

The Golden Lotus

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The Golden Lotus

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Summary

Strangely, Hideko comes to realize her feelings for Sook-hee through one of the books she has to read.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

In hindsight, it seems strange my realization took me so long.

But I had been secluded from the world for all my life and had not been close to anyone since my early childhood. I can't quite recall whether it was maybe just a detached, voyeuristic interest I took in her at first – like watching a freshly caught fish, writhing on dry land until you beat it to death. Could it be?

I cannot imagine, now, that there was ever a time when she was not the dearest thing on earth to me – and yet I know it must be the truth. I do remember I thought her foolish and naive, just as I had wished for, and how I was condescending and amused, an adult making fun of an all-too-eager child.

Tamako – "jewel-child", oh yes, foolish little thief who couldn't resist the ensnaring sparkle of glittery things! I believe it was a game, at first. An amusing game in which I had the upper hand, a game that would set me free – finally. I took a perverse delight in confusing her, creating tricky traps for her, acting out a play for her, deceiving her. Oh, the poor young lady, so gentle, so fragile! We shall close the windows to protect her from any cold draft or she will wither like a rare orchid. Oh, her delicate health! We will prevent her from getting out on a rainy day. Aw, the sweet innocent girl, with her doll in her bed, blissfully unaware of any adult concerns! We will bathe her like a young child and sing at night for her to fall asleep. Never shall a dirty word be allowed to profane her ears. I admit, every now and then, I had a hard time not to break into hearty laughter.

Yet, something about her intrigued me. She was more interesting than a fish out of the pond, and very much more than all my handmaids before. Despite trying to convince me otherwise, she was so different to Chyoko! I initially believed it had something to do with her being from a big city.

I watched her every step, with my fullest attention: during the day from the corner of my eyes, during the night through the spyhole in the wall of my chamber. Not only did I watch her tidy up my rooms and clean the windows and learn how to write, but I also observed when she undressed herself and washed her naked skin and fell asleep in her linen. I particularly liked to spy on her when she assumed to be all by herself: how she appraised my jewelry and dresses with the scrutiny of a pawnbroker, how she stared at the costly furniture, or how she slipped into her nightshirt and let her hands roam free under her blanket. I consumed every one of her moves – because I could. And I did not feel the slightest shame – for she was just as bad a human being as me!

Occasionally, when she was alone, she would talk to herself, or rather, she cursed. And I whispered those swearwords I had never heard before to myself, trying them out. They felt exciting and new. They tasted of promise. I would make good use of them as soon as I would be free and she behind bars.

Of course, I convinced myself that I did it all solely out of expediency: After all, I had to verify whether she could read, whether she would fit into my dresses, whether once dressed up she would really pass for a lady. And of course, I had to grab every opportunity to make use of her knowledge – small as it may have been – to transform myself into an urbanite. My own travels were soon to begin.

Oddly enough, of all things, it was one of the books from which I had to read that gave me the idea for a possible answer. It was the story of Jin-Liang, from "The Golden Lotus." I had read it several times before but it had vanished in the depth of my memories. My uncle always demanded I rehearse the books I had to recite from at least a week in advance, again and again and again – until he would be content with every accentuation, every pause, every pitch of my voice.

My aunt had taught me to perceive texts as nothing but a sequence of words. A single word cannot hurt, can it? A single word you read does not cause you any shame. Then why would you feel ashamed or in pain just because this one word is followed by another? And another? You will get through any text, repulsive as it may be, by always remembering that it is just a sequence of words, none of which are to be blamed, none of which bear any cruelty. To the one reading them out loud, words are just abstract, meaningless items. They require a certain pronunciation and a certain facial expression, a low voice or a loud voice, and maybe a pause in between. The words' content, however, shall not bother the reader as it is meant for the listener. I hardly ever listened to my own readings.

But that time, when I read to my uncle that Jin-Liang could not fathom the thoughts of her lady, it rang strangely true, like something I had asked myself before. "What is the matter with her? Why does she stomp her feet to express her anger? Why does she sit in bed at night and sigh?" That notion baffled me. Tamako, too, sighed in bed at night. And I had heard her stomp her feet and throw things to the ground as well. Of course, I knew how the story went, that Jin-Liang's lady was secretly in love. Did that mean that Tamako, too, ...? Maybe she— but then my uncle slammed his hand on the desk. My ears rang but I did not let it show, cleared my throat, and read on.

Later that day, I had to think on it again. Of course, I knew that all those books were only stories men had invented to arouse themselves. Women in those tales always did whatever would please the men. And if they refused, it would please the men even more. Real women were not like the women in my uncle's books. My aunt had not been like this, and neither was I. And Tamako?

There was a simple solution: I could try what those books described. If it went wrong, well, what would the harm be? She would be locked away in the asylum soon enough. Who would listen to her there? What would her word count against mine in my uncle's house? I had nothing to fear.

And so I hatched a plan. My manipulations now aimed at something else (or so I told myself). In ten years, I had accumulated a considerable amount of theoretic knowledge. Surely, there weren't many noble ladies my age who were as well-versed in such numerous ways of seduction and so many different choices of gratification. Essentially, it was all very much like a story in one of those books – an experienced noble lady seduces her naive handmaiden. I had read it a hundred times, in dozens of variations. It should not be all that hard. And since she was a woman and I held her fate in my hand, it should – in contrast to the performances for gentlemen hosted by my uncle – please me.

From then on I waited for my chance, for the right moment. I smiled at her, shyly, and paid her compliments. I invented reasons for us to dress and undress each other. She was such a

sweet living doll! Sure enough, I would have never entrusted her with my secrets then as I did with my own doll. Yet, playing dress-up and make-believe was so much fun! I had never had a friend, but I am sure it would have felt somehow similar to this? My days were less shaped by fear, and my thoughts were less overshadowed by gloom. I slept so much better when she lay beside me. I ate with more appetite because she asked for my favorite foods to be cooked. I enjoyed how she seemed to think of me as her doll to be bathed and fed and tucked in. With every passing day, I felt more alive. How wonderful freedom would be!

And then there was our first real moment. "Count Fujiwara" had announced his visit for the afternoon, and Tamako had insisted I bathe in the midst of day. She told me her aunt had done exactly the same with her babies every time visitors were set to arrive. Of course, that was a lie. Because not even an imperial concubine would ever have been bathed with so much love and devotion by her maids, let alone some bastard Korean orphans by some dubious agent.

Tamako tested the water with her elbow to make sure it was pleasantly warm. She heated the towels at the stove so I would not be cold when I got up from the bath. She surrounded the tub with a variety of fragrance oils and soaps, and I just had to point to my favorite scents for her to pour them into the water. She sprinkled petals all over me and gave me a lollipop – "because bathtime is sweet." Indeed, had anything in my life before ever felt so good? I cannot remember those times very well; but by all means, I felt so cared for and peaceful and cherished that my eyes began to tear up.

Tamako noticed. She gave me a look I wasn't sure I liked. I did not want her pity. I did not want to be pitied by a criminal handmaiden! And so when I looked for an excuse, my sharp-edged tooth came to mind – a most welcome alibi. Truth be told, though it sometimes did cut the inside of my cheek, this was a minor inconvenience, nothing to cry about. When during my performances the works of world literature got re-enacted on my bare skin, it would hurt much more – and I would not cry even then!

But to my surprise, Tamako obviously deemed the precise level of my discomfort irrelevant. What mattered to her was that I was not well. Carefully, she explored my mouth with her finger and then nodded. She went to retrieve something from the next room: a metal thimble with a coarse surface. She told me to open my mouth again – and I did. With her left hand holding my neck, she stuck one finger of her other hand into my mouth and began to grind the sharp edge of my tooth with her thimble. Gently, with tiny, thoughtful movements, not hurting me. I closed my eyes, enjoyed the touch of her hand, the skilled movements of her fingers inside my mouth. For long minutes, only the quiet, steady sounds from the grinding accompanied our silence. I did not move at all, stayed completely still. From the water rose the fragrance of plum blossoms that I adore. My tongue still bore the taste of the bittersweet candy. And I do believe this was the moment I fell in love.

I caressed her elbow with my hand, still holding on to that lollipop, and I only allowed myself the faintest touch so she could pretend not to notice. At last, I opened my eyes. She averted hers but gulped. Glinting droplets of sweat had formed on top of her upper lip. Was it the heat of the bath that made her cheeks so red?

"Do you like the fragrance? Why don't you join me?"

That evening, in bed, I pondered this incident for quite some time. It had been nothing like the stories in my uncle's books. I had not seduced her. There had been no passionate declaration of love. Not a thing had happened that would warrant a scene in one of those books. And I had not learned one thing more about Tamako's real intent. We had shared a bath – nothing more.

Strangely enough, I did not regret that fact at all. It had been so nice to be this close to her, so pleasant to be cared for. I did not want for it to stop! It had made me so happy.

I would have taken much more time with my feigned falling-in-love-with-the-Count so I would be able to enjoy our game of innocent lady and her devoted handmaiden a little longer. Alas, our time was short. My uncle would visit his gold mine in two weeks, and that would be the definite end of it. Until then, I had to be certain.

Over the next few days, the Count arranged a great many "favorable occasions" during the painting lessons and beyond to convince her that her plan to make me fall in love with him had finally begun to bear fruit. I tried hard to be convincing, but it was tiresome.

I did not like it when he touched me or when he looked at me in this particular way – and I told him so. At least he acted like a gentleman, aside from the necessary maneuvers, even when I took out my bad temper on him. But what was the matter with me? Deceiving her had been so much fun before. Did I even look forward to freedom anymore if it meant I would have to condemn her to a lifetime in detention?

I had not minded that thought before, so why now?! After all, she was nothing but a stupid, greedy, naive pick-pocket! Except... it was so nice to have her around. And why did she look so angry and sad when her plan seemed to succeed? I did not understand neither myself nor her.

During what would become my last performance I read "The discovery of the secret well" from "The Golden Lotus." This was the first and only reading during which I listened to myself from the beginning to the end. It came naturally because I knew the text – but this evening, it seemed completely different and new, even though the words were exactly the same. Maybe it was I who had changed. Never before had it touched me when a character in a story wondered what the other one might think of her. Always had I made the effort to delicately reflect the descriptions and the technical details of the act, with all its artistry, and maybe with some subtle mockery where appropriate. And of course, I noticed that the pleasure of the attending gentlemen was not entirely art appreciation. Yet, I tried hard to keep it all at bay. It was not my business – I was just the reader.

This time, however, it was different. Maybe the recurring power blackouts were to blame? The lights, which had already been dimmed, flickered again and again and created a peculiar mood. But it did not interfere with my reading for I knew the text by heart and did not actually need to read – the kanji and pictures were just aide-mémoires. Eventually, the lamps went out completely and I closed my eyes. Surrounded by nothing but darkness. And into the

dark I told the story of two women. Not to any of the alleged book lovers now hidden from my view but to myself. I was my own listener. It was magical.

Jin-Liang's insecurity became my own. My voice was higher and sweeter when she asked her questions. And it switched to slow and deep when Lady Sung listed the signs by which Jin-Liang would know the right moment. "Does the lady swallow hard already and does she take heavy breaths? Does she whisper sweet things into your ear and kiss you tenderly?" I imagined Tamako's breath tickling my ear and got warm from the thought. "Does she nuzzle close to you and fondle your breasts?" I dreamed of her naked skin and how it would feel against mine. "Does her secret region become slick and does she bite your shoulder gently?" My body reacted dutifully to any word I spoke into the darkness. But then the power came back and the blinding light harshly ended my dreams.

My uncle nodded his approval and the gentlemen gave jovial applause. But I could not care less. I just wanted to leave, and I could not wait for the performance to end and to be with her again. It did not suffice any longer to just read about such intimate moments. I wanted to feel them, to discover her secret well, to hear the sound of bells in a windless night myself. I believe if she had been there this evening, waiting for me like she had on all other evenings before, and if she had helped me out of my kimono, undone my hair, removed my make-up and showered me with kindness like before, I would have confessed to anything. But she did not wait for me. She was not at the door, neither in the bathroom nor in my bedroom. I could not have been more disappointed. Of course, I knew she was in her chamber, but she could not have made it any more obvious that she did not care as much about me as I did about her. My disappointment turned into anger, and perhaps that gave me the courage to really act out what I had in mind. Very well then, let's have it this way! I knew at least as many tricks as she did.

After I had gotten ready for bed, I lay down and rang for her. She did not come. I rang again and again with furor and would have done so until the bell pull would have torn – but, at long last, she came. I did not hide my anger and demanded she sleep beside me because I surely would have had bad dreams after my tiring performance. I looked away from her, and for some time, we lay in silence.

But then I began, hesitantly at first. With my high, sweet Jin-Liang-voice I whispered that I had agreed to the engagement with the Count on that evening but added that I was insecure and afraid.

"Of your uncle's wrath?" she asked.

"No, of the Count," I said.

Still we faced opposite directions, and still she tried to shamelessly praise him to me.

"But he is such a gentleman, isn't he? There's no need to fear a man like him!"

And then I turned around to face her and whispered that, well, I just did not even know what it was that men wanted. That I could not possibly know what to do at night, in secret, when one was married. Wasn't I practically a child in those matters? And wasn't she the only one who could possibly explain it to me?

Playing an act became fun again. I was very curious about her reaction. Strangely, she did not begin with any explanations but fetched one of her lollipops from the nightstand. She took it

in her mouth and coated her lips with the slick sweet. She then moved very near to me and rubbed her lips against mine. Of course, that meant that I licked my lips involuntarily. And hers, too. And then she licked mine. And it so happened that we kissed. And it vanquished all my restraint – I took her and kissed her, kissed her, kissed her. Long moments passed until we finally separated again.

"So this is how it feels!"

I was still short of breath, and she was, too.

"You will feel the same for the Count!"

And so it went on. Once the first move had been made, the rest came very easy, naturally. Oh, I have such cold hands – won't he be appalled by them? Here, see, I will slide my hand beneath the neckline of your nightshirt... What do you say, it does not feel unpleasant? Do the same to me so I can see that you are telling the truth! ... And what will the Count say to me in our wedding night? Will he be exactly as tender as you? ... Oh, may I do something like this, here, or am I doing it wrong? Could we try that, too?

I made her believe that she led, and since she still could not read back then, she did not notice that I re-enacted whole chapters from "The Golden Lotus." It felt just like it had hours earlier when the lights had gone out. The story from the book became my own, and I became its protagonist.

When we were right in the middle of "the discovery of the secret well," she praised me as a natural and applauded my being so inventive without any experience whatsoever – and I chuckled to myself for I thought her to be a natural, too. Without any knowledge of the book, she was perfectly playing her part. Just as "The Golden Lotus" had prescribed, she swallowed hard, she took heavy breaths, she kissed me tenderly and whispered into my ear, she nuzzled close to me and fondled my breasts. She praised the beauty of my jade portal. And her own secret region – which stopped being secret once we had re-enacted its discovery – got slick. Admittedly, she forgot to gently bite my shoulder, and so I did it to her instead. Finally, I knew the right moment had come.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Do you promise to never betray me?"

"No, never."

And in the end, this is how it went.

I know she would like to destroy every single book that tells such stories and depicts such scenes. She cannot stand the thought of me having to read those things to sleazy old men. (And I have never told her about those extra acts that my performances would sometimes include.) She is convinced that every single such book must be a painful reminder for me. And of course, us destroying my uncle's library together is one of my fondest memories. It was that act of rebellion that truly set me free. And yet... I sometimes like to think that some of those books, even if just very few, must have been written by women. And I don't know whether it would make me happy if they were all destroyed. I think I would like to keep "The

Golden Lotus.” All those men I read it to never quite grasped what those words had to offer. The truth is, not all of those books were meant for them.

This one was for me. And for Tamako. Or rather, for Sook-hee.

End Notes

I'm sorry - I only realized the story Hideko refers to is from the Chinese classic "Jin Ping Mei" ("The plum in the golden vase", or "The Golden Lotus") one week before deadline. I was not able to get the book myself and read it in time. So what *my* Hideko is referring to is entirely what I could make sense of, knowing only the few lines taken from the movie. I'm really sorry if I'm butchering a Chinese classic here. This is not my intention. If you know the text - I'd be glad for some hints if I'm telling something wrong.

Also, I only got my hands on the German version of the film (apart from the Korean/Japanese version) - so whenever I cite a line, it mostly is the English translation of the German translation of the Japanese translation of the Chinese original. It is therefore absolutely possible some things got lost in translation. If so, again, I'd be glad if you drop a line.

I hope you enjoyed it nonetheless.

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