

Judge Dee and the Courtesan

Other books by Piet Rombouts

English:

Dee Goong An second part: Governor Dee Defies the Empress

Bronnen van illustraties in de rechter Tie romans
– *Judge Dee illustrations and their sources*

Dutch:

Een onbeduidend verhaal van een lentedroom
(een Chinees verhaal uit de Ming dynastie)

Het bezoek van de censor
(een rechter Tie verhaal)

Vierentwintig zaken van rechter Lan
(De strijd van een magistraat tegen criminaliteit in het Chinese keizerrijk)

Rechter Tie en de courtesane
(een rechter Tie verhaal)

Het gevecht om de vlecht
(De machtsgreep van de Mantsjoes en de pacificatie van de regio langs de Lange Rivier)

Judge Dee and the Courtesan

Two Judge Dee stories by Piet Rombouts



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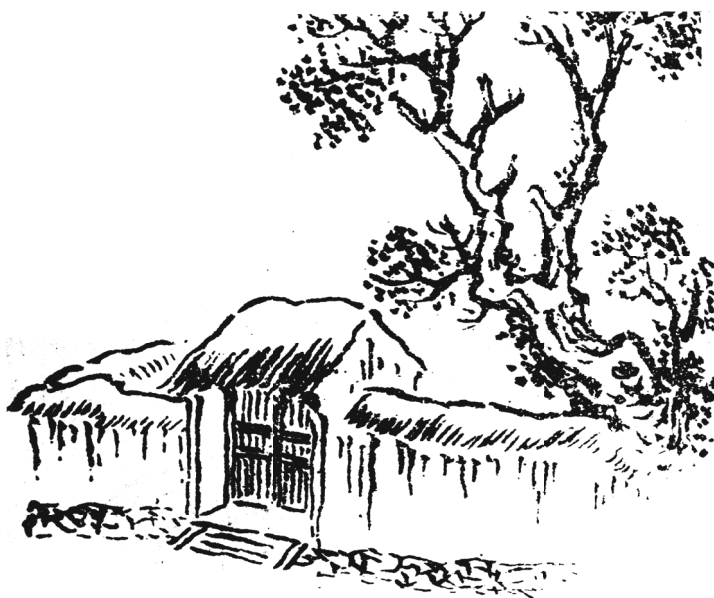
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Judge Dee and the Courtisan



This story takes place in the summer of 680, immediately after the events described in the detective novel *Murder in Canton* by Robert van Gulik. In the southern city of Canton Judge Dee has solved the case of the disappearance of a censor. During the investigation his loyal lieutenant Chiao Tai is killed. Shaken by this loss, the judge returns with a military escort to the capital. His assistant Tao Gan shall stay in Canton a few days more to wind up a few outstanding matters before leaving for the capital.

Introduction

An orchid comes into bloom A manuscript comes to light

What a bitter disappointment I had to swallow today! – But let me begin at the beginning. You should know that I cultivate orchids and, at this, even though I say so myself, after years of application I have become fairly proficient. Nearly as adept as my neighbour across the road, the late Mr. Ling. After the death of this dedicated cultivator, his wife, as should every respectable widow, observed the prescribed three-year mourning with proper decorum and only sporadically appeared in public.

In this difficult period, she continued her husband's hobby and, when the opportunity arose, showed me her most beautiful specimens. In all honesty, I must confess that her orchids were not the only thing which caught my eye. Despite her mature years, she was still a beautiful woman and extremely gracious and courteous. She was also a lady who wrote fine calligraphy and could paint well. I had always thought her flower paintings were very beautiful and her poems were certainly worth reading. After I had said how much I appreciated them, her husband had presented me with an album of her poems and paintings, a volume, although small, I have treasured ever since. No wonder that I developed a particular fondness for the cultivated widow and that, after the demise of my neighbour across the road, the notion that it would not be such a bad idea if I were to marry her took root in my mind. This would be advantageous to us both! In order to avoid any trouble caused by gossip among the neighbours, I waited patiently for the three-year period of prescribed mourning to pass. Otherwise, people might have thought that we had joined forces to help Mr. Ling on the road to meet his ancestors!

Now the period of mourning had elapsed and I considered that the moment had come to make a definite decision, something wonderful happened in my house last night: a rare

flower bloomed completely unexpectedly! What fragile, beautifully formed petals, what a velvety colour! The yellow petals with the purple-black spots imbued the flower with an almost catlike grace. As well as all this, it also shed a faint but completely unique scent! For three months I had cherished it but had never dared hope that I would coax it to flower! In the eyes of this unworthy mortal, it seemed that the blooming of this flower was a sign sent from Heaven that an era of happiness had dawned. Therefore, my first thought was: I must show it to Mrs. Ling! This would not only give me the great pleasure of sharing this special occasion with a true fellow flower-lover but it would also afford me the chance to closely observe her again. Having done this, I would take the plunge and approach a matchmaker. Together we would cultivate the most beautiful flowers!

I sent her an invitation asking her to call on me. She came immediately and entered with an enchanting smile, as always gracious but modest. While we enjoyed a cup of tea, we discussed my orchid. She displayed great admiration for this fruit of my labour. Then she asked me if I would give her a cutting. Of course, this was not my intention. I declined this request in the most courteous manner.

Then tragedy struck: I was called to the gate by another visitor. I excused myself and went to the front of my house, where I had a brief conversation with an unexpected caller, whom I soon sent on his way with heartfelt apologies.

Returning to my lady visitor, I discovered that the teapot was empty. I heated some fresh water and settled myself down to continue our delightful conversation with the greatest conviviality. However, shortly afterwards, the Widow Ling took her leave and hurried back to her small dwelling. You can imagine how disappointed I felt.

That evening I was overwhelmed by a great bewilderment and panic: I saw that my greatest pride, the flowering orchid, was visibly wilting and dying! I was flabbergasted! I dug carefully into the soil. I was able to establish that the roots were in good condition. These were as white as jade and even had new shoots. Only one explanation was possible: during my



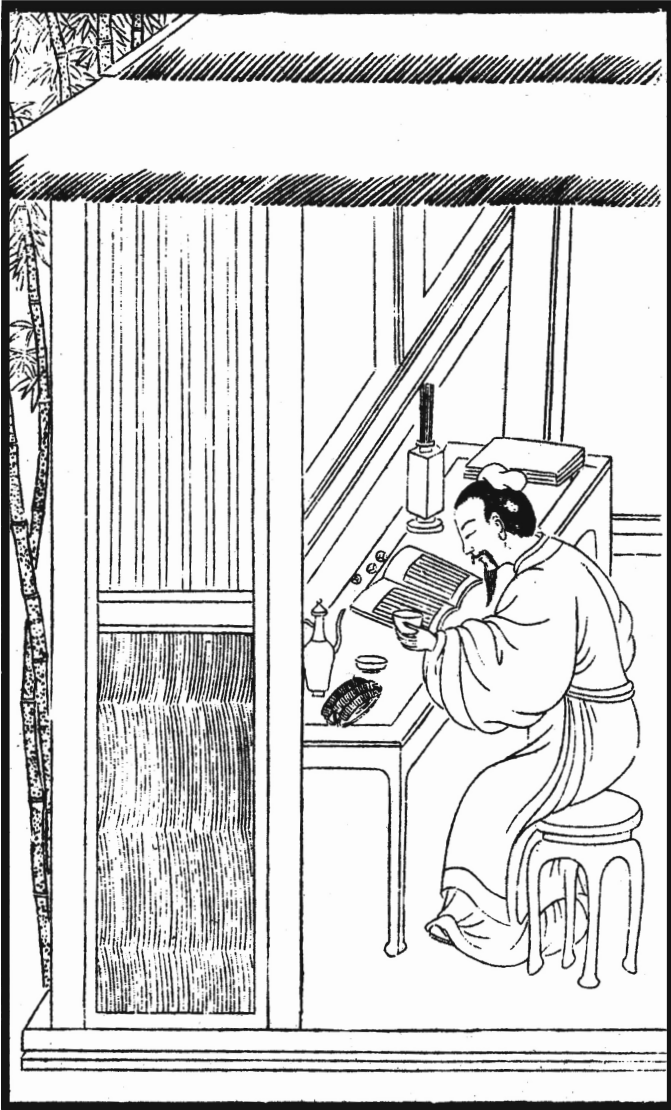
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Orchid

short absence, compelled by pure jealousy that spiteful cat had poured hot tea-water onto the soil and had murdered my flower. That was why the teapot was so empty! What a bitch!

In my rage I lost no time in ripping the album of poems and paintings to shreds. The cover was thicker and, when I was pulling it apart, a few sheets of paper fell out of the hollow inside. In the most minute handwriting was written down the following true story of a statesman of the Tang dynasty, Dee Jen-Djeh, better known as Judge Dee. He was a true upholder of justice! He would have known how to deal with that cow across the street. All things considered, I preferred to have this manuscript than the album of insipid verses and paintings, which were actually of a pretty poor quality.

Committed to paper by Jao Pao-ssu,
in Tsing Lao Tsai,
Tseng Hwa era,
year *ken-yin* [1470]



Mr. Jao Pao-szu reads a manuscript



Farmers return home happy from their fields

**The judge returns home and reminisces about times gone by
He relaxes with the First Lady and tells her of his misgivings**

The group of horsemen, sixteen in all, trotted along the highway. It was late in the afternoon and the worst of the heat of the day had passed. In the distance the riders could see the city walls of their destination: Luoyang, one of the two capitals of the Tang dynasty. In a loud voice the leader addressed the older man who rode beside him: "Your Excellency, the city is in sight. Shall we ride on at this pace or would you like to slow down a little?"

The older man indicated that they could proceed more slowly. None of the people whom they had hurried past on the road could have suspected that this strongly built, fifty-year-old man who was dressed in a simple brown gown, wearing a blue cap on his head and his long beard divided into two strands looped together at his neck, was the President of the Supreme Court: Dee Jen-Djeh, better known popularly as Judge Dee.

The riders continued at a slow trot. The fields around the capital looked promising: after a long dry spell it had rained heavily the last few days. The farmers and buffaloes were hard at work on the land. At another place, two farmers were irrigating their land, setting a large water-wheel in motion by pedalling it with their feet. The road gradually became busier: farmers were returning home from the city, their empty vegetable baskets swinging lightly from their carrying-poles. Although in the judge's eyes the scene did not differ very much from how it had been a few weeks earlier, he realized that a great deal had changed in his life in this short period. He stared sombrely in front of him and, just as on all the days since they had left Canton on the south-east coast of the Chinese empire, the captain was aware that it would be better not to disturb the judge and his thoughts.

Half an hour later, the cavalcade entered through the southern city gate. The streets were busy but the mass of peo-

ple dodged out of the way leaving a space for the horsemen to pass through. It took a little while before they arrived at the great gate of the judge's residence. One of the riders had gone on ahead to announce the return of the judge; the gates swung open immediately and the gate-keepers bowed deeply. A servant holding a tray hurried over and offered the judge a damp cloth and a cup of tea to assuage the worst of his thirst.

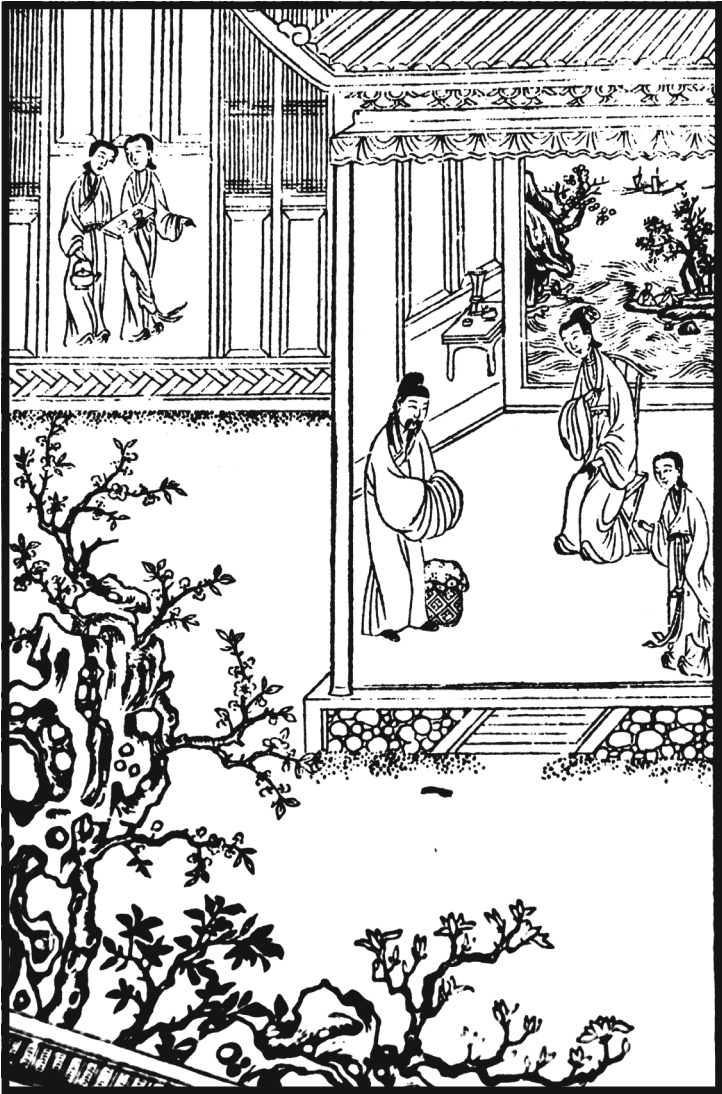
The judge dismounted from his horse, wiped the cloth over his face and took a sip of tea. A servant had already unfastened the saddle-bags and taken them inside. The judge gave his horse's reins to one of his servants and bid his escort farewell.

He then crossed the first courtyard and made his way via a number of roofed galleries to the rear of the complex where the women's quarters were situated. The judge went straight to the room of his First Lady. She was waiting for him outside the door and made a deep bow. "I am glad that you have returned. Come in and take a rest. Tea and some snacks are ready waiting for you." She examined the judge anxiously before preceding him into the room. With a gesture, she dismissed the two servants who were waiting in the room.

The First Lady's room was very spacious, consisting of a sitting area and a partly screened study. Against the wall stood a small ebony table on which was placed a pot with flowers and a tea-tray; two chairs were positioned on either side of this table. The First Lady poured the tea, offered the judge a cup and said: "You are very tired, but I see that it is more than just fatigue. You really must rest for a few days. Are you able to tell me what happened?"

"I have brought my mission to a successful conclusion, even though the empress will not be overjoyed with the outcome. However, I have had to pay an immensely high price, Chiao Tai is dead. Stabbed in the chest. He died in harness saving me from certain death. An irreplaceable loss. Four years ago, we lost Sergeant Hoong, now Chiao Tai. What more can I say?"

The First Lady was deeply affected by this news. She tried to find words of comfort: "Chiao Tai was ... how long was he with us ... seventeen years, if I remember rightly? And now he is no more ... He was a courageous warrior. I think he died



Judge Dee walks through his residence to the First Lady