noodles. A taxi stopped behind him; the noodle vendor gestured that there was no food left. The cab choked up and was off, squealing as it turned the corner. Cheng Ling gulped down his soup, paid for it and started out. It was oppressively hot and humid. He pulled off his shirt. He turned into a narrow lane; it was pitch-dark, and quiet.

"Where's the tiger?" Cheng Ling shouted. "A man who's afraid of himself will never succeed."**

He rushed down the lane. A cat which was running along on top of the wall meowed at him. Cheng Ling laughed loudly. He slowed his gait, and, after a few twists and turns on the road, arrived home.

* *From a poem by Tao Yan-ming (365-427). Translation based on Hightower.*

** *An illusion to The Water Margin. The reference is to a passage in Chapter 22, in which the hero, Wu Song, is warned against crossing a ridge in the mountains alone, because of the presence of a man-eating tiger. Wu Song dismisses the warning as ploy by the local inn-keeper to increase business, and fearlessly sets out across the mountain. He laughs, "Where's the tiger?" and lies down to rest. In the ensuing battle, he manages to club the beast to death with his bare hands.*

11

Cheng Ling spent all of Sunday morning painting. Ding Yu-mei hadn't called back. She must have gone to Yeliou with Professor Liu. Cheng Ling was sorry that he had called in the first place. At least he hadn't done anything stupid. His brother was right: getting entangled wasn't worth it. It is better to have a nice platonic relationship for in that way he wouldn't be left out in the cold. He did his best not to think of Ding Yu-mei. He thought of painting last night's mist, and Feng Wei-min, succumbed to the effects of alcohol under a street lamp. Lautrec was right: take your inspiration from the common man; there was no need for all this razzle-dazzle. He concentrated on painting. The canvas gradually composed itself, and he calmed down. He smudged the image of the drunkard; after all, drunkenness was formless. There was no world, and even less any 'I'. Cheng Ling painted happily, oblivious to the entrance of his brother. He jumped at his voice.

"Painting again? Want to have lunch?"

"You two go ahead and eat first. Mom hasn't gone out yet?"

"She's already back from church. You're very industrious today — painting so early." His brother looked at the canvas. "Isn't that Taipei at night? I'll help you out." He hummed a popular hit song, "The blue street lamps, flickering throughout the city ..."

"Cut the crap. Get out."

His brother popped his head in a little later. Cheng Ling was about to snap at him.

"Don't bark. You've got a call."

Zhou Pei was unusually loud today. Cheng Ling held the receiver away from his ear. He could still hear him shouting.

"Fat Cheng, it came to me last night. Amazing. Big business. This time we're rich."

"Zhou Pei, I've already told you, no more stocks."

"Who said anything about stocks? You didn't like the market, so we pulled out right away. But there are other ways to make a buck. You can't have any objection to opening a *buxiban**?"

"A *buxiban*? What kind?"

"A college-entrance-exam one, of course. Strictly on the level. Do the youth a good turn. Be a model of virtue. An extremely noble cause. The others have probable examination questions, and so have we. But there will be one big difference: At the other places, their guesses are just promotional gimmicks. Ours will be guaranteed to be right on target. No harm in making our tuition fees a little higher, either. We'll guarantee you test into the school of your first-choice. As long as we can predict the topics, we will never have to worry about enrolment. Our fortunes are made. Sweet Jesus!"

"And who is going to predict the topics for us?"

"Why, the wonder kid, of course! Don't play silly. There's nothing illegal about predicting test topics. We'll take the ones he predicts, and mix them in with a few others we've invented. Then we'll put them out as a book. Everyone will think we're just lucky at guessing; no one will suspect we're relying on the kid. And we don't have to take too many students. Five hundred. Just five

hundred. Tuition fees per person at twenty thousand dollars. That's a cool ten million. My God! I am so excited that I can't sleep!"

"We have already decided we're not going to make use of the kid. No need for all these shenanigans."

"Why are you pretending to be so respectable, Cheng Ling? If there's money to be made, and we don't make it, how can we face up to ourselves? I'm coming over to work out the details with you. Don't go out."

Cheng Ling replaced the receiver. His brother angrily threw down his chopsticks.

"You tell me I mustn't tell a soul, then you go out and spill it yourself. Well done."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Didn't mean to? Who said we had to protect the kid, not to let anyone take advantage of him? You say you're afraid he'll be exploited, and then you go out and trumpet the news all over. You're only afraid that nobody knows. And you tell me you didn't mean it."

Their mother was very upset that they were fighting again. She told them to be quiet and sit down for lunch. The phone rang as Cheng Ling picked up his rice bowl. His brother stared at him contemptuously. This time, it was Feng Wei-min.

"Listen, I want to ask you something. Did I hear you wrong because I was drunk, or did you say there's a Gobang prodigy or something floating around who can predict the future? Did you say that?"

"Yeh. But I was just talking. Don't tell anyone about it."

"Hey, with a friendship as old as ours, you've nothing to worry about. Where is this kid? Taipei?"

"He's in Taipei. But he doesn't want anyone to know."

"I understand." A pause, then Feng continued. "I'd like to ask him a few questions. How about this: I'll come

and talk it over with you. If you think it's okay, we'll go together to call on him."

Cheng Ling hung up. He knew his brother wouldn't be pleased. He covered himself by apologizing.

"It's all my fault. Don't yell at me anymore."

"Who's yelling at you? It's just that I think you're like the mother hen in that children's book. As soon as you see someone, you tell him a secret, then you ask someone else to keep the secret, too, and before you know it everyone is very quietly passing on the secret. You're about as smart as a hen, too."

"Cheng Li, don't talk to your elder brother like that," Mother intervened. "What's wrong with you two today? Fighting and arguing. The child might be a prodigy, but he can't be worth all this fuss. He's so pathetic, so thin and tiny. His arms are thinner than bamboo. Force him to play *xiangqi* and appear on television, and you're only going to hurt him."

"It's all my big brother's idea. The kid was fine at first, but he was bent on making him play *xiangqi* with Professor Liu."

"You really shouldn't have done that, Cheng Ling. All you think about is money. Always thinking of an angle. I never told you to kill yourself for money. Your father never wanted you to be that way, either. You shouldn't be so obsessed with money. Man dies for money the way a moth dies for light. Our family has been blessed; we've never had to worry about food or clothing. If only you two didn't fight, your father and I would have been satisfied. You want to paint, then paint; you want to open an ad agency, then open one. I'm always behind you. All I ask is that you be a man. How much good can come from taking someone's little boy and putting him on television? Don't do this kind of thing again."

Cheng Ling lowered his head. He didn't dare say anything. His mother continued.

"You're both grown up now. I can't take care of you. You have to learn things by yourself. You're not willing to go to church — well, young people want their fling. I wouldn't force you to go. It doesn't matter whether or not you go to church, but you must always remember grace, and let Jesus live in your heart. We Chinese say that man is made to be good; but if you do something bad, you'll pay for it. You really ought to go to church and beg for forgiveness, Cheng Ling."

"What's the matter? I haven't done anything wrong." Cheng Ling sighed in exasperation. The phone rang again. Cheng Ling cursed — someone up there didn't like him. He picked up the receiver angrily.

"Fat Cheng? Shi-jia here. Are you upset? Your voice doesn't sound right. Is anything wrong? Hey, let me tell you, that kid is incredible. This morning I went over to his house. I played 1 pawn chess with him, just like you did. He guessed right every time. That squirt isn't just stabbing in the dark — he's seen the light. I've got to hand it to him. I'm a believer. Fat Cheng, you've convinced me; we've unearthed a *bona fide* wonder kid! His family is all confused. The squirt's father doesn't like him playing chess. The squirt himself is scared of his dad, he won't talk about anything with his family. We've got a gold mine here. You're a true genius; tell me what to do. I'm calling from the street; it's not too convenient. Where can we get together and talk? Can I come over? Okay? I'll be right there."

Cheng Ling mulled things over. Zhang was no dope; he wouldn't be able to hide anything from him. Zhou Pei, Feng Wei-min and Zhang Shi-jia were all coming over. What should he do? His head was spinning. He helped

his mother put away the bowls and chopsticks. His mother went to take her afternoon nap. Cheng Ling braced himself, and told his brother everything. His brother had no sympathy for him.

"You made your bed. Now lie in it."

"You can't blame me. There was never any way to keep the lid on. Sooner or later, the wonder kid is going to make it to the front page. If we hadn't come around, somebody else would have discovered him. Who told him to go play 1 pawn chess, anyway?"

"So what do we do now? Everybody uses him to get rich?"

"If the kid doesn't object to it, no one's against letting people get rich. And if he's unwilling to do any more predicting, and we don't give him away, as long as he doesn't play any 1 pawn chess, he won't be used by anyone. It's up to him."

"But can we keep a secret?"

Cheng Ling couldn't guarantee it. Zhou Pei was the first to arrive, followed soon by Zhang Shi-jia. Feng Weimin was the last to come. Cheng Ling invited them all up to the balcony. They stood in the sun and talked. It was a hot afternoon, but no one was in any hurry. Cheng Ling went over everything in detail: how the boy had known about the fire, how he had guessed the random numbers, how he had predicted the stock prices. His audience listened in rapt attention, occasionally exchanging glances among themselves. In conclusion, Cheng Ling said that since the boy had this special power, they ought to protect him, and not let anyone destroy him. If the boy didn't want to predict the future, then they shouldn't force him. When he had finished, Zhang Shi-jia spoke.

"Right now, we're the only ones who know about the

kid. But after he appears over television on Friday, things will be different. We ought to think of a way to protect him for his sake. But we can't cut Friday's programme. What can we do?"

"Mr Zhang," Zhou Pei said. "This is the first time I've met you. It is also the first time I've met Mr Feng. However, as we're all Cheng Ling's close friends, his confidantes, I'm going to go straight to the point. Fat Cheng says we should protect the kid; I agree two hundred percent. But aside from protecting the kid for his own sake, frankly speaking, we ought to be quiet for our own benefit. I was just telling Fat Cheng on the phone, if the kid was willing to predict the college-entrance-exam topics, we would all clean up — and I'm including the kid himself in that 'we'. There are many roads to riches open to us. If the kid doesn't want to cooperate, then we'll forget it. But if he wants to help, then we have absolutely got to hold on to our golden goose. But, no matter what happens, we have to stay quiet. Does everyone agree on that at least?"

They all nodded again. Zhou Pei continued.

"As for Friday's *Wonder Kids*...it would be best if we could cancel it. If not, then Mr Zhang has got to figure out a way of keeping the kid's powers secret."

Cheng Ling cut in before Zhang Shi-jia could reply.

"That shouldn't be any problem. As long as Zhang Shi-jia doesn't make the kid play 1 pawn chess, the audience will just think that the kid is a *xiangqi* genius. They won't have any reason to suspect anything else."

Zhou Pei kept nodding his head.

"No problem. I'll just cancel the 1 pawn chess part. But, Fat Cheng, if we do it this way, the kid has got to win at *xiangqi*. If he loses, it would look really bad."

"I guarantee you, no problem."

Feng Wei-min hadn't said anything. Suddenly, he spoke.

"I agree with Mr Zhang and Mr Zhou. As to using the kid to make money...if he's willing, I don't object. I would like to ask the kid some questions myself, questions about man's future, about the world's future. Nothing to do with making money. I just want to satisfy my curiosity. I'm a historian, I'd like to know what the kid thinks about these things."

Cheng Ling looked around. Zhou Pei and Zhang Shi-jia were shaking their heads.

"Mr Feng," Zhou Pei said. "Why ask such questions? I don't want to think about such problems. I'm sure the kid won't answer you. Let's just concern ourselves with how to get rich."

"Mr Zhou is right," Zhang Shi-jia said. "Your questions are too big. If it took the kid half an hour to figure out that stock business, your questions would take him a few months. We don't have any time to waste."

Feng Wei-min seemed a little disappointed.

"Well, I'm a businessman, too. I'm interested in getting rich. I'd also like to know about the export situation, about the prices of raw materials. If I knew about them in advance, I'd certainly be able to turn in a profit..."

"Yes, yes!" Zhou Pei said. "We should have thought of that."

"...But can it be true that nobody cares to hear what the kid has to say about the 'big' questions? Don't you want to know what direction history is going in?"

Feng Wei-min stopped. Judging from the expressions of Zhou Pei and Zhang Shi-jia, they didn't want to hear anymore. Cheng Ling saw that too, and hurriedly added, "Look, Feng, we'll ask the kid your questions later. First, we've got to decide about *Wonder Kids*. Shi-jia, don't tell

Professor Liu about the kid. It would be best if you didn't tell Ting Yu-mei just yet, either. Also, his family still doesn't quite understand what they're dealing with. We ought to tell them and make sure they watch over him."

"No hurry," Zhou Pei said. "First let's figure out a way to get rich. Then we can talk to his folks. In that way, we don't have to worry about their approval."

"I haven't finished yet. If the kid's family and the kid are both against his predicting the future, then we'll drop it. We ought to at least have this implicit understanding."

"If there's money to be made, of course they'll approve," Zhou Pei laughed. "If they don't, then we'll forget it."

Cheng Ling turned to Zhang Shi-jia. No problem. Feng Wei-min hadn't any objections, either. They chatted for a while, then decided that they would each try to think of ways of making money. Then they all exchanged addresses. Cheng Ling told them where the boy lived, but asked them not to disturb him before Friday. They would wait till the programme was over before they'd all go over and talk with his family. Feng Wei-min, Zhang Shi-jia, and Zhou Pei were in complete agreement. Feng didn't bring up any more questions about history. Cheng Ling saw them off.

"What do you think?" he asked his brother. "My friends are all good soldiers. They won't blab."

His brother shrugged his shoulders.

"If only for their benefit. Feng Wei-min is relatively on the up and up. I don't really trust Zhou Pei or Zhang Shi-jia. You can never trust anyone over thirty."

Cheng Ling forced a smile.

"Feng Wei-min and Zhang Shi-jia are around thirty. Zhou Pei and I are of the same age. Can you trust me?"

"Who knows? You're pretty much the same as them."

Cheng Ling returned to his room, and continued with his painting. He couldn't calm down, though. He forced a couple of strokes but wasn't satisfied with them. He pulled down the canvas, and threw it at the wall. Next door, his brother was listening to rock music. Cheng Ling lay on his bed, dispiritedly staring at the ceiling. He got up only when his mother called him for dinner.

12

"The kid's disappeared!"

"Disappeared? How do you know he's disappeared?"

Zhang Shi-jia's head was covered with sweat. His short-sleeved shirt was wet through. Cheng Ling had never seen him so unkempt. Cheng Ling told the girl to go out and buy three cokes. Little Dong brought over a couple of chairs.

"I just went over to his house to ask him to come to the studio tomorrow for a rehearsal," Zhang explained. "What was I to think of when his folks told me he'd gone out in the morning, and hadn't come back yet? He's a good kid. If he had gone out to play, he would certainly have told his parents. There's something fishy going on; the kid has obviously disappeared."

"Don't make a mountain out of a molehill!" Cheng Ling couldn't help laughing. "A little kid goes out to play, and he forgets to tell his parents. No cause for alarm."

It's not so simple. His family said someone came for him this morning at about eight o'clock. Not long after this fellow left, the boy took off. Maybe he was kidnapped!"

"Who would want to kidnap a little boy?"

"Exactly. Who would want to kidnap a little boy unless he knew that this wasn't your run-of-the-mill little boy, but someone who could predict the future?"

From the first, Cheng Ling had thought that Zhang was implying that he had something to do with it. He

was less than amused.

"So you're saying it was someone in our group? Shi-jia, you're getting worked up over nothing. The kid went out to play, and you immediately suspect he's been kidnapped, and by one of us, no less. My friends wouldn't do that."

"I don't suspect you, Fat Cheng. Don't get me wrong. And it couldn't have been that Mr Dong. The kid's family said that the man who came for him was very short, so it couldn't have been either of you. It must be one of them."

"Hey, we're not even sure if the kid has disappeared, so why make wild accusations? Feng Wei-min and Zhou Pei are old friends of mine; you can't suspect them just like that."

"One of them must have been kidnapped the boy," Zhang Shi-jia was livid. "I knew you shouldn't have given them the kid's address. I couldn't say anything in front of your friends. But you can be someone's friend and still not know him. I might trust someone the first time I meet him, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he'll trust me. Now we're really in a fix. We can't find the kid, and if he isn't in on Friday, I'm a dead duck."

The girl came in with the cokes. Zhang Shi-jia drank his from the bottle. Cheng Ling couldn't conceal his suspicions. He asked Little Dong where Zhou Pei was. Little Dong said that he might be at one of the exchanges. Cheng Ling called several of them. No Zhou Pei. Zhang sat beside him, sighing. Cheng Ling told him to relax. There was no way the boy could have disappeared. Probably he'd already gone home. Zhang said that if they could find Zhou Pei and Feng Wei-min, they'd discover the whereabouts of the kid. Cheng Ling knew that Zhang didn't trust his two friends, or even him. Explanations

were useless. All he could do was to call Feng's office again. Feng Wei-min was in. When he heard the boy had disappeared, he got upset, too. Cheng Ling hung up and told Zhang that he'd found Feng. By the tone of his voice, he hadn't known about it, either ... so that left only Zhou Pei. Zhang got even more agitated. He couldn't sit down. He wanted to go to the police. Cheng Ling said that going to the police was being a little premature. He suggested that Little Dong and he split up to look for Zhou Pei. Zhang would go back to the boy's home. They would rendezvous at his office at the studio at six. Zhang's couldn't think of any better plan, so he agreed. Little Dong said he'd go and check out some brokerage houses and coffee shops. Cheng Ling himself would go to Zhou Pei's home.

Zhou Pei lived in Chingmei. Cheng Ling took a taxi. The only person home was Zhou Pei's grandmother, who spoke only Amoy. Cheng Ling couldn't quite understand what she was saying. He managed to make out that Zhou Pei had gone out early that morning, and he left him a note. As he was walking out from the lane, he saw Zhou Pei coming across the street towards him. Cheng Ling grabbed him.

"Woah, my good man. Where have you been?"

Zhou Pei jumped.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"The kid's disappeared!"

"Stop kidding; I don't believe it."

Cheng Ling told him that Zhang couldn't find the boy, and was afraid that he had been kidnapped. Zhou Pei thought for a while before he spoke.

"Holy mackerel! So one of them is in it for his own profit. What did this guy look like? There were only a few of us yesterday. If it wasn't Little Dong, then it must have been our Mr Feng."

Cheng Ling said that Little Dong had been at the agency all morning. Feng didn't know anything about it. He couldn't help asking Zhou Pei whether or not he had gone over to the boy's house. Zhou Pei was furious.

"Fat Cheng, we've been friends for years. Do I look like someone who'd go behind your back?"

"I don't suspect you...but where did you go this morning, anyway?"

"Where did I go?! I went to see a friend at a *buxiban*. I asked him how to start one. Didn't we decide yesterday that we'd all go out and look for ways to get rich? You all sit around and talk, while I run myself ragged; then I get kicked by you for my pains. For Pete's sake!"

"Did you really go to see a friend?"

"Fat Cheng, have I ever tricked you? I might be a smooth operator on the outside, but I've never crossed my friends. It hurts me that you could ever suspect me."

At first, Cheng Ling had been sure that it was Zhou Pei. But Zhou Pei's attitude made him even more sure that it wasn't him.

"You're such a trusting soul," Zhou Pei continued. "You can't conceive of deceit. That's why I've always believed you. But your friends are another story. The only reason why everyone was so cooperative yesterday was for the sake of your face. By the time they got home, I bet some people weren't so satisfied anymore; they might have had second thoughts. Zhang Shi-jia discovered the kid. Why would he want to split the profits? If anyone is going back on his word and up to something, it's him."

"But he's the one who discovered that the kid had disappeared."

"How can you be so simple-minded? The robber cries 'Stop, thief!' and strolls away. It must be him. This Mr

Zhang is obviously a dangerous fellow. A two-faced liar. He's taken us all for a ride."

Cheng Ling had nothing to say. Zhou Pei was making quite a case. Could it be that Zhang was dipping his finger into the honey-pot? What was the point? He couldn't very well pull the boy out of his sleeve on Friday. No matter how crooked he was, he wasn't going to cheat his own business.

Cheng Ling mulled it over. He felt Zhou Pei was still the most likely suspect. On the other hand, since they weren't even sure the boy had disappeared, there was no need to accuse him just yet. Cheng Ling asked him to come over to the studio, where they'd try and clear things up. Zhou Pei was fuming, but he agreed. They hurried over there. Little Dong sat alone in Zhang's office, reading the paper.

"Little Dong, where's Zhang Shi-jia?"

Little Dong looked blankly at them.

"I don't know. He hasn't been back. Maybe he found the kid."

"What nerve," Cheng Ling muttered an oath. "So all this is for nothing. I ran to take a taxi to Chingmei. As if the cab-fare was free..."

"What do you care? I was at home, only to be dragged over here by you to take part in the charade. I don't need to wait for our Mr Zhang. I'm going home." Zhou Pei stalked out.

"Don't go. He might be right back."

"Oh yes, Zhou Pei. I was checking the prices at a broker's when I went out looking for you. Our stock has already gone way up. Should we sell?"

Zhou Pei shook his head.

"Didn't the kid say it would double? We'll wait two more days. Pluck when the fruit is ripest."

The three of them waited for half an hour but there was still no sign of Zhang Shi-jia. Zhou Pei was cursing loudly. Cheng Ling was mad, too, but he didn't want to show it. He went over to the door and looked around. He saw Ding Yu-mei coming over. Cheng Ling's anger suddenly disappeared. Ding Yu-mei saw Cheng Ling and smiled.

"Hi. Too bad you didn't come with us to Yeliou yesterday. We had such a good time."

"I called you up. You weren't in."

"I know." Ding Yu-mei said hello to Zhou Pei and Little Dong. "Are you waiting for Zhang Shi-jia? He's not coming back today."

Little Dong and Zhou Pei looked at each other. Zhou Pei said he had to go, and pulled Little Dong along with him. Cheng Ling looked at Ding Yu-mei. He saw she wasn't angry, and relaxed.

"So you three went to Yeliou yesterday?"

"Four. Old Gong came too. You and your stubbornness. Wang Ruo-fen asked for you."

"What a joke. How did she remember me? How was it? Did Professor Liu remember to bring along his own trumpet to blow?"

"He didn't say anything. I suppose, since you weren't there, there wasn't anyone to compete with him. Actually, the professor doesn't bear any grudge against you."

"Why do I care whether or not I'm in his favour?" Cheng Ling had been waiting for a chance to say something more. Then he decided it would be inappropriate, so he changed the subject.

"Free tonight? I'd like to make good on last week's promise and take you out to dinner."

Ding Yu-mei looked at her watch.

"I've got to be back by eight."

"We'll go to a Western restaurant nearby. It's not far; it won't take too much time."

They hadn't quite got to the front door downstairs when Ding Yu-mei gave a little start. Cheng Ling followed her glance to the doorway. Who could be standing there but Professor Liu. Cheng Ling cursed his luck.

"Trailing around after her like that. Disgusting."

Ding Yu-mei shot a look at Cheng Ling. Beaming with pleasure, Professor Liu advanced.

"Mr Cheng, I hadn't expected to see you again. We were so sorry you couldn't come with us to Yeliou yesterday. You were on Yu-mei's mind constantly."

Cheng Ling was exceedingly uncomfortable.

"How do you have time to come over here?" Ding Yu-mei asked. "Weren't you going to the south?"

"I decided to put it off. I was passing by, and thought I'd come up and see you. Have you eaten yet? I'll take you two out for dinner."

"I've already arranged with Ding Yu-mei," Cheng Ling put in. "There's no need for the professor to offer a treat."

"Mr Cheng, please don't treat me like a guest. Any friend of Ding Yu-mei's is a friend of mine. I'll take you two out for dinner; let's not stand on ceremony."

He's got some nerve, Cheng Ling thought. He looked at Ding Yu-mei, who neither agreed nor disagreed with Professor Liu. Her dark eyes let out a glint of mischief. Cheng Ling was upset. He'd been shanghaied again. But he couldn't back out of this one. He put on a serious expression.

"Mr Liu, as I've just stated, I've already arranged with Ding Yu-mei. If you're free, I can treat you, too. If you're busy, I won't insist. But tonight's my treat. You can pay some other night."

"Okay, okay. As you've got the prior claim, I naturally

respect your wishes. You can foot the bill tonight."

Professor Liu hadn't the slightest notion of retreating. Cheng Ling was one step short of killing him. At dinner the two of them engaged in a heated debate which Ding Yu-mei didn't try to mediate. Cheng Ling saw that she wanted to be an impartial observer, content to watch her two pursuers fight it out. Professor Liu went on and on about his wonderful electronics factory. Cheng Ling didn't have anything to brag about; he had to content himself with getting in a few pot shots from the side. Professor Liu didn't care at all. Then an idea popped into Cheng Ling's head, and he turned to Ding Yu-mei.

"Do you know why the earth is round?"

Ding Yu-mei fluttered her eyelashes and laughed.

"Why ask me? Ask the professor."

"Professor Liu, you're such a well-read, intelligent man, you must know why the earth is round."

Professor Liu hadn't been prepared for this. He stuttered.

"That, ah, is a long story. The earth naturally is round because...the inviolability of the laws of nature...the effects of the gravitational forces...the mutual attraction of all the matter of the planets, must, ultimately, concentrate, into a spherical shape ..."

"Wrong! The earth is round because that's the only way everyone can believe that he is the centre of the universe. It's not your fault that you have such a high opinion of yourself, Professor Liu. It's just that you never realized that the earth is round."

"Ha, ha. Mr Cheng has his own opinions. He's certainly entitled to his opinions. But you have overpraised me. I'm really not that important. Our little factory doesn't even have two hundred employees. How can I be considered an important person?...Though, on the other

hand, in my own little world, I guess I am ...” Professor Liu stuck up his thumb.

“Everything’s up to me. You’ve never had to supervise people, so you don’t know the difficulties inherent in employing and leading others. I don’t want to brag, but unless you have an abiding self-confidence and a diplomat’s tact, you won’t be able to control ten people, much less two hundred. When you want to employ someone, you’ve got to understand a few things: What are his weaknesses? What are his strengths? Would he be of use to me? What use? How can I make him content? How can I make him work docilely for me? You probably don’t have any experience of this type, Mr Cheng. If you’ve ever been in charge of people, you know that the most difficult thing to learn is how to make others work for you. The sages said that some people work with their bodies, and others with their minds. The first type only knows how to do stupid work. That’s the greatest knowledge. The most important things to be learnt in this world aren’t taught in schools.

“Mr Cheng, if someone wants to be successful, he has to learn how to control people. The ancients all had to study the ‘Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government’. Do you know what it’s all about? Does it have dynastic histories? Does it tell you which king did a great job? No way. All that that book records is how people related to each other. All men’s fundamental aspirations are basically the same. If you can figure out what someone’s after, you can figure out how to manipulate him, and you’ll be a success. But this kind of knowledge can’t be spelled out so simply. There had to be a book like the Comprehensive Mirror to collect some examples that you can study at your leisure ...” Professor Liu laughed.

“Si Ma-guang was quite intelligent. You can tell how

intelligent he was from the story about how, when he was a little kid, he saved his friend who'd fallen into a water crock. If he had jumped into the crock, too, he might have become a little hero, but it wouldn't have done any good. But he wasn't stupid, so he got a brick and broke the water crock. Clever kid. That's the so-called 'indirect route'. Have you read Liddell Hart's Strategy? Liddell Hart was a great student of soldiering. He devoted his life to researching military strategy, and came up with one fundamental principle: all successful strategies must follow an indirect route. Si Ma-guang understood this principle a thousand years ago. Nothing in this world is straightforward. If you really want something, it's best not to let anyone know about it.

"That's why I say, 'If you want something done, don't kill yourself doing it.' It's better to get someone else to do it for you. That way, you save energy, and you don't suffer. Mental labourers spend all their time thinking of indirect routes. It's the same in playing chess, or managing a business. If you know how to take the indirect route, you'll get unlimited benefits."

"You might be successful in your factory with that method, Professor Liu, but you can't use it in your studies."

"It's the same thing. Take a look at those big-name professors: one conference or lecture every alternate day, in addition to a sideline in business. Where do they get the time to do any scholarly research? Actually, they don't do any. They find some students to do the legwork for them, and, if anything come out of it, they put their own name at the top of the paper. It's the same everywhere: If you don't have to do it yourself, don't. That's the indirect route."

Cheng Ling still wanted to argue.

"Are you two ever going to finish?" Ding Yu-mei asked. "I'm going back to the station; it's almost eight."

Professor Liu drove them over to the studio, then finally excused himself. Cheng Ling breathed a sigh of relief. Ding Yu-mei looked at him and laughed.

"You two are born enemies. As soon as you see each other, you start up."

Cheng Ling didn't feel like discussing it any further.

"Are you free tomorrow?"

"I've got a rehearsal. It's for a new serial. I've got a cameo."

"Why didn't they just ask you to play the lead?"

Ding Yu-mei looked at him pointedly. Cheng Ling was sorry the minute he'd said it. He quickly changed the topic. Ding Yu-mei, however, had lost her interest. Cheng Ling looked at this beautiful, delicate young woman, while a melancholy look spread over her face. He suddenly felt a deep pity for her. He wanted to tell her she didn't have anything to worry about. The words were almost out of his mouth, when he swallowed them down. Several television actresses, who were standing at the cafeteria door chatting, called Ding Yu-mei over. She flashed an apologetic smile at him. He watched as she left his side. She's still a little girl, he thought. She didn't care about anything aside from her dreams of stardom. Professor Liu wouldn't necessarily catch her. He'd do better with Huang Duan-shu than Ding Yu-mei. And Cheng Ling? He sighed. Cheng Ling wasn't sure himself. From a safe distance, he could see Ding Yu-mei laughing with her friends. He felt somewhat rueful. He looked around. A sweating Zhang Shi-jia came out of the elevator.

"Fat Cheng! So you're floating around down here. I've been waiting for you in my office."

"Waiting for me? We waited for you until six-thirty. Why didn't you call back?"

"I was waiting for the kid at his home. I couldn't call in. But he still hasn't come back. His family is worried to death."

Cheng Ling became frantic.

"The kid still hasn't gone home? He has really disappeared!"

"Disappeared? He's been kidnapped. Have you found Zhou Pei? Why hasn't he come to the studio?"

"He waited for you, then went home. Shi-jia, I don't think it's Zhou Pei. He said he went to a *buxiban* this morning to see some friends. I don't think he was lying."

"If it wasn't Zhou Pei, and it wasn't Mr Feng, then who was it?"

Cheng Ling shrugged his shoulders. He didn't like Zhang's attitude: it was as if he deserved an explanation. He didn't feel he had to protect anyone, though. Let Zhang go and investigate whosoever he suspected. He put it straight to him.

"The prodigy has disappeared. My friends didn't know about it. I have no reason to suspect them. If you don't believe me, go and ask them yourself. It's none of my business."

"You can't forget the whole thing, Fat Cheng. If you pull out, what will I do?" Zhang Shi-jia settled down. "Look, Fat Cheng, the *Wonder Kids* thing was your idea. And it was you who discovered the kid's special powers. I owe you everything. Ask Ding Yu-mei or Old Gong. They know. But once you're involved, and everything's so complicated, you can't just wash your hands off it and walk out. What good would my being fired do to you? A peony is pretty, but not without green leaves. I've helped your agency at the station in every way I've been

able to. If I go, what good will it do to you?"

True enough, Cheng Ling thought. Zhang's removal wouldn't help him in any way. But who had taken the kid, anyway? And where, in a city of two million, do you look to find him? Cheng Ling hadn't a clue. When he didn't say anything, Zhang clasped his hand and appealed to him.

"You're the only one who can resolve this. The kid couldn't have disappeared without any reason. I'm not a double-crosser, but frankly, I don't trust your friends. You can't blame me, can you? If you bring back the kid, I'll be indebted to you forever. I won't forget it."

"Okay," Cheng Ling said hopelessly. "I'll do my best. But what if I can't find him?"

"We'll cross the bridge when we come to it." Zhang Shi-jia smiled nervously. "If we really can't find him, then rig up a phoney wonder kid. My mother's brother has wanted his first-born on television for a long time. I never agreed. If the kid doesn't turn up, I'll put my nephew on stage. After all, television is an illusionist art form ... Don't tell anyone. If my back weren't against the wall, I'd never do it."

"I know," Cheng Ling remembered what Ding Yu-mei had told him: They'd already had one ringer on *Wonder Kids*. He unconsciously looked toward the cafeteria. Ding Yu-mei and her friends had already disappeared. "There's nothing wrong with nepotism if your relatives are as qualified as anyone else."

"Don't tell anyone. It's still a bad policy. It would be best if we could find the kid, and they could play chess like they're supposed to. Otherwise, I'll have a hard time explaining things to the company, and it won't be easy to tell Professor Liu, either."

Cheng Ling laughed.

“Right. From the professor’s standpoint, I ought to find the kid, too. Otherwise, it gives him reason to brag.”

13

Cheng Ling spent the whole day running around searching, but he couldn't find a trace of the boy. He went to see several of his classmates, and to his school. Nobody had seen him. It seemed the boy was hardly an outstanding character. His homeroom teacher had almost no recollection of him at all. Only when Cheng Ling described his big head did he give an "ah" of recognition. The boy liked to play Gobang, and often handed in his weekly diary late. Other than that, there wasn't anything special about him. Cheng Ling thought it strange that the boy would be late with his diary. The homeroom teacher explained that he was in the habit of letting the diaries pile up on his desk, and not correcting them until Thursday. The students knew his practice, so those who were late would often slip their books into the pile, thinking that they wouldn't be discovered. But this homeroom teacher had thought of everything; he was always able to find a flaw in their books. He let Cheng Ling see the chess prodigy's diary. He pointed to the weekly calendar of what had happened. The boy had often made the mistake of recording what hadn't happened yet, a week early. This was iron-clad evidence of lateness. The homeroom teacher was extremely proud of his own intelligence and keen powers of perception. But Cheng Ling knew the reason why the boy was in the habit of recording things that hadn't happened yet. There was no need to discuss the matter further. The homeroom teacher couldn't care

less if the boy had disappeared. During summer vacation, a child might go over to play at a classmate's house. Last month, a child ran off down south. He was sent back up by the railroad police. The boy had said he had wanted to go off to the mountains to study the martial arts.

Cheng Ling saw that he wasn't getting anywhere, so he left to grab a bite to eat. He went back to the agency, where Zhou Pei and Little Dong were running about like nervous ants in a hot pot. Zhou Pei called out to him.

"You've really done it this time. Some true prodigy. Just one big act. Did you hear that our stock fell?"

Cheng Ling's heart sank. He felt like he had been hit in the chest. Zhou Pei continued shouting.

"He said it would double. It went up a quarter, and now it's falling. What do we do?"

"It might go up again. The boy couldn't have been wrong."

"I think it will go up," Little Dong said. "All the other major issues are going up. Ours is the only one falling. It doesn't make sense."

"Christ! Since when does sense come into it? When it falls, it falls, and that's that. We ought to go to the boy and ask him to re-predict things. If it's going to double, fine, but we still have to know when it's going up. We can't wait till next year. We couldn't pay the interest on the loan I took out to buy it in the first place."

Cheng Ling lost his composure.

"He said it would go up this week," he stammered. "How could..."

"No harm in asking again. We can still get out today if we have to. Fat Cheng, let's impose on the boy one more time. If he's not certain, then we'll dump it."

"But you know the boy's disappeared. We still don't know where he is."

"He still hasn't been found?" Zhou Pei jumped. "I thought Zhang Shi-jia was talking nonsense yesterday."

"Nope. He's actually disappeared. Zhang Shi-jia wasn't lying. I've already wasted a day looking for him. Nobody knows where he's gone to."

They looked at each other. Cheng Ling saw Zhou Pei was really upset. It was obvious that he didn't know where the boy was. Little Dong wiped his glasses carefully. Zhou Pei sat down, dejected. Cheng Ling sounded them out.

"Let's dump it, okay? We'll still have cleared several hundred thousand. That's hardly a loss."

"No, no great loss. But what if it goes up after we dump it?"

"Who cares? What's important is our original investment."

Cheng Ling steadfastly recommended selling. Little Dong had no opinion. Zhou Pei made a few calls; the price was still falling. He wasn't going to hesitate. He told his broker to sell. Little Dong figured it out, subtracting the service charge, etc., they could still make a little over ninety thousand. They relaxed. Zhou Pei put his hand to his forehead.

"My God. Only ninety thousand. Too bad. Where the hell did that prodigy go to? We've got to find him!"

"Hey, didn't you say that we should open a *buxiban* if we stay out of the market?"

Zhou Pei gave a start, then recovered.

"Right, a *buxiban* is a good idea. Take a look at the material I've collected. The entrance exams are now using a computer-graded answer sheet, so the potential topics are quite limited. It shouldn't be hard to guess them. The old way, we would have been kept pretty busy. Now, all we have to do is collect all the lists of potential topics, and let the kid choose from among them. Anyway, they're

all multiple choice or true and false questions."

Little Dong interrupted him.

"I've got a friend who imported intercoms that look like watches from Hong Kong. He sold them to students. I hear he really cleaned up."

"That's for swindlers. We're above that. This is an honest operation." Zhou Pei was starting to sound a little angry again. "But if the kid doesn't show up, I will be talking myself blue in the face for nothing. Whichever bastard took him away ... Some friends you've got."

After they had sold the stock, Cheng Ling felt completely relaxed. He gathered his wits around him to consider the case of the disappearing wonder kid. From what he had just seen of Zhou Pei's reaction, he could be struck off the list of suspects. So it was Feng Wei-min? Cheng Ling hadn't suspected him. Now he was changing his mind. Zhang Shi-jia and Zhou Pei were both beside themselves with worry. If Feng were nervous, he should have called back today. Since he hadn't called, that meant he wasn't upset. Why wasn't he upset? Obviously, because he knew where the kid was. Cheng Ling put the pieces together, and jumped out of his chair. Puzzled, Zhou Pei and Little Dong looked at him. Cheng Ling had no desire to explain things to them. He ran down the stairs, almost knocking his secretary over. He ignored her curses. He hailed a taxi, and sped toward Feng's company on Hua Ning Street. People were getting off from work. The area around Jong Hua Market was packed. Then they had to wait ten minutes for a north-bound train at a crossing. Cheng Ling was wet with perspiration. Feng sat alone in his office; everyone else had left. A bandage was tied around his head. He looked pale. Cheng Ling shoved him gently.

"Hey, Feng, what happened to you?"

Feng Wei-min smiled wryly.

"Believe it or not, yesterday, on Heng Yang Road, I was watching a girl in a mini-skirt, when I bumped into a light pole."

"You might fool somebody else with that one. I don't buy it."

"What will you believe? Last night I got drunk, and fell into the sewer in front of my house?"

"Try again. If you'd fallen into the sewer last night, you wouldn't be sitting around talking about it today. I'm afraid some bones would have to be broken."

"Okay, I guess I'll have to tell you. Yesterday, my wife went to see her mother. I was alone in the kitchen. My wife had piled up some cans and bottles on a high shelf. I tried to pull one out from the bottom, and I was hit by a can of imported peaches. I didn't realize it could be so serious."

"With such a pathetic answer, no wonder you wanted to make something up."

They both laughed. It was their old habit of exchanging invented stories as a kind of greeting protocol. Then Feng Wei-min explained, "These last two days, I've been especially busy. We've had a big deal in the works. I'm here late every night. Let's go out for a bite, okay?"

Cheng Ling didn't have time to reply. The telex machine started chattering, and Feng rushed over to read it. The more he read, the happier he got.

"I've got a confirmation! This one's all sewn up! The duck is as good as cooked! I'll treat you to duck rice."

"You made a killing, and yet you're still so stingy!"

"At least it's better than seafood. If I took you out for seafood, you'd really complain. After all, duck rice is a dish with a story behind it. Do you recall how Chen Ba-xian beat the Northern Qi army at Nanjing? First,

he killed one thousand ducks. In the morning, every soldier had some duck rice. After his army had eaten, they were full of energy and went out to slaughter the army of the Northern Qi on Mufu Mountain. That secured the area south of Jiangxi. See how useful duck rice is?"

"So duck over rice is the correct southern style of eating it?"

"That's right. In the olden days, they called it 'mixed rice'. 'Duck meat mixed rice'. Very nutritious. The North rewarded their soldiers with cattle and sheep. The South gave their troops poultry."

They walked to a little place that sold duck rice, ordered a plate each, and fell to eating. Cheng Ling was waiting for Feng Wei-min to bring up the issue of the lost child, but Feng didn't mention him. Finally, Cheng Ling couldn't restrain himself.

"Okay, Feng, where did you take the kid?"

Feng Wei-min was ripping into a duck drumstick. He took his time answering.

"How did you guess it was me?"

"It had to be you. But it is hardly exemplary behaviour. Why treat your old friends like this?"

Feng Wei-min didn't say anything. He picked up a piece of duck with his chopsticks, and placed it in Cheng Ling's bowl.

"Here, duck's rump for you."

"I don't eat duck's rump," Cheng Ling retorted. "It's already Tuesday. The kid has to go on TV on Friday. Zhang Shi-jia is worried half to death. Why did you take the kid?"

"I wanted to ask him a few questions. Anyway, you all weren't interested. I didn't kidnap him. He came with me on his own volition. I'll send him home before

Thursday."

"You mean to say he's at your place? No wonder you sent your wife home to her mother's. You holed up with the kid at your place so he could struggle with the future of mankind. Why did you bother?"

Feng Wei-min was hurt.

"I haven't forced him to answer anything. He wants to, himself. The kid is complex. He's no fool. That Mr Zhou who wants to use him to get rich is wasting his time. The kid only looks like he's out of it. I talked to him the whole night; he has a lot of ideas of his own. But he's not someone whom we ordinary men can understand."

Cheng Ling thought of the kid's deep, faraway, wizened stare. It seemed as if he had already seen through the window to the future. He thought of what his brother had said. Maybe he was right: the boy was a flaw left in the universe on purpose. He watched the current of people flowing outside the restaurant. Street merchants were hawking underpriced clothes and sundries. Neon lights were flashing in rows. Under the curtain of the black night, a myriad of colours combined to form an impressionistic sculpture of the city. Cheng Ling felt a cold loneliness in this hot, bustling place. Duck rice, Chen Ba-xian, Jiankang, Nanjing, Mufu Mountain, the Qinhuai River.* He found himself reciting some lines that stuck in the back of his head:

"For the love of the Qinhuai River,
in the old days I left home.
I wandered up and down behind Plum Root Forge;
And strolled about in Apricot Blossom Village;
But now I have cast off my official's robes
As cicadas shed their skin;
I wash my feet in the limpid stream

And in idle moments fill my cup with wine,
And call in a few new friends to drink with me.
A hundred years are soon gone, so why despair?
Yet immortal fame is not easy to attain.
In days to come,
I shall stay by my medicine stove and Buddhist sutras,
And practise religion alone."

"Terrific! Medicine chest and Buddhist sutras!" Feng Wei-min laughed. "Since when are you into 'The Scholars'? That poem is about the most simplistic kind of nostalgia for tradition. There isn't much to it. Is that all you're up to?"

"Let's go to your place. The kid's family has been looking everywhere for him. You say he doesn't care, but I don't believe you."

Feng Wei-min stood up.

"You know I don't have any evil design on the kid. I don't intend to get rich off him. Give me a couple more days, okay?"

"Send him home. He won't be able to answer your questions. There is no use trying."

Feng Wei-min seemed to know he was in the wrong. He stopped insisting. They went over to his house. The boy was curled up in a corner of the living room. His big head lay on his knee. He was sleeping soundly. Cheng Ling woke him up. The boy didn't seem in the least surprised. He obediently stood up. Cheng Ling couldn't understand how the boy could listen to Feng and leave his home, and now stoically prepare to go back. He didn't seem to care about anything. His eyes were half-closed, he wasn't quite awake, and hardly noticed Cheng Ling and Feng talking.

Feng knelt down, and grasping the boy's thin shoulders, said, "After you go home, think about my questions

again, okay?"

The boy nodded his head. Feng continued.

"Think carefully. What is man's future? What is the fate of the world? If you can predict stocks, you should have no trouble predicting the future of mankind."

The boy didn't say anything. Cheng Ling became impatient and he was about to lead him away when suddenly the boy cried out. His eyes opened wide. A look of terror spread over his face. Cheng Ling had never in his life seen such a frightened expression. The boy's triangular-shaped face was all contorted. His lips turned purple. His whole body looked like it was receiving an electric shock. He jumped into the air, then fell heavily to the floor.

Cheng Ling was frantic. He shook the boy violently. The frail body weighed nothing in his hands. Feng Weimin got a damp towel, and put it on the boy's forehead. Cheng Ling's heart was thumping. He was petrified that the boy was going to stay in a coma. Finally, the boy's feet and hands began to twitch. His mouth opened and closed like a fish. His eyes gradually opened. Cheng Ling hissed a sigh of relief. He met the boy's gaze, and immediately knew something had changed.

He met the gaze of an ordinary twelve-year-old. That clairvoyant depth was gone.

Cheng Ling understood instantly: the wonder kid was no more.

* *Jiankang* was the old name for Nanjing, a cultural centre, and the capital of many Chinese dynasties. The Qinhuai River runs through the pleasure section of Nanjing. The translation is from the Foreign Languages Press' 1964 version.

"Christ! Feng Wei-min is a real bastard! We treat him like a friend, and he goes behind our back and kidnaps the boy. Do you know how much we've lost? Several hundred thousand! My God!"

Zhou Pei was waving his newspaper. He was screaming. Cheng Ling, his brother, Zhang Shi-jia, and Little Dong were sunk into chairs around him, watching as he paced up and down, cursing to himself. The stock had turned around as soon as they had dumped it, as if it was waiting for them to sell. Zhou Pei read the headlines: the market was bullish, everyone was buying in. They were the only ones who had, idiotically, got out. Zhou Pei was furious.

"What a chance! Completely ruined by Feng Wei-min. If the boy hadn't disappeared, there was no way we would have sold. Look at us now; all we can do is sit around and watch everybody else get rich. Christ!"

"Why bring it up?" Cheng Ling asked. "At least we didn't lose anything. The problem now is that the boy is no longer clairvoyant, so he can't even win at Gobang."

They all calmed down. That morning, Cheng Ling and his brother had gone to see the boy. The boy had already recovered; he didn't remember what had happened the previous night. Cheng Ling's brother played four games of Gobang with him. The prodigy won only once. The kid was a little sad. Cheng Ling was even sadder. Zhang Shi-jia, when he heard that the boy had lost his magic

for good, got even more worried. There would be problems with Friday's match. And he would have to give up his plan to use the boy to get rich. Everybody was thoroughly depressed.

Zhang Shi-jia cleared his throat, and attempted to break the silence.

"It doesn't matter so much to you guys. I'm the one who's really up a creek. If the kid can't go on on Friday, *Wonder Kid's* reputation will go down the drain. If only I knew things would turn out like this, I wouldn't have spent so much money on advertising. Now, everyone out there is eagerly anticipating the squaring off of the Big Chess Master and the Little Chess Master. How could I know that something would snap in the boy? I'm finished."

Zhang Shi-jia looked sad. Cheng Ling felt bad about it. But who could have predicted the boy would lose his power? Cheng Ling didn't understand why it had happened. Feng Wei-min shouldn't have asked him those questions yesterday. Judging from the terrified look on the boy's face, he had probably seen something. Could it be that he didn't want to face a future he could see? Maybe he had lost his senses for a moment, and fantasized something. Didn't they say that there was a fine line between genius and madness? The boy's brain was different from that of the average person's. Maybe it was easier for him to hallucinate? No matter how he tried, Cheng Ling couldn't explain it to himself.

Zhang Shi-jia hung his head in defeat.

"Actually, we can still put the boy on television," Cheng Ling's brother suddenly said. "All he has to do is play those three games of *xiangqi*; there's no need for him to do anything else."

"The kid has already lost it. You think he can still beat

Professor Liu?"

"Now, of course, he'd lose. But last week, while he still had his power, we predicted and analyzed the moves the professor should make. If Professor Liu plays according to plan, then Professor Liu is going to lose!"

"Forget it," Zhou Pei shook his head unbelievably. "The kid couldn't even predict his own moves. I don't believe he could guess someone else's chess moves a week before they take place. It's just one big act."

"How do you know he didn't know he'd lose his power?" Cheng Ling's brother asked. "Maybe he foresaw all of this. Maybe he knew his fate a long time ago, but just didn't bother to tell anyone else. You say it's an act. He predicted the stock was going to rise. Wasn't he right? You sold it when your own faith wavered. Who are you going to blame?"

This effectively silenced Zhou Pei. Cheng Ling pondered on his brother's theory; he felt that there might be something to it. The boy didn't really have to do anything by himself. As long as he played the moves his brother had recorded, the professor would still lose. But could the boy really predict the future? And if he made a mistake in his predictions, then what? Professor Liu would be sure to whip the pants off him. Cheng Ling looked at Zhang Shi-jia.

"Shi-jia, what do you think?"

Chang mulled it over.

"Actually, it's a way out. We ought to give it a try. If the kid didn't get it right, and he loses to Professor Liu, then there's nothing we can do anyway. We'll just have to hope that he doesn't lose too badly, too easily."

"Our original plan was to have the kid follow the script, anyway," Cheng Ling's brother said. "Whether or not he's below form doesn't matter. The only problem

is that the kid will only be able to play these three games of *xiangqi*. Afterwards, he won't be able to play again."

Zhang Shi-jia said that it didn't matter. As long as he could meet Friday's challenge, as long as he didn't reveal his bluff, there was no problem. The company wouldn't do anything to promote him, and, in a month, no one would remember him. Chang laughed.

"We've had more than our share of wonder kids on the show. We've had baby singers, baby athletes, baby musicians, baby authors...where are they all now? If I may be permitted to put it frankly, they never had any future in the first place. Our audience likes to see little squirts on stage, so we cater to their taste. If a kid can sing a couple of songs, we pronounce him a singer. If he can write a couple of lines about clouds and birds, we dub him an author. Let the audience watch to their heart's content. After all, just because you're a big splash when you're young doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be so great later on. That's the first thing everyone should have realized."

"I should never have suggested it to you," Cheng Ling said. "When you promote a prodigy, you destroy him."

"How can you blame me? Every child is a great potential genius. What can I do? I just happen to make my living in television. Educating the next generation is none of my business." Zhang Shi-jia saw that Cheng Ling was less than delighted with him, and hastened to add, "Let's do it this way, okay? I'll find a way for the company to give the kid a scholarship as a reward for the match. That way, he won't lose out, either."

Nobody had anything to say. Zhou Pei was still sobbing about the money they had "lost" in the market. Little Dong was secretly laughing at him. Cheng Ling's old stomach ailment was acting up again. He and his brother

went home. He lay on his bed all afternoon. He couldn't get the image of that frail kid out of his mind. Suddenly, he realized that no one had really cared about the boy. Zhang Shi-jia was only worried about *Wonder Kids*. Zhou Pei just wanted to get rich. Little Dong was the man without any opinions at all. Feng Wei-min's sole concern was the historical trend. Even Cheng Ling and his brother had only a superficial concern for him. No wonder he wasn't enthusiastic about anything. Maybe he had seen through the people trying to exploit him a long time ago. He had lost his special powers but at least from now on, he wouldn't be used by others. It was a blessing in disguise.

Cheng Ling couldn't get to sleep. He found some rolled-up canvas tucked away in a cover, and tacked it onto a frame. He wanted to paint something. When he turned to the canvas, though, he hesitated. He made a decision, and sketched in a few lines with his charcoal pencil: the frail wonder kid, kneeling in the centre of the canvas. The boy was surrounded by empty spaces. Cheng Ling clutched his pencil tightly, and filled in his sketch. He would never understand why Lautrec's line was so vivid; the silhouette — like a paper cutting, a few strokes — a shivering, pulsating of life. He would never be able to draw such a powerful line. Cheng Ling put down his charcoal; he felt hopeless, almost nauseous. He said to himself: Don't drive yourself into a corner. Admit you're a second-rate artist. You're your only real enemy. You've got to protect yourself. Just do your best. That's all there is to it.

He sat on the edge of his bed, listening to the strains of music drifting up the garbage trucks on the street. The boy was coiled up peacefully on the canvas. He didn't seem to be in the least concerned with the surrounding

space. It wasn't that the boy was without feeling, it was just that he wasn't concerned about things. You don't have to fill in this empty space, Cheng Ling said to himself. Everything is okay. The boy must surely know how to protect himself, there's no need to worry about him. Just do your best. That's all there is to it. Cheng Ling looked at the boy on the canvas, who looked back at him. Cheng Ling picked up his brush, and slowly coloured him in.

That night, Feng Wei-min came over. He was all apologies with regard to the previous night's incident. He hadn't imagined the boy would react so violently. Cheng Ling said it wasn't his fault. The boy might have known all along that he was slated for this. Cheng Ling said the boy could still go on television. This made Feng feel a lot better. He caught sight of Cheng Ling's painting, and scrutinized it, but didn't say anything. Cheng Ling thought the least Feng could do was to criticize it a bit. He was a little disappointed. Feng changed the subject; he mentioned that he had recently put together a string of deals, and he was thinking of going to Europe.

"Those Germans don't think badly of us. We used to have to go through the Japanese to sign agreements with them. Now, suddenly, they want to do business with us directly. So we can dispense with the Japanese middleman's cut. That way we double our take! Business is very interesting. When you see the cash rolling in, all your troubles and hardships immediately roll away. When I used to teach, I never dreamed I'd have a chance to travel to Europe. Business certainly is interesting."

Feng Wei-min was quite a character. Cheng Ling laughed.

"Are you going to take your wife along?"

"Maybe. It depends on whether or not I can get a

guaranteed contract. If I'm not sure I'll get the money, spending a little more won't matter."

"So why bother about the historical trend? Isn't it true that you're growing ever more successful?"

"It's not so easy." Feng Wei-min sunk into silence; he had nothing more to offer. Finally, he asked, "Have I ever told you about Mr Fang? I went to see him before he retired..."

"You told me at Gao Yue-bai's. You were so drunk you don't remember."

"I've always respected Mr Fang. He's made of strong stuff. We're no match for him."

"What can you do? You can't be everything."

Feng Wei-min looked at his watch.

"You're right. I'm going back. I really disgraced myself over this *Wonder Kid* business. They probably all hate me. You'll explain things to them, won't you?"

After Feng left, Cheng Ling and his brother carefully reviewed the three games the kid had precharted. The more Cheng Ling looked at the moves, the more he felt the boy had been a genius. His brother said that the boy would have to memorize it all by the day after tomorrow. If he made a mistake, he'd be finished, they would just have to sit back and watch him lose. Cheng Ling thought that might be a problem, too. Fortunately, children are quick to memorize things. If he worked hard at it the whole of tomorrow, he should be able to get it down. Pre-ordained chess games were unusual. Several hardcover books were piled on his brother's bookcase. Cheng Ling had never looked at them before. He randomly picked out a book on thermodynamics. It was full of strange mathematical symbols and formulas. His brother put the book back.

"Nothing interesting. Just next semester's text."

Cheng Ling lit a cigarette. His brother was much more learned than he was. Who knew what he could become? When their father was alive, he used to make them memorize Tang Poetry, and excerpts from *Gu Wen Guan Zhi**. His brother would always get them down first. Cheng Ling remembered when they lived in Shindian. Every morning he and his brother would memorize lessons; every afternoon, they'd be off to Green Lake to play. In those days, his brother still didn't know how to swim. He'd just stroll along the shore and pick up stones. One time, they rowed out to the deepest part of the lake, below the cliffs, and he forced his brother to jump in. He told him that after he was in the water he would naturally learn how to swim. "Put your troops in a position of no escape, and they will fight for their lives, and win." Cheng Ling didn't know where he had learned that theory, but he used his brother as a guinea pig. His brother was terrified; he started to cry; he begged Cheng Ling for mercy. Cheng Ling threw him in anyway. Fortunately, there were other boats around them. His brother swallowed a couple of mouthfuls of water, then he was saved. Cheng Ling warned him not to tell anyone when they got home. His brother didn't squeal. His brother was incapable of bearing a grudge. Cheng Ling had put him through hell several times, but that never dimmed his devotion for his elder brother. Thinking about it now, Cheng Ling was terribly ashamed. At least he'd known enough to look out after him. Each time, on their way home from swimming, if Cheng Ling had a nickel, he'd go and buy some fishball soup, five balls to a bowl. He'd give his brother one fishball, and tell him to have a few sips of soup. His brother would be delighted, and he'd do whatever Cheng Ling wanted him to. They would sit on the boiling hot dyke, and watch the people crossing

the suspension bridge one by one, swaying, as if they were walking in the sky.

"Give me a cigarette," his brother lit his own cigarette with Cheng Ling's lighted one. "Are you sorry the kid lost his powers?"

"Not at all. His below-normal is everyone else's normal. The only difference now is that he won't be used by anyone anymore. I'm not sorry at all."

"That's how I feel too," his brother said. "His natural ability was unnatural. Things which are contrary to the laws of nature don't last. In thermodynamics there's a law governing entropy: the lower the entropy, the greater the order, and vice-versa. All systems tend to go to the highest entropy. So ordering is an unnatural act. If you put an air-conditioner on the inside, the air temperature will go down till it becomes colder than is natural. Then, in order to maintain this unnatural state, you're forced to use up electricity. However, if you decrease the entropy here, the entropy somewhere else will rise. In the final analysis, entropy is still increasing. Man invents things to put the world in order, but public hazards and environmental pollution problems increase. Why? Because when you order some part, some other part inevitably tends to turn chaotic. The more energy you expend, the higher the entropy. That's merely the second law of thermodynamics. Eventually, the entropy in the universe will increase to an upper limit, and chaos will also be at a limit. Everything will converge into chaos, and nothing will change anymore. This is what is known as the Apocalypse. As we head towards it, things with a low entropy find it increasingly difficult to survive. The wonder kid was extraordinary; he must have been at a very low entropy. He couldn't have lasted for long."

Cheng Ling ground out his cigarette.

"Let's go to my room. I'll show you my latest work."

At first glance, his brother knew it was the boy.

"Not bad! You've captured his essence. Why is it all blank around him?"

"You don't like it? I couldn't think of anything else to add."

"You could paint him and the professor playing chess."

"Buzz off!" Cheng Ling was furious. "Isn't just the kid okay?"

His brother shrugged his shoulders.

"If you don't want to paint him, don't. I'm not going to say anything. Hey, what about your 'Blue Street Lamps'? I prefer your 'Blue Street Lamps'."

"You don't know anything."

"First you ask me in, then you forbid criticism. What a tyrant!"

His brother went back to his room to listen to records. Cheng Ling took a long look at the kid he had painted. The more he looked, the less satisfied he was. He felt like ripping it up. It was all he could do to restrain himself. Don't drive yourself into a corner. Just do your best. That's all there is to it. You can't run away from yourself forever. The Beatles were singing 'Nowhere Man'. Cheng Ling conquered his impulse to rip up everything, and continued to paint. "Everything will be okay," he said out loud, "as long as you're willing to go on painting. Everything will be okay. You've got to do your best, you must do your best, and everything will be okay. Don't worry about the kid. Don't worry about anyone. Everything is okay. As long as you're willing to go on painting, everything is okay. As long as you're willing to paint."

15

Zhang Shi-jia was holding the camera and asking everyone to line up. Company President Jin and Assistant Vice-President Guo were in the middle; Professor Liu and Ding Yu-mei were to the right; Old Gong, Cheng Ling, and his brother to the left. Zhang wanted the boy to stand in front of President Jin. Cheng Ling didn't feel like having his picture taken. He walked over and took the camera.

"Let me take it, Shi-jia."

Zhang pushed him away.

"Get back there. I've got it."

"I'm not the star. I'll take it."

"Of course you're a star. If it weren't for you, how could we have pulled this off? Stop tugging, Fat Cheng, everyone's waiting for you."

Cheng Ling had no choice but to go back. Zhang took a couple of pictures, then turned the camera over to Cheng Ling. When they had finished, President Jin shook hands all around, excused himself, and left with Assistant Vice-President Guo. Zhang Shi-jia was thrilled.

"What an occasion. Our president actually coming down to get his picture taken. He's taking this chess challenge very seriously. First, I'd like to thank the professor and our young wonder kid for taking part in this contest. And of course I'd like to thank the Cheng brothers for their assistance. You'll all be our guests for lunch now. Afterwards, we'll start the match."

The professor was confused.

"I thought we were doing it live."

"*Wonder Kids* is only a half-hour show," Zhang explained. "We couldn't fit it all in. So you'll play in the afternoon, then we'll edit it before we put it on. Sorry to be so arbitrary."

Professor Liu said he didn't care either way. Cheng Ling wanted to go downstairs and eat in the cafeteria. Old Gong said they had already prepared a conference room upstairs for lunch; they were going to send the food up. Ting Yu-mei wrinkled her nose at him.

"We're all basking in the kid's light. If it weren't for him, the company wouldn't be treating us."

"That's not true," Zhang quickly put in. "Fat Cheng has helped us a lot. We should have thanked him before. Buying a lunch is the least we can do."

They all went to the conference room to be seated. Six western meals had been prepared for them. Cheng Ling cut into his fish-steak. He saw that the kid was staring at his plate, not knowing how to begin. Ding Yu-mei was seated next to him. She instructed him on how to use a fork and knife. Professor Liu laughed.

"Is this your first experience with western food, my young friend?"

The boy timidly nodded his head. The professor picked up a fork and pointed to himself.

"My friend, ten or fifteen years ago I was just like you: Unable to eat western food. In fact, I was in worse shape than you are, because I had already graduated college, but I still had never eaten western food. Right before I was going to take the boat abroad, several friends took me out to a waterside restaurant in Keelung for some western fare. You're a lot luckier than I was."

Zhang Shi-jia spat out a fish bone.

"You left the country by boat, Professor?" he asked.

"That was the old-fashioned way."

"She was a freighter of the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company, a displacement of only four thousand tons. At top speed, it took a month to reach New York. Youngsters now are really lucky: Hop on a plane, and you can be wherever you want to be within twenty-four hours. Still, each way has its advantages: We had a great time on that boat."

"Could you tell us about your experience as a student abroad?"

"Modesty forbids me." The professor waved off his request. "I can't stand talking about myself. Well, I could tell you the story about the Old Man of Phoenix. If everyone is interested..."

Zhang Shi-jia and Cheng Ling's brother clapped. Ding Yu-mei widened her eyes. Professor Liu looked quite smug. He wiped his mouth with a napkin, and began.

"That summer, I was working in New York. I was working at a restaurant during the afternoons and evenings. In the mornings, I played basketball. I was good buddies with several well-known players then, like Chen Xu-lie. I don't mean to brag, but I was hardier and better conditioned than he. He himself said that if he'd known me the year before in Taipei, he would have recruited me for his Cannon team. One morning we were playing a game of half-court basketball with some blacks. I wasn't too careful going up for the ball, and I injured my thigh. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but that night, when I turned over in bed, it hurt so much that I cried out. I couldn't move one of my legs. My room-mates sent me to the hospital. They said a blood vessel had burst under my skin; I had to stay there for four days. There was nothing so extraordinary about that. What was

extraordinary was the old man I met in the hospital.

"I had a semi-private room. The first day, I had it all to myself. The hospital meals weren't very good, but the nurses were very pretty. I got along especially well with a certain young Puerto Rican nurse. Puerto Rican men, for the most part, are quite ugly. It's strange. The women are all really good-looking — especially the mulatto women. Dark and wild, quite a combination."

Professor Liu looked over at Ding Yu-mei. He wasn't prepared to continue. Cheng Ling's brother urged him on.

"And then?"

"That was Day One. The following day, I awoke to find the other bed occupied by a wretched old man, who must have been moved in during the night. I'm an easy-going fellow and I can get along with anyone. But this old geezer had a terrible temper. As soon as I woke up, he was fighting with the nurses. I tried to calm him as best I could. This old fellow had a ruptured blood vessel, too. One of his legs was completely paralyzed, and he couldn't move. We commiserated with each other. He was much older than I, but the more we talked, the more we found in common. The old man loved watching baseball; I am a big fan, too. The old man liked playing the horses; I can hardly be called a novice. We talked about ball and horses, and time passed quickly.

"The nurses at the hospital couldn't stand the old man; they felt he made too many demands on them. Only that Puerto Rican nurse, for my sake, patiently took care of him. I was in the hospital for three days, and during that time, not even one person came to see the old man. I gathered that he was a poor Jew from Queens. He'd worked hard all his life, and managed to save enough money for his funeral. He was a widower. One morning, he fell sick on the sidewalk and was sent by the police

to the hospital. New York is full of these old people; they would wander up and down the streets, or die of hunger alone in some apartment. Nobody even comes to pick up the corpse. It's a crying shame.

"On the fourth day, I was getting ready to leave. The old man was usually so gruff, but when he saw that I was going, he actually shed a few tears. He shook my hand. 'You'll come to see me often?' he said. In those days, I hadn't a cent to my name. I had a large hospital bill. I had many outstanding debts. I said I'd come back, but I didn't really figure I would ever see him again. After I checked out, I was busy trying to make up the lost hours of work. When I thought about it, though, I really felt sorry for the old man. It didn't matter to me one way or the other whether I went to see him or not. Still if I didn't go at least once, it might have reflected badly on all Chinese. Also, that Puerto Rican nurse had suggested that I come back and visit her. So, a few days later, I went back to the hospital to see the old man, and I took along a couple of racing forms. I still remember how surprised and moved the old guy was to see me. He probably thought that the Chinese were the most reliable and sentimental people in the world. Actually, if it hadn't been for that Puerto Rican girl, I'd never have gone back there at all. Ha, ha!"

Professor Liu paused to drink some soda.

The professor might like to brag, Cheng Ling thought, but at least he was honest.

"Not long afterwards, I went back to school, and my friendship with the Puerto Rican girl ended. I had seen the old man maybe five or six times. I figured I'd done all that could be expected of me. The last time I went to see him before school started again, he was almost completely recovered. I told him I was going back to the

university, and left him my address. He said he would be out of the hospital in a little while. We wished each other good luck, and this story ought to have concluded here.”

Ding Yu-mei was disappointed.

“Is that all? How boring!”

Professor Liu laughed loudly.

“There’s more, of course. Three months later, I suddenly got a letter from the old man postmarked Phoenix, Arizona. He opened by thanking me very sincerely for looking out for him during his convalescence. He said some very nice things about the Chinese. Then he asked me if I could come to visit him during Christmas. He had enclosed a first-class plane ticket. I had been concerned about not having anywhere to go during winter break, and I was pretty curious about what the old man was doing in the central United States, so I wrote back immediately, accepting his invitation.

“When I boarded the plane, who did I bump into but that Puerto Rican nurse! So the old man had invited both of us! During the flight, we tried to guess what the old man’s racket was. Of course, we were both in the dark; we hadn’t a clue. When we got to Phoenix, we followed the instructions in our letters, and went to a far-off corner of the airport. Guess what we found? The old man had a private parking lot there! The swankiest Rolls Royce you can imagine, complete with a uniformed chauffeur, was waiting for us.”

“This story is beginning to sound more and more familiar,” Cheng Ling’s brother said. “You didn’t make this one up, did you, Professor?”

“I swear it’s the truth. This isn’t the kind of story you think it is: poor girl meets rich man.... The old man was, of course, loaded. He lived in the desert, about thirty

miles out of town. One found it hard to believe that anyone was willing to live there. But he had insisted on the desert, and built a glass-dome house there. The house was rooted by a slab of marble. All the rooms were below the marble. At the centre of the marble surface was a swimming pool. The place had a controlled temperature. It was twenty or thirty degrees cooler than the desert. There was nothing above the marble aside from that swimming pool, not even a potted plant. All the rooms had marble walls. There were no rugs. There wasn't any antique furniture. You might say there wasn't anything at all. It was like a marble exhibition hall. But all the rooms were full of buttons and intercoms. You could communicate between any two rooms by means of a closed circuit TV. In the centre of the living room was a private radio station, from which you could talk to any place in America. He had every 007 gadget there was.

"It turned out that he was an insurance magnate. He controlled dozens of insurance companies and banks. You can't imagine how rich he was. Every day, someone came in by private helicopter to confer with him. The old man directed his worldwide empire from out there in the desert."

"Good grief!" Zhang Shi-jia was dumbfounded. "So there are really people as rich as that!"

"But the old man said he couldn't be considered particularly wealthy. He figured that there were at least fifty people in America who were richer than he was, so he couldn't be considered very rich."

"The old man said he was self-made. When he was young he had worked as a real-estate broker, then as a car mechanic. Finally he got into the banking world, and, after fooling around for forty years, he eventually made it to his present position. When we met, he had come to

New York for a conference. Afterwards, he was walking along the street when he felt a cramp in his foot, and he ended up in the hospital. For some reasons, he didn't tell any of his subordinates. He has three daughters — he didn't tell them, either. He sure was tough.

"We spent a week with him and listened to him expound all the subtleties of business. I was fascinated. The old man had developed his own theory of human nature. According to him, man had become a dirty, foul beast. One night, he took us out to some fancy restaurant in Phoenix. The place was packed, and the hostess asked us to wait in the bar. We waited for half an hour. The old man felt slighted so he decided to give them a little show. He bowed elegantly to the Puerto Rican girl, and, pressing her close to him, proceeded to dance a high-stepping tango with her. He drew a large audience. In less than five minutes, the *maitre-de* had come over to the bar, and invited us in to be seated.

"This left a deep impression on me. Throughout this whole episode, the old man hadn't divulged his name. If he had said who he was, he would have received preferential treatment. But all he had done was dance a tango to draw attention, and the restaurant staff knew he was a self-confident big-shot whom they had better not insult. On the way home, the old man told me that the only way to get to the top was through wheeling and dealing."

Professor Liu paused again for some soda.

"And then?" Ding Yu-mei asked.

Zhang Shi-jia motioned to Old Gong. Old Gong left.

"The professor's story is most interesting," Zhang said.

"But time is getting short. Let's go over to the set."

Ding Yu-mei was impatient.

"Don't interrupt! And then?"

"And then, our vacation ended, and the Puerto Rican

girl and I flew back to New York. Before we left, the old man gave her a lot of money. He didn't give me a cent. I was really disappointed." Professor Liu grimaced. "But he told me that, as I had lived with him for a week, if I were smart enough, I should have learned a lot during that time. When I left, I thought about what he had said, and I decided he was right. The old man knew I was studying for my Ph.D. He used to laugh at my stupidity. He said he had three daughters. One was a doctor, one a biology Ph.D. The old man thought they were both imbeciles. His youngest was a bar hostess in Los Angeles. The old man said she was the smartest. I told him that we Chinese have a saying: 'Books are like gold; study hard and you can get anything you want'. The old man agreed, a Ph.D. could land a steady job. But he said he could hire a dozen Ph.D.'s to work for him anytime he wanted. Brains were the cheapest commodity in the world."

Cheng Ling latched onto the last line.

"Here we go again with the 'A Degree is Useless' theory. I've heard enough of it."

"Why didn't you finish your degree, then?" his brother asked Professor Liu. "Why didn't you follow the old man's example, and start up a business in America?"

Professor Liu laughed and stood up.

"I did learn something from him. That's why I came back home as soon as I finished my degree. I'm not a fool; I'd never take on any sophisticated research project again. But I wouldn't want to be like him, either. If you had been to his glass house, you'd know how lonely he was. He wasn't dumb — he wasn't kidding himself. That's why, when he got sick, he preferred to fool about with people like me, and didn't tell his daughters or his staff. If there is a price to everything, he wouldn't know what

not to buy."

Zhang Shi-jia wanted to cut in again. Ding Yu-mei beat him to it.

"And then? Did you keep in touch with him?"

Professor Liu shook his head.

"There was no need to. I know how to live. I will make money to buy freedom, not loneliness. I want to live happily. I still know where he is, of course. If you pass through Phoenix, you might still be able to see his glass-dome house outside the town. I told him he ought to call his house the Phoenix Terraces, I even made a translation of two lines of a *Li Bai* poem for him:

'Here in the Phoenix Terraces
the phoenix birds once roamed.
Now the birds are gone, and
the terrace is empty,
but the river wanders freely on.'

He said he was going to engrave them on copper sign, and hang it over his front door."

Zhang Shi-jia made another plea, "Excuse me please, but can we go down now?"

"Okay, let's go," the professor said. "That was the conclusion of 'The Millionaire of Phoenix'. Ha, ha."

The studio lights were already arranged. Old Gong and Zhang Shi-jia bustled about. Professor Liu and the boy sat facing each other over the chess board. Cheng Ling pulled his brother over to a corner. His brother took out the sheet with the moves on it from his breast pocket.

"This is the difference between defeat and victory," Cheng Ling said. "I hope the kid remembers it all."

"We rehearsed all yesterday. He ought to have it down."

Ding Yu-mei stood in front of a couple of cameras, reading a little introduction. Zhang Shi-jia wasn't satisfied. He waved his hands, and told her to do it again. Ding Yu-mei pursed her lips, and turned away from the lights. The boy stared at her mutely. They readjusted the lights. Everything was set. Ding Yu-mei recited her lines again. The cameras turned to Professor Liu and the boy. Cheng Ling's brother was taut with excitement.

"There they go!"

Professor Liu moved first: Pawn three up one. Cheng Ling's brother nudged him. Cheng Ling was secretly delighted. It was turning out just as the boy had predicted. The boy moved his horse. Professor Liu furrowed his brows. Evidently, he hadn't figured the boy would respond like that.

"The professor should move his cannon now."

Professor Liu thought for a while, then moved his cannon over to the centre. Cheng Ling's brother nodded. All was going as expected. The boy was moving quickly. Professor Liu was taking his time. It might have been because the mercury lights were too hot, or maybe because he was nervous, but by the time they were just halfway through, Professor Liu's face was covered with sweat. When the professor lined up his two fortresses, Cheng Ling's brother nudged him again.

"That's his mistake. It's all here."

Then, the professor lost a horse. The two sides continued exchanging pieces. On the attack, the professor was left with one cannon, and two pawns that had crossed the river. The boy had a horse, a pawn, and a cannon; both sides had their elephants and advisors. Professor Liu was at a disadvantage. The boy's lone pawn made it to the professor's tent. Professor Liu gamely defended his corner. His general was trapped. Cheng Ling calculated

the time for the first game: barely twelve minutes.

Zhang Shi-jia called for a rest. Old Gong had some orange juice sent up. Professor Liu drank his down in one gulp. Cheng Ling felt a bit of a chill; watching the professor march towards inevitable defeat, moving towards the inevitable slaughter. His brother took out the sheet of moves, and whispered to him, "The second game is even more clever. The professor is only down by a pawn and an elephant. He'll take this loss even harder, since he will be slowly but surely crushed."

"So he's going to lose in the endgame again?"

His brother nodded. Suddenly, Cheng Ling felt something was wrong. If the boy won the first two, and it was two out of three, then he wouldn't have to play a third game. If the boy knew this, then why did he predict three games? Now whose oversight was this? Could it be that the boy was so muddle-headed as to predict three games of chess?"

Cheng Ling was about to talk it over with his brother, when Zhang popped out of the booth, and told everyone to start again. The boy moved first: Elephant up. Cheng Ling's brother was startled.

"What happened?! He moved his elephant. He should have moved his cannon up. How could he have gotten the first move wrong?"

Cheng Ling was startled, too. He grabbed his brother's sheet. It clearly stated "Cannon up". Why wasn't the boy moving according to the script?

The professor was mystified, too. He pondered over his move for a long time, then advanced his horse. Cheng Ling looked down at the sheet. Okay. At least Professor Liu was playing according to plan. But what was the boy up to? The boy hung down his head. It didn't seem as if he was thinking anymore. He thrust forward his centre

pawn. Another new move. Professor Liu was even more perplexed. He couldn't decide how to respond. Finally, he moved his elephant up. It seemed like the professor was doing his best to stick to the plan. Evidently, the boy had predicted accurately. It was the prodigy himself who was on the wrong track. Why was he going on with it on his own? Cheng Ling clenched the sheet, and watched as the boy made his random moves.

Eventually, the professor gave up moving according to the sheet, and responded a bit more rationally. Offstage, Cheng Ling and his brother were stunned. The boy didn't look at them. He just lowered his head and contented himself with moving blindly. The professor captured the boy's centre pawn, and sent his own across the river. The boy was playing in a bad way; he wasn't playing at all coherently. Cheng Ling knew the boy couldn't really play *xiangqi*. He was asking for trouble. The professor, naturally, didn't let up in the least. He marched forward; cannon, horse, and tank on the attack. In no time at all, the boy had lost his entire army. All he had left was his general, which was easily captured by the professor.

Zhang Shi-jia called another break. Professor Liu stood up and stretched. He was smiling. The boy was expressionless, as if the loss hadn't had any effect on him whatsoever. Cheng Ling and his brother felt fearful. They pulled the boy over behind a screen. Cheng Ling's brother asked him why he hadn't played according to the sheet. The boy lowered his head and said nothing. Cheng Ling's brother got even more frantic. He asked him if it was because he still hadn't memorized the moves, or was he too nervous to remember them? The boy remained silent. Zhang Shi-jia came over.

"What happened? Why did the kid lose the second game?"

Cheng Ling's brother explained that he hadn't played according to the plan. Zhang got very nervous. His voice moved to a higher pitch. Cheng Ling held him back. Zhang said that the boy absolutely must win the third game — so he had better follow the plan. Cheng Ling said he was afraid that the plan was already useless. The boy had already gone against his own predictions, who knew if they had any validity to them anymore? Zhang paced up and down, wringing his hands. Old Gong called him over. He had to go. The boy slowly lifted up his head, and spoke, softly:

"I can play myself."

Startled, Cheng Ling looked at him. For a split second, he thought that he saw that unfathomable look flash in the boy's eyes. Cheng Ling looked again; the gaze had focused, become dull and uninspired. Cheng Ling didn't know what to say. He was elated. Maybe he was still a wonder kid? Maybe he had never lost his power? Maybe he could turn his clairvoyance on and off? Cheng Ling wanted to ask the boy straightaway, but Zhang Shi-jia came over and hustled him off to the board.

"Let's get on with the match." Zhang Shi-jia was downcast. "No matter what, this is the last game. Now keep to the plan. If you're going to lose, there's nothing we can do, anyway."

The boy silently followed Zhang to the centre of the mercury lights. Professor Liu was telling Ding Yu-mei a joke. Ding Yu-mei covered her mouth, but couldn't suppress a giggle. Cheng Ling noticed that Miss Wang of the news desk had appeared, too. Zhang pulled her over and whispered something in her ear. Professor Liu and the boy sat down again at the board. The third game commenced.

Professor Liu moved his cannon up. The boy

responded with his horse. Cheng Ling and his brother checked the sheet; they weren't the moves they had recorded. Obviously, the boy had decided to play by himself, and had completely abandoned their battle plan. Cheng Ling couldn't help admiring the boy's courage. He understood that the boy was taking on quite a challenge. He didn't want to rely on his clairvoyant powers, he wanted to play chess by himself! A new respect for the boy welled up in Cheng Ling, but he was also worried for him. Could he win? Cheng Ling couldn't help breaking out in cold sweat.

They were playing more and more slowly. Professor Liu had started dabbing at his sweat again. The boy started at the board, his big head quietly composed. They continued to match move for move. Then they started to trade off. They each lost a horse and a cannon, but the overall balance still hadn't changed. The boy moved his other horse over. He was putting pressure on Professor Liu, pushing for a trade with his tank. The professor thought about it for a while, then decided to exchange. The game was down to Professor Liu's other tank, a horse, and a cannon, versus the boy's two tanks.

"The boy is in trouble," Cheng Ling's brother whispered. "The professor's horse and cannon are a tough combination. He might not be able to deal with them."

Cheng Ling, too, figured the boy was at a disadvantage. The professor pressed in for the kill. The boy's two tanks seemed helpless. They had gotten rid of Professor Liu's pawns across the river, but they couldn't deal with the combined attack of his tank, horse, and cannon. A smile floated across Professor Liu's face. Cheng Ling was nervous. He looked at the boy. He was staring at the board, but he didn't seem at all nervous. Professor Liu continued to thrust forward. The boy used his two tanks

to invite the professor to trade tanks. The professor, however, withdrew. Suddenly, his horse fell into a trap which he couldn't wriggle out of. Professor Liu's face hardened. Finally, he exchanged the horse for the boy's elephant. The threat to the boy's general was reduced. He moved up his twin tanks. He invited a tank exchange again. This time, the professor didn't have any choice. After the exchange, it was Professor Liu's cannon versus the boy's tank. The boy's two pawns crossed the river. Professor Liu wanted to fight it out, but he really didn't have any way of preventing them from getting to his ministers and rupturing his last line of defence.

"The kid's won!" Cheng Ling's brother happily shouted.

On the other side, Zhang Shi-jia, Ding Yu-mei, Miss Wang, and Old Gong were also clapping. Professor Liu shook his head, and clasped the boy's hand.

"You win. Let me be the first to congratulate you."

Everyone surrounded the boy. He lowered his head; he didn't seem so delighted. Zhang asked them to give him room. Ding Yu-mei faced the cameras and announced that the little wonder kid was the winner of the match. Then she asked Professor Liu to say a few words. The professor analyzed all three games, pointing out how he had carelessly lost. Then he put in a few good words for the boy. Everyone clapped again. The mercury lights were turned off. The audience all came up on stage. Several employees of the station came over to get a look at the boy, too. Cheng Ling was squeezed out by the crowd. Professor Liu was squeezed out, too. He saw Cheng Ling and laughed grimly.

"You've got yourself quite a disciple there. I never imagined he could catch me at my mistakes. That's not an easy thing to do. The kid is a real genius. He has quite

a future."

Cheng Ling said a few words to comfort the professor. The professor was stoic.

"Time marches on. I ought to retire from the chess arena. Behold, the future chess master!"

They all looked at the boy. He grinned, and laughed silently. Cheng Ling squeezed forward. He found the boy's gaze was still the gaze of a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy. Where had that deep look gone to? Could he still predict the future? Cheng Ling took a long look at the boy. The boy didn't notice him, he just laughed silently. Cheng Ling felt like grabbing the boy and asking him straight out. Zhang Shi-jia interrupted. He wanted to take the boy to see President Jin, then tape the news.

Zhang Shi-jia, Ding Yu-mei, and Miss Wang surrounded the boy as he left. As soon as he had gone, everyone else scattered. Professor Liu and the Cheng brothers were the only ones left. The professor was a bit disconsolate. When they went over to take the boy away, Zhang didn't even acknowledge him. Zhang Shi-jia was that kind of guy, Cheng Ling thought. When he wanted something from you, he was all sugar; as soon as he got what he wanted, he'd kick you away, he wouldn't even give you the time of day. They talked to Professor Liu for a while; still no sign of Zhang Shi-jia. Some workers came in to re-do the studio. They had to leave. Professor Liu said he was going back to his factory to check on things. He asked Cheng Ling and his brother if they wanted to catch a ride with him. Cheng Ling declined.

"Professor," his brother asked, "was that story you told us true?"

"Of course it was. He is the only person I've ever really admired." The professor thought for a while, then continued, "He also said, 'In the end, cockiness is all.

Whether it's a little cockiness or a lot is up to you. If you're serious about everything, you'll have to be very cocky. If you don't care, just be a little cocky. It's the same in the end."

"How about yourself?"

"Me? A little cockiness is enough." Professor Liu clapped his student's shoulders. "I'm just chatting with you off the record. Don't say anything about this to your classmates. Otherwise, they may get the idea that their professor is a little ... Well, it's all just one big game. Why take it so seriously?"

Professor Liu strode out. Cheng Ling's brother watched him go.

"He might like to brag, but he's really not a bad guy."

Cheng Ling nodded. He felt a bit sorry for the professor. He had arranged everything, and Professor Liu had taken the fall. To be as composed as he was took a lot of class. Perhaps the professor really did see it all as one big game. So he had sold him short. Cheng Ling thought about the match. He was completely at a loss. The boy had won! He hadn't relied on the sheet, he had been able to beat the professor at his own game. Maybe the boy had some great talents in chess after all? He didn't have to use his clairvoyant powers in the first place. Everything could have been coincidental. Cheng Ling thought of the boy's unfathomable gaze. He felt tired. His brother shoved him.

"Let's go home."

"I want to talk to the kid."

"What's the hurry? We'll go to his house tomorrow. Relax. Nobody's going to start looking for him. Everyone thinks he's just an ordinary kid."

"He's not an ordinary kid," Cheng Ling mumbled. "I

know he's not an ordinary kid."

"Of course he's not ordinary," his brother laughed. "He's a little chess master. Come on, let's go home. There's a Little League World Series game on tonight!"

16

Early the next morning, Cheng Ling woke his brother up and asked him if he wanted to go with him to the kid's house. His brother blinked, climbed out of bed, and lay down on the living-room sofa. Cheng Ling said he was hopeless, and went to change. His brother went to sleep again. Cheng Ling had no choice but to go alone. Last night's Little League game had gone on to three a.m. Cheng Ling and his mother had given up early, and gone off to sleep. His brother had stuck it out till the end. No wonder he couldn't get up. Mr Lin was outside the building, wiping his car windows. He waved cheerfully to Cheng Ling.

"Good morning to you. Did you watch the game last night?"

"Half of it. It was no contest. The Americans simply can't beat us."

"Did you see that American pitcher? What a hunk of meat. All his fat wobbled when he ran." Mr Lin imitated the American team's pitcher. He laughed and laughed. "Over two hundred pounds! What's the use? We still hit them out."

"Mr Lin, last night there was a great chess match on television also. Did you see it?"

"What chess match?" Mr Lin obviously had had no idea that it was on. Cheng Ling told him that *Wonder Kids* had put on a *xiangqi* contest and some little kid had beaten the ex-provincial champ. Mr Lin scratched his head.

"I've never watched that programme. Ask my kids, maybe they know." He went back to wiping his windows.

Cheng Ling was a little disappointed. Zhang Shi-jia had only made one mistake, but it was a fatal one. He had planned everything fine, but he had chosen the wrong week to air the match. Everyone had been watching the Series and would not bother to see some kid off the street play chess. Had he known that it was going to turn out like this, he would have told Zhang to delay the show by a week. Cheng Ling thought about it for a while, then decided it was okay as it was. Nobody had paid much attention to this week's show, so the boy was in no danger of catapulting to fame. Next week, Zhang Shi-jia would come up with another wonder kid, and the week after that there would be another one ... Nobody would bother him. And no one would be hatching any schemes to get rich off the boy. Everything would be alright.

Cheng Ling hopped on a bus. He saw the water buffalo in the field turn towards them, stretch out its neck, and behave as if it were going to bellow. Cheng Ling held his breath in anticipation, but the buffalo silently retreated into the field. Maybe it was a mute buffalo. Was there such a thing in this world as a mute buffalo? Cheng Ling had never heard of one. Were mute buffalos deaf and dumb? Maybe it really was a mute buffalo. Cheng Ling thought of the buffalo's dumb expression. He couldn't help laughing.

He found the boy's house, and pressed the doorbell. He waited for a long time. Finally, the door was opened by his mother who appeared to size him up in a very strange manner. Cheng Ling explained that he wanted to have a chat with the boy, and that he had been sent by the television station.

"Oh," she said. "Your Mr Zhang is here. Do you know

him?"

Cheng Ling hastened to say they were colleagues. Zhang Shi-jia was seated in the living room, chatting with the boy. When he saw Cheng Ling, he waved a red envelope he was holding.

"Fat Cheng, you've come just in time." Then, to the boy's mother: "On behalf of our company, I'd like to present this scholarship to our little chess master. There's ten thousand dollars in here. Please accept it on behalf of the little chess master."

The boy's mother was very happy. She told the boy to thank Mr Zhang. The boy stood up and bowed stiffly to him. Zhang said there was no need to thank him. He ought to thank Uncle Cheng. Cheng Ling said that the boy had won the scholarship himself. His mother went in to make tea.

"Too bad there was a baseball game on last night," Cheng Ling said to Zhang Shi-jia. "It doesn't look as if many people watched *Wonder Kids*."

Zhang Shi-jia sighed:

"Actually, I'd thought about that a long time ago. At first, I wanted to change the telecast date. But then, when the boy lost his power, I was afraid he wouldn't win, so I figured we'd let it slip by ... If I'd known he was assured of winning, I would have stepped up our publicity. He gave us quite a scare yesterday. I was really nervous when he lost the second game. Thank heavens he recovered in time."

Cheng Ling looked at the boy. He was still sitting silently, with his head down. Zhang Shi-jia continued.

"I also considered the fact that the kid could only play the three games he'd predicted. Promoting him afterwards wasn't going to help. If a chess master wants to get well known, he has to take on all comers. Do you think he

can still play chess?"

Cheng Ling was about to reply, when the boy raised his head and spoke.

"I can play myself."

Zhang Shi-jia peered at him, as if he hadn't understood what the boy was saying.

"What he means," Cheng Ling explained, "is that he doesn't have to rely on predicting the moves. He can play using his own chess ability."

Zhang Shi-jia laughed.

"What chess ability? Tell me, are you still clairvoyant?"

Cheng Ling caught the flash in the kid's eyes.

"I'm not clairvoyant," he said. "I want to play chess by myself."

He's lying again, thought Cheng Ling. Zhang Shi-jia stood up.

"Since you're not clairvoyant, we'll forget it. Fortunately, *Wonder Kids* is going to be discontinued after a few more weeks. I won't have to wear myself ragged unearthing prodigies anymore. Our president told me yesterday that he wants me to plan a new variety show. I've wanted to do one for a long time; songs, dances ... a lot easier to sell."

"So that's the way it is; no wonder you weren't nervous." Cheng Ling thought of something else. "And what about Ding Yu-mei? Will she be the hostess of the new show?"

"We'll have to see what the company says about that. Ding Yu-mei is pretty, but she is kind of stiff. I don't know if she'll be content, or competent, at this new job. Don't worry about her. I'll look after her. And I'd like to ask you to serve as our artistic director. We'll always be a team, right?"

Cheng Ling didn't say anything. He didn't want to

insult Zhang Shi-jia, but he couldn't help appealing for justice for Ding Yu-mei. He ought to go and comfort her. She probably still didn't know Zhang Shi-jia was going to dump her.

The boy's mother came in with some tea and cakes. Zhang Shi-jia excused himself. The boy's mother thanked him all the way to the door. Cheng Ling shook the boy's hand. This was the only time he had been alone with the boy. He looked deep into his eyes. The boy looked straight back at him. He didn't avoid his gaze at all. Perhaps the boy knew he was being completely up front.

"I won't bother you again," Cheng Ling said. "But I wish you would tell me: are you or are you not clairvoyant?"

The boy looked at him. Cheng Ling suddenly saw a laugh in that gaze. The boy is not a loner, Cheng Ling realized. He's not unconcerned with the world. There was a warmth and tenderness in his gaze.

"I don't need to be clairvoyant," the boy said. "I can play myself. Will you play with me?"

Cheng Ling relaxed. He thought of his painting. He could still paint. He hadn't given up. He said to himself: You don't have to worry about the boy. Everything's okay. As long as you do your best, you don't have to worry about anyone. Everything's okay.

The boy took out a board and two trays of pawns from under the tea table. His mother stood in the doorway, watching them play chess. She didn't interrupt him. Everything was quiet. Cheng Ling could hear the laughter of children playing out in the street, and the distant sounds of cars. He played a few games of Gobang with the boy. The boy only lost once. Cheng Ling picked up the pawns. The boy packed the board and trays away.

"I'm off," Cheng Ling said.

The boy grinned and laughed silently. For a moment, Cheng Ling felt he had caught sight of that twinkle in the boy's raven-black pupils — an unfathomable gleam.

Cheng Ling walked to the phone at the end of the lane. He put in a coin. Several rings, then Little Dong's voice.

"Cheng Ling here. Did anyone call me this morning?"

"Not a soul." Little Dong's voice drawled. Cheng Ling could imagine his expression. He was adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses, and yawning leisurely. "Nobody came in this morning. Even the girl didn't show up. After the Series, the whole country ought to get a day off. Oh yes, a Manager Mao called up yesterday afternoon. He said you said something about designing a mail-order catalogue. I said you would get in touch with him. Next time something like that happens, you ought to tell me first."

"Okay. I'll come over right away."

Cheng Ling walked out of the lane. Several children were sitting underneath a banyan tree, blowing bubbles. Cheng Ling looked up as the bubbles floated by him, one by one. The morning sun shone on them. Each soap bubble was a fabulously-coloured transparent ball. Cheng Ling stared at the bubble that was flying highest. It had just superimposed itself upon the sun. A sudden dazzling flash shot forth from it. Then it burst. The spectacular colours fell onto drops of water. Cheng Ling watched as another cluster of bubbles rose and was dispersed by the wind.

THE AUTHOR

Chang Shi-kuo is one of Taiwan's most versatile modern writers. He was born in Chongqing (重慶) in 1944, but his family actually came from Nanchang County of Jiangxi Province (江西). He left China, as a child, together with his father and settled in Taiwan.

He was educated in Xingzhu (新竹) Secondary School and received his Bachelors degree in Engineering from the University of Taiwan. Subsequently, he pursued his studies in Computer Science and received a Ph.D degree from the University of California, Berkeley, USA.

He has lectured in Cornell University and later became the Professor as well as the Chairman for the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering in the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, USA. Presently, he is Chairman of the Department of Computer Science, University of Pittsburgh, USA.

Though a computer scientist by profession, he has also established a name for himself in the literary field. His writings include novels, social commentaries and science fiction, which are highly regarded and recognized.

His style is lively, displaying a sharpness found only in one that is a keen observer of life. We see, through his work, the humanist spirit dedicated towards the building of a better society.

Chess King is his first translated work.

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