

A N O V E L B Y X I X I

Flying Carpet

A Tale of Fertillia

Translated into English by Diana Yue

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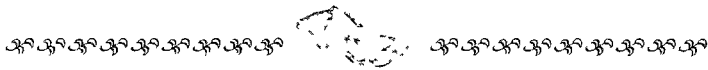
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Sleep and Flight

A long time ago, a man called Zhuang-zi* had a dream. In that dream he was a butterfly.

It is a very well-known fable, and throughout the ages it has generated all kinds of interpretations.

The man himself told us so in his treatise *On the Equality of All Things*: 'Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me '* Follow this concept, and it would seem that if man opens his heart, abandons all prejudices and renounces his egotism, then it may just be possible for a man and a butterfly to establish mutual correspondence in some way, and be transformed into one another. And at the moment when mutual transformation between the thing and the self takes place, the line of distinction between thing and self disappears, and the subject and the object become one.

How rich in meaning this fable is! It arouses all kinds of imagination even now! For example, about sleep and flight. Zhuang-zi said he had a dream, that he dreamed he was a butterfly. Normally, a man only dreams when he is asleep, and a butterfly is an insect that can fly.

Man needs sleep.

Most living creatures need sleep.

Insects and birds can fly.

Man is a creature that cannot fly.

But compared to other animals man has a much better developed brain and greater capacity to think. Man is always in quest, pushing ahead into the infinity of time. Man is always curious, always imagining things about the universe, and he can consolidate the results of his thinking and findings.

Why does man need sleep? What makes him fall asleep? There is no answer just yet. The explanation that says man's brain cells need rest has been ruled out. Even those who are regularly in a state of rest feel drowsy from time to time. Even in sleep, our brain cells do not stop working.

Scientists have long discovered that when somebody is asleep his eyeballs move rapidly and irregularly. Thus, the sleeping state of man is not a 'restful state', as people often think, but a state of busy 'motion'. In the 'motion' of sleep, dreams appear.

Some scientists argue that the kind of sleep in which the sleeper's eyeballs are engaged in fast motion can produce a regular stimulus, and this can drive the sleeper's central nervous system into a state of alertness, cautioning him against the hostilities of the outside world. Primitive men living in caves must be alert even in sleep, because the body must not fall asleep completely and become defenseless. The civilized adult man today does not enter into a 'restful state' when he sleeps, presumably because he has preserved this instinct to 'stay alert' in his long evolution down the ages.

When man is asleep, the pupils of his eyes become smaller, his blood pressure drops, his pulse weakens, his sweating diminishes and his breathing slows down. These are all signs of retreat and self-defence. An animal in hibernation shows the same symptoms. Sleep weakens the sleeper. By keeping up some 'motion' in sleep, man is actually revealing his unwillingness to fall sleep.

In daytime man moves about, stands or walks, and only his two feet and ten toes touch the ground. At night he lies down to sleep, and then his whole body rests on the ground. It is during sleep that he is nearest and closest to the earth. Man's reluctance to sleep makes him look up to the sky, and then he wishes he can fly. However, man *cannot* fly.

The butterfly is an insect that can fly.

And so Zhuang-zi dreamed that he was a butterfly. This fable, showing man's desire to resist sleep, is an expression of the unconscious deep within him.

Biological Clock

A clock is ticking away in the body of our Monsieur Consul.

A clock is also ticking away in the body of Madame, the Consul's wife.

These clocks are biological clocks. People sleep and wake and wake and sleep

every day. Apparently this mysterious cycle is controlled by some kind of biological clock, and is not just a result of fatigue. Like all man-made clocks and watches, this biological clock inside the human body imitates the earth's self-rotation. Scientists believe that this clock, which controls man's sleep, runs by 'tagging after' the movement of the earth's self-rotation, probably by means of some biological rather than mechanical vibration. That is why man's sleep can synchronize with the night-and-day cycle of the world.

It is now time to sleep in the town of Fertillia, twelve o'clock midnight. Although most animals living on this planet need sleep, not all of them sleep at night. Some nocturnal creatures, like the rat, sleep in dark holes during the day, and when night falls and it is safe to look around for food they automatically wake up. Man, on the contrary, is a diurnal creature. He moves about in the daytime, and at night he goes to sleep in dark surroundings.

Tonight Monsieur and Madame have returned to their consular residence rather late. The biological clocks in their bodies tell them it is bedtime, and Monsieur has been yawning incessantly. In a short while the two are in bed, one on each side, and Monsieur is soon snoring away gently.

Though Monsieur and his wife each has a biological clock regulating the time of sleep, their clocks happen to be different. Monsieur is already asleep, snoring gently, but Madame is not. She has switched on the light and, leaning on the bed, is reading a new magazine sent from home. The clock inside her is a slow clock, and at night she doesn't feel sleepy at all until way past midnight. Her husband's clock is much faster, and he is usually yawning heavily by eleven o'clock.

The couple we have here are not from Fertillia originally. They are from France, and are here in an official capacity. On our globe, France is in the west, while Fertillia is in the east. When the sun shines on France, it is night time in Fertillia, and when Fertillia gets the overhead sun France is in darkness. When the couple first arrived in Fertillia they were badly hit by the time difference between the two places, and didn't know when to fall asleep and when to stay awake. Then gradually they adjusted themselves.

Tonight the couple has attended a dinner party and then an opera, showing up as guests of honour. A lot of concerts are held in the City Hall. There are piano recitals and violin recitals, and the people who go are usually foreigners. Not too many local people show up there, being unaccustomed to foreign music and the stiff, dressed-up ambience. Fertillians have their own favorite theatrical hangouts. They love to go to a Fertillian opera at the theatre dressed in comfortable casual wear. The tickets are inexpensive, and the arias are sung in lyrics which can be easily understood, and during the performance talking and eating are permitted.

Just as the natives stay away from foreign music and the City Hall, the foreigners living in this town avoid the theatres where Fertillian operas are performed. Indeed, because of the language barrier, it is quite impossible for foreigners to understand the local shows. But finally a local opera is staged in the City Hall. A Fertillian drama connoisseur who knows the foreigners' language has picked a work and made a translation and adaptation of the lyrics and dialogue, and the result is a foreign-language local opera. It so happens that the Royal Consort of the Country of England is stopping over in Fertillia on his grand tour, and the authorities decide to present a Fertillian opera in the City Hall, to give His Royal Highness a glimpse of something different. Consuls of other countries are also invited to the performance, and what they see that night is *Zhuang-zi's Butterfly Dream*.

Testing the Wife's Fidelity

Back in her own country, Madame Consul has seen many, many operas, but a Fertillian opera sung in a foreign language is a first time for her. She finds the gongs and drums that last from start to finish a bit too loud, but she really likes the the actors' and actresses' costumes. All those flowing silk robes and elaborate coiffures! And what a strange story for an opera! A man called Zhuang-zi wanted to test his wife and see whether she was faithful to him. Of all things he could do, he chose to sleep in a coffin, pretending to be dead. Next he disguised himself as another man, and made love to his wife under that disguise. As a result, his wife, having gained what she thought was a new lover, agreed to take an axe and hack open her husband's coffin.

The interpreter explains that Zhuang-zi was a real character from history. When his wife died, he beat on an earthen basin and burst into song. The man was also a writer of essays. He had had a dream, he wrote, and in that dream he was a butterfly that fluttered about quite happily. In fact he was a philosopher, and the story about his testing his wife was made up by later people, the interpreter explains to Monsieur and Madame.

'Philosophers have such a strange way of looking at things,' Monsieur remarks.

'I say, his wife must be quite unattractive, to make him dream of being a butterfly,' says a fashionably dressed lady. 'Dear, dear, why are men so suspicious about their wives? Can't they trust them at all?'

Now Monsieur is fast asleep. Madame does some more reading and reflects on the opera they have seen that evening, but she just doesn't feel sleepy. She switches off the little bedside lamp, puts on her dressing gown and goes out to the balcony, closing the French windows behind her. At that moment she catches sight of something flying past outside, not far from the balcony. The object is floating past in seemingly weightless motion. It is not luminous, and does not make any noise. Now it is getting nearer and more visible, and what does she see? Lo and behold, it is a flying carpet, and it looks exactly like the drawings she has seen in picture books!

'Pierre! Pierre!' she yells, pushing open the French windows again.

'What's the matter?'

By the time Monsieur has run barefoot out on to the balcony, he only sees his wife straining her neck and staring into the sky, pointing at the distant stars. He cannot figure out what has happened, and thinks maybe she has had a strange dream and called him up from his sleep.

'A flying carpet, Pierre, a flying carpet! I just saw a flying carpet!'

However, Monsieur cannot see any flying object. He puts his arm gently round her shoulders, but she is extremely excited, and with the help of wild gestures proceeds to tell him what she has seen.

'It's so strange! A carpet that flies! It came this way from up front, and flew up and went away in that direction! There seemed to be somebody on it, but I couldn't see very clearly. It was too fast and too sudden.'

'My dear Eva, you've been reading science fiction again.'

'But I did see a flying carpet. Someone was on it, probably a woman. She was wearing something like the heroine's outfit in tonight's opera, something light and flowing and very soft.'

'You've seen and heard too many strange stories tonight. A carpet that can fly? A woman sitting on it, from ancient times? Those stories have really got to you, that philosopher's wife, that flying butterfly. And, what's more, we've just been to the Fertillia Air Show last week. The people here have never seen airplanes before, you know.'

'Uh-huh, three days in a row, terribly windy, and there was a drizzle. Pity the plane didn't manage to take off.'

'That's right. You were too keen to see it get into the air. And guess what? That carpet exhibition we went to the other day. That's it! Your head's still full of airplanes and carpets!'

Principles

To some people, going to bed at night is not such a great thing, because they can find better things to do. The Director of Fertillia Observatory is one of these people. He may tuck in early when it is foggy or cloudy or actually raining outside, but how can he go to bed on a cloudless night like this, when the air is cool and breezy and the night sky looks almost transparent? Right now he is inside his planetarium, glued to his telescope, watching the stars.

The director has a friend who also dislikes going to bed at night. But he isn't staying up for star-watching. He likes to study all kinds of scientific matters, and he also loves to share his opinions with others. At this moment, when the director is gazing at the stars, this friend is writing a paper on the phenomenon of 'flight'.

Our writer begins his paper by posing a question: Why do some things made by man have the ability to fly like birds and insects? Which principles of flight do they rely on? With this as a start he pours out his views, and does not feel a bit drowsy.

First Principle of Flight: The Hydrogen Balloon

Why is it possible to send a hydrogen balloon or a hot-air balloon into the sky? The explanation lies in the buoyant force of air. The buoyant force of an object can be reduced until it becomes lighter than the buoyancy of air. The human body has a buoyant force that is heavier than that of air, and that is why man cannot rise into the air and fly. However, when man lands on the moon, the buoyant force of his body undergoes a change. When he takes one step forward, he feels incredibly light and experiences something similar to flying. By the same principle the Kong-ming lantern* was invented by ancient people and successfully launched into the air. The eagle is a heavy bird, and requires a lot of hot air to rise into the air.

Second Principle of Flight: The Airplane

Why is it possible for an airplane or helicopter to rise into the air? The reason lies in the lift, or elevating force, created when the wings of an airplane move against an air current. All flying creatures have wings, and by contrast man, who is born without wings, cannot fly.

At this point in his paper our writer pauses and puts down his pen. He takes a sip of coffee, which he always prepares before he sits down to write something. In this world lovers of coffee are legion, and when they do not want to go to sleep or cannot fall asleep at night they rely on coffee to help them resist sleep. After some coffee our writer picks up his pen again. Tonight his writing is going very smooth. He is, so to speak, inspired.

The director of the observatory never drinks coffee. He doesn't need coffee to resist sleep. He never falls into sleep's trap because the stars are an infinite attraction to him and he never gets tired of them. The sky is wonderfully clear tonight. The director hasn't discovered any extraordinary star, but he has spotted a little comet though it is not what he is after. Suddenly the telephone rings. Who can be calling at this time of night?

'Hello, is that Fertillia Observatory?'

'Yes, and why are you calling us?'

'Well, it's like this.'

'What?'

'Just now, over the roof of our house . . .'

'Well?'

'There was a thing there, a very big thing that can fly.'

'What kind of thing?'

'Something that looked like a big towel.'

'Probably it's a towel from the house opposite — hung out to dry and got blown over to your side.'

Our writer carries on with his principles of flight.

Third Principle of Flight The Rocket

Our future world will be the home of many rockets and guided missiles. Why are such objects capable of flying into the air? The answer lies in the principle of jet propulsion. In an air-base all the rockets are parked on the ground with their heads pointing towards the sky. The launching of a rocket is a very spectacular sight. The head of the rocket rises from the ground at a right angle, and its tail gives off a powerful backward-streaming flow of gas amidst a bright blaze and deafening noise.

A Different Kind of Flight

By now our writer has come to his fourth principle.

Fourth Principle of Flight The Tornado

Why are houses, chairs, tables, trees, barns and buffaloes all suddenly flying in the sky? The answer lies in the tornado principle. A tornado can go as fast as 200 metres per second, and the air pressure at its centre is only 20 percent of normal air pressure. As the air current swirls faster and faster, it produces a centrifugal

force, and the air pressure in the centre gets lower and lower. So when a tornado comes along, houses, trees, barns and buffaloes are all swept into the sky. And the cause here is the violently rotating air and atmospheric pressure.

The coffee on the table is already his second cup. Our writer takes another sip, and carries on with his writing.

Fifth Principle of Flight The Flying Carpet

Why is a flying carpet able to fly? If there is a tornado, then it is probably blown into the sky by the tornado. But if there is no wind, why is the carpet able to fly? Here we come to the fifth principle of flight: the magic of myth.

It is true, floor carpets or hanging tapestries are able to fly because there is a fifth principle of flight. This is a different kind of flying, one that relies on certain outside forces. At this point our writer puts down his pen, stops writing for the time being, and reaches his hand out for his coffee. Uh-oh, he has knocked over the cup of coffee, and the dark fluid is spilt on to the writing paper. The dark stains immediately spread over the written words, leaving just the phrase 'the magical power of myth' still visible. Feeling lucky that he has not knocked over the ink pot, he quickly salvages the writing paper, brushes the coffee from it, and takes a cleaning cloth from the kitchen. Having mopped the paper dry, he returns to the kitchen to rinse the cloth. Just when he is doing that, he catches sight of something flying past outside the kitchen window. What's that? he wonders. The thing has a flat, thin shape and doesn't seem to have wings. For sure, it's a carpet. Good heavens, he cries, A flying carpet!

The director of the observatory is looking at the starry sky and enjoying himself when the telephone rings again. It's strange, why am I getting so many calls tonight? The call is from his friend, the one who is taking a flying journey on paper.

'Did you see that?'

'See what?'

'Outside my kitchen window.'

'What?'

'A flying carpet!'

'What?'

'A flying carpet!'

'A flying carpet?'

'A carpet that flies.'

'You must be kidding. Maybe . . .'

'Maybe what?'

'Maybe it's Hello's Comet.'*

'I know what a comet looks like. It's bright and shining, and it has a long tail

trailing behind it. But the thing I saw just now wasn't shining, and it hasn't got a bright silvery tail. It's flat and thin and square-shaped. And it can fly. It's a flying carpet!

'Are you still writing that paper on the principles of flight? Have you gone crazy and half-blind with all that writing? How can you say there are flying carpets in this world?'

'I'm not asking you whether there are flying carpets in this world. I'm just asking you whether you have seen a flying carpet. If you haven't, forget it, bad luck. Frankly, you stay glued to your telescope day and night and you only look at things that are very very far away, ultra ultra far away, and yet you cannot see something that is right next to you or right in front of you.'

'Oh c'mon, what are you talking about? I'm the director of an astronomical observatory. Astronomy is the study of heavenly bodies — their movements, their interaction, their physical conditions, and their whys and hows. Have you mistaken me for director of a meteorological station that studies the earth's atmospheric layer? Or maybe you think I'm director of a verandah on a private villa who just stands there all day looking at flowers and trees and streets and people and kites and pigeons? Or maybe you think I'm the director of the Observatory of Imagination in Dreamland?'

'Well, well, I'm sorry. I went too far just now.'

'Alright, alright, I'm sorry I sounded nasty.'

Garments for the Earth

As more and more people flock to Fertillia to do business, all kinds of rare foreign goods are gradually finding their way into the local markets, and it is no longer necessary to order them all the way from abroad. Recently, a foreign hong* with premises on Flying Earth Boulevard has sponsored a carpet sales exhibition. Many beautiful carpets are shipped over from the Country of Persia by merchants for this occasion, and antique carpets are also put on display. The promotional talks and lectures, presented by experts, are very interesting. Everyone who turns up gets a beautiful brochure printed with information about these wonderful carpets, even though he may not be buying anything.

Many must have come to the exhibition, for in less than three days half the items are already sold. The antique carpets are for viewing only and not for sale,

and every day a carpet specialist will be there, assisted by an interpreter, to give short lectures on these carpets to the viewers.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me draw your attention to a place called Badzere, which is high up on the northern slopes of the Altay Mountains. Up there, layers of very thick ice cover the ground all year round, so objects buried underground are very well preserved. For example, look at this artefact. This is actually the world's oldest carpet, and it was excavated from the area we are now talking about. The interpreter is a local guy, and every time he says 'carpet' he pronounces the word as 'jin', in Fertillian dialect.

Look at this carpet, ladies and gentlemen. Its edges are decorated with five rows of different designs. The first and the fifth rows consist of red squares with bird and animal motifs. The second row has a red background on which you can see saddled horses woven in green and men woven in yellow. The men, wearing hats, are either riding or walking beside the horses. Their dresses and accessories and the horses' ornaments and saddles are woven with great fineness and delicacy. The third row is embellished with four-petalled persimmon-bud patterns. The fourth row shows a green background on which are red deer, the deer's bodies dappled with yellow plum-blossom spots and their heads crowned with great golden horns. The central part of the carpet has a red background superimposed with yellow-and-green four-petalled flowers and crocket patterns set in interlinked squares. The whole carpet glows with brilliant colours, and its vivid pictorial elements are a good reflection of how nomadic tribes lived in ancient times.

Yes, this gentleman is right. The most beautiful carpets in the world are those produced by our country. Our people adore flowers, and they often weave a whole garden into a carpet. The garden has little ponds and interlacing canals in it, and you'll see fish swimming, lilies in bloom, luxuriant trees and shrubs, and nightingales singing on the boughs. As for the edges, they are lined with clusters of *fleur-de-lys*. A carpet is portable, and it is thus a movable garden.

You're right — when the Persian people make carpets, a leader will chant out the order of the colours to be used. The carpet-weavers tie each knot with great care, and they can tie nine hundred knots in an hour. On the average, 320 knots are made on one square inch of carpet. As the story goes, Peter the Great of Russia once gave a carpet to the Hapsburg kings as a present, and that carpet actually had 783 knots to the square inch. Of all Persian carpets, the Polonaise carpets* are the grandest. A Polonaise carpet is inlaid with gold and silver threads, which explains its brilliant lustre. It has a big elaborate medallion in the centre, and the edges are lined with broad rows of patterns woven so miraculously that an entire Portuguese armada can be depicted amidst extremely intricate floral patterns.

Today no artisan can produce such carpets, and we can't find that kind of craftsmanship anymore. You see, the first stage of human civilization began when primitive people discovered fire and learned to cook food with it. Then carpets appeared, marking the distinction between the nomadic tribes and the savages. The savage people didn't go beyond using leaves and animal skin to cover their bodies, but the nomadic tribes discovered the know-how of weaving. The earliest carpets were made by crushing and pressing sheep's wool, and did not have any warp and weft, but later people developed the skill of weaving carpets with warp and weft and tying woollen knots on to them.

Why does mankind keep on making carpets? Apart from the Persians, who think of their carpets as movable gardens, the other people all emphasize one point in their answers to this question: We make carpets so as to protect our skin from the cold and damp. Ah, but the original idea of having carpets is much more than that. We make carpets because we want to protect the earth. Carpets are the garments we make for the earth. Just think: man walks about on the earth; he grows crops on it, he rears animals, he lives, he breathes, and the earth gives man abundant blessings in the form of rich forests and green pastures and fertile land. For these reasons, how can man not love and care for the earth? That is why when he walks man should put his feet on pebbled roads and not trample on the grass; and that is why man should do his best to clean up the factory chimneys and prevent black smoke from polluting the woods and forests.

Man weaves a carpet and sits and sleeps on it. He does so because then the soil will be less easily eroded, and his own body sweat will not cause the soil to acidify so badly. The dust and dirt in the air, too, will not fall directly on the face of the earth. Because man respects and loves the earth, he has woven the most beautiful of garments for its sake.

Holland-Water

At this shop called Fa & Sons,* which sells holland-water,* the owner-cum-manager gets up very early in the morning to attend to business, and goes to bed really early too. Likewise, all the family members and shophands follow suit and tuck in early. None of them has seen a flying carpet fly back and forth over the town of Fertrillia, not on any night. The shop opens very early. The wholesale people bring back the empty bottles stacked in boxes, and the small retailers haul the re-

filled bottles on to their handcarts. The shophands are variously engaged in filling the bottles, pasting the labels, doing the accounts and lugging and putting away the ice blocks. Apparently the whole of Fa & Sons, even the cats, are particularly busy as long as it is summer-time.

Though human beings are blessed with eyesight, they sometimes miss seeing things, and they cannot possibly see all the things that are happening in the world. In the whole of Fertillia, only a few people have declared seeing a flying carpet. Many Fertillians have gone to bed early that night because the biological clocks inside them are ticking fast, and some never look up at the sky at all because they prefer to concentrate on things on the ground. The few who say they have seen a flying carpet cannot even convince their own friends and relatives. Who knows if they haven't been deceived by their own eyes or by some wild fantasy?

Fa & Sons is an old shop on Fertile Water Street, and it has been selling holland-water for many years. The drink is certainly nothing more than a small bottle of aerated water, yet quite a lot of people are fond of it. The people of Fertillia are tea-drinkers by tradition. How pleasurable it is to have a leisurely cup of hot tea after a meal! In the early morning the teahouses in town are all packed with customers. Just sit down at the table and order a bowl of tea and two dishes of *dim-sum* and never mind who knows whom, before half a cup of tea is brewed everyone will be chatting away about anything under the sun. If you belong to this generation, you are likely to be more wary about holland-water.

'That icy cold stuff, you'll get ill drinking it,' says Customer A.

'So sweet — it generates phlegm,' echoes Customer B.

But young people and kids like the drink and even get addicted to it. Fertillia is changing every day. Strange new things keep popping up, especially on Flying Earth Boulevard where you can be absolutely stunned by the great variety of people and merchandise you see. Holland-water is one of the new things which has caught on. At first the business is not so spectacular, but it has gradually picked up. Foreigners are especially fond of it, because they do not go to the tea-houses and would rather stick to their sweet tea and something called coffee which has a bitter-sweet taste. They are used to drinking cold beverages, and on Flying Earth Boulevard they can get something called beer which has bubbles in it and is served icy cold. Holland-water is a favourite drink for the foreigners probably because they are used to drinking sweet, cold and bubbly stuff.

Do Fertillian people drink holland-water? Actually many of them do, especially the residents living midway up the hill in the Mid-Levels area. Either because they are very westernized in life-style, or because they are keen to keep up with the trends, these people drink holland-water too. How 'modern' and chic it is to treat

your visitors to a few bottles of the drink! It is also a good topic for conversation. Just look at the bottle itself, with its pointed bottom and that glass marble inside. Some people even use these bottles for decor.

Most of the holland-water produced by Fa & Sons is distributed to the big compradore stores* and the smaller stores on Flying Earth Boulevard. The wholesale figures are big, and retail business is not bad either. People often drive down from the Mid-Levels to Fa & Sons in honk-honk cars and buy holland-water by the cases. It's a nice cold drink for a hot summer day, and outside the shop you can often see some customer sipping a bottle while chatting with the manager. It's both business and socializing.

Fa & Sons is only open seven to eight months of the year. When the weather gets cooler, they will stop making holland-water. Who still wants cold drinks in the chilly months? Those who still come to buy regardless of the season are all foreigners. In summer-time Fa & Sons makes holland-water as ferociously as bees make honey, then in winter all that watery look is gone, and no one washes bottles or pastes labels or operates the hand-held bottling machines anymore. The halt brings the business into a sort of winter hibernation, but some compradore stores still need holland-water, and so the stock kept since autumn is released bit by bit on wholesale, but none of it is sold at the shop. Then, when spring returns and the insects stir from their sleep,* the machines are heard again, rumbling away noisily in Fa & Sons.

Moros*

During the winter months Fa & Sons does not sell holland-water, but it is still open for business. What kind of business? Well, it all depends on what fanciful ideas the shophands come up with. Every winter the boss lets these guys run the shop and take whatever profit they can make. Some of them will return to their native villages for the Lunar New Year family reunion, but others will remain in the shop to earn more money. In winter all sorts of activities can be seen outside Fa & Sons. It's a different picture every year, and the business may even change from month to month, because the shophands are allowed to do whatever they like.

On some occasions they set up a congee-'n-cakes stand outside the shop, and on other occasions they sell fried eggplants and octopus or stewed beancurd and

pig's liver and kidney. At one time they even have little chicks, ducklings and baby rabbits for sale. Then the neighbours start getting curious. 'What's Fa & Sons selling these days?' they often ask. Several years in a row, the shop is simply rented out to people for short-term businesses, so for a while you will see workmen inside the shop making cotton fluff by teasing cotton with bows, and another time you will see people making umbrellas.

Then comes a rather special year. All of a sudden, to people's surprise, half the shop is taken up by goods rarely seen in Fertillia. One look at the things on the walls and the floor and you can tell that they're rather special: copper teapots with giraffe necks, glass cups shaped like the figure 8, bales of fabric woven in gold and silver threads, brocaded shoes that look like little boats, and then there are carpets and rugs. Actually such items are not absolutely rare in Fertillia because Fertillia is a grand bazaar that can give you the world's most extraordinary things as long as you know which corners to look into, but to see them displayed in Fertile Water Street is still rather unusual.

Naturally some Fertillians know where such rare and odd things can be found, but such people are few. The vendors are odd, and so are the searchers. The vendors are odd in that they are not original inhabitants of Fertillia but Indian people from abroad, with dark skin, big eyes, bearded faces and heads wrapped in white turbans. They are quite different from the other foreigners living in Fertillia, and the local people call them 'Moros'.

What has brought the Moros to Fertillia? They haven't come here as traders to do business. Rather, they are employees brought here by foreign traders, and some of them are originally seamen. In Fertillia their main occupation is serving as watchmen and guards for the banks, the warehouses, the foreign hong's or the villas up in Mid-Levels. As time passes these people have grown old and their families have also come over, and so they congregate on two little side streets off Flying Earth Boulevard, selling old things and indigenous products from their native land.

Who is looking for lignum aloes,* curries, or different kinds of linen? Tell him to look up Mr Moro, and it'll be easy. The Moros have the most attractive things for sale — old stuff like hanging clocks, pocket watches, jade bracelets, necklaces, hand-operated phonographs, music records, magazines and books. They have big things such as tables, chairs, beds and cabinets and small items such as metal springs and steel wires, and they also have broken and rusted copper and iron ware and extremely beautiful coloured glass lampshades. Provided you have the patience and the judgement, you stand a good chance of acquiring a valuable seventeenth-century painting or a genuine piece of eighteenth-century antique from Mr Moro's collection.

'What's Fa & Sons selling these days?'

'Oh, there's a Moro there, selling some Moro things.'

This time the information is not correct, because the man who has set up shop at Fa & Sons is not a Moro, and the things he sells are not indigenous Moro things. It's true, the man is a foreigner and has big eyes, curly hair and a big beard, and he is not wearing the kind of outfit Fertillians usually wear, so no wonder people are mistaken. But one thing is obvious — he doesn't wear a white turban on his head.

Two Crazy Guys

Even the neighbours living on Fertile Water Street rarely catch sight of the brothers called Wonson and Twoson, because these two men neither live in Fa & Sons nor stay in the shop to help with the holland-water business. However, most residents of Fertile Water District know that they are Mr Fa's nephews — that is, they are his brother's sons. They live just a little distance away, in a red-brick house near the sea. The house used to be inhabited by a foreigner, but the man has later disappeared, and now the two Crazy Fas are living there.

This nickname, the two Crazy Fas, is coined by the neighbours in Fertile Water District because those who have seen the brothers all agree that they are utterly crazy and the things they do are entirely against common practice. Some strange stories even say that these two fellas stay at home all day playing with bottles and catching bugs and ants, having great fun but not doing any work. People get curious when they pass by the red-brick house, for the main door is always tightly shut and no noise can be heard from within. Even when they pile themselves into a human pyramid and look in from high up through a window they cannot see anything, because the place is just full of holland-water glass bottles and appears to be really a storage place for Fa & Sons' things. Yes, shophands have been spotted carrying bottles away from here, and in winter the bottled drinks which Fa & Sons has no space for are kept here. How shall we put it? Wonson and Twoson are members of the family doubling up as long-term watchmen guarding the house in which goods are stored.

People generally assume that these two men are slow and dumb and simply do not know how to make holland-water, so they are sent to guard the house. If you wait here outside patiently enough you might run into them after all, because

they sometimes come out to the open ground at the back to dig for earthworms and turn up the soil. Once they have been seen crouching on the ground playing a catch-frog game, their hands and feet and faces all covered with dirt, and everywhere frogs are leaping about.

But the two Crazy Fas will come to Fa & Sons two or three times a year for family gathering on the important feast days and New Year's Day. When Mr Fa asks them to come over for dinner, they'll come, but they won't bring any fruit or cakes. Once they brought along several long-horned grasshoppers locked up in a little cage knitted in fine bamboo strips, and once they brought a bowl with a dozen tadpoles swimming in it.

This year, as usual, the brothers are invited to Fa & Sons' Winter Solstice dinner. They arrive with two crickets kept in a chunk of bamboo with the open end blocked with cotton wool, but there's no clay bowl for staging a cricket fight. They are a little surprised to see a foreigner with curly hair and a big beard outside Fa & Sons. It's the merchant who is renting half the shop for this season, and his name is Faliyeh. The brothers are immediately attracted by the things displayed there, because they have come across many of these things in books but for the first time here they are seeing the real things.

They examine the things in turn — a giraffe-necked silver teapot, a small glass cup shaped like the figure 8, some small plates, and brocaded shoes that look like little boats. And then almost simultaneously they catch sight of a carpet hanging on the wall, and almost simultaneously exclaim, 'Oh?'

'This carpet of yours, can it fly?' Wonson asks.

'Is it a flying carpet?' Twoson asks.

'What flying carpet?' asks Mr Fa.

Mr Fa has never heard of something called a flying carpet, but Wonson and Twoson have. The brothers are great readers of fairy tales, and they have read about the Country of Persia and its flying horses and flying carpets. In fact, just the night before, hearing crickets chirping, they have abandoned sleep and sneaked out to the back of the house, intending to hunt down the little insects, and there in front of them, not very far away, they have seen a square-shaped, flat-looking thing, flying not very high up in the sky, and looking exactly like the drawings in the picture books.

'Hm, flying carpet.' says Wonson.

'A flying carpet for sure.' says Twoson.

'Ah, but there are no more flying carpets now,' says the merchant with curly hair.