

## ***Doctor Pork Hogs the Limelight***

**by Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut**

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His back aching and his legs heavy, Hong slowly climbed the fern-covered hillside. He wearily pushed aside clumps of purple-veined fronds, forcing his way through the dense foliage. In the slanting afternoon light, their silvery canopies seemed to float above the solid darkness of their shadows. When he reached the top of the hill, he collapsed at the foot of a beech tree. Brushing a strand of damp hair out of his eyes, he stretched his legs and carefully shrugged off the bag slung across his chest.

A satisfied smile lit up the young man's face as he opened the bag and contemplated its contents. His harvest was worth a small fortune. With his eyes, he caressed the shiny leaves of *truong sinh thao*, which the Chinese call *chiao ku lan*: the herb of immortality. The plant wasn't particularly rare, but it only grew in jungle ravines, depths choked with vegetation and crawling with snakes that few people dared descend, for fear of not making it out before nightfall. Which is why Mr. Trung, the apothecary, relied on Hong to gather the miracle plant that filled his shop jars and sold for its weight in gold. Immortality was often dreamed of but rarely achieved, Hong reflected. It was certainly worth a few strings of coins and some jostling, though. He thought of the old men and women who elbowed through the crowded herbalist shop to snatch up the little packets with their hint of eternal life. Gnarled fingers greedily clutched the promise of days without number, and their owners hurried home to infuse the leaves and pour a drink sweeter than honey down their withered throats.

But trade in immortality wasn't what made Mr. Trung prosperous, because sooner or later the little old people stopped coming to his shop. In fact, the apothecary made most of his money selling the herbs that went into cosmetics: beauty elixirs, youth unguents, vaporous powders. These he stingily parceled out to the drug compounders, who paid dearly for them. Hong knew this because he worked behind the counter when he wasn't gathering plants. For someone concocting a batch of Seven Treasures for Silken Hair, he would carefully bring down the blue porcelain jar of angelica, weigh out Chinese boxthorn, and wrap packets of sesame seeds. For the delicate balm called Perfumed Snow on Marble Mountain, he chose peony and milk vetch roots, which clear the complexion and soften the skin. Slimming potions called for ginseng, hawthorn berries, and licorice twigs. The buyers gritted their teeth as they handed over their coins, but consoled themselves with the thought of how much they would charge their beauty-mad customers.

A pensive expression crossed young Hong's face. No doubt about it, women were an ideal clientele for these pill pushers, he thought. Whether they liked what they saw in the mirror or were dissatisfied with their shape, they all ran to the quacks, anxious to enhance their beauty or disguise their faults. Just look at Mrs. Jonquil, whose hair had stayed jet black through at least fifty springs, or the greengrocer's vain wife, whose tofu-white face rose above the weathered neck of a peasant woman.

Hong found these feminine wiles confusing. How would he be able to detect the real woman beneath her affectations? Given his age, this was far from a rhetorical question, because he was young, vigorous, and sadly inexperienced. He noticed his attractive customers of course,

glanced at the shy girls and discreetly eyed the married ones. But he always wondered if his senses weren't being fooled by the glint of an artfully placed comb or the graceful drape of a well-cut garment. Did that velvety skin come out of a jar of foundation cream? Did scarlet paint hide pale, rough lips eager to bestow a treacherous kiss on some credulous fool?

Mostly, Hong was scared to death of being misled. He knew that nubile young girls outdid each other in devising clever traps for simpletons with reasonably deep pockets, and had just one thing in mind: marriage. This timeless manhunt had already made a few victims among his acquaintances. A childhood friend who eagerly embraced a soup seller by candlelight woke in the arms of a hard-mouthed woman demanding reparation for her lost honor. A first cousin let himself be enchanted by a very feminine artist, but when they became intimate was dismayed to find her more artistic than feminine. Finally, a gray-haired neighbor, who had sparked his elderly friends' envy when he yielded to the charms of a woman with a slim waist and neat eyebrows, unexpectedly found himself the father of a child the spitting image of a local buffalo herder.

In light of these obvious betrayals, Hong had resolved to keep a cool head. He swore to remain vigilant in the face of the subterfuges woven by marriage-minded seductresses. He wouldn't be fooled by a layer of powder hiding pockmarked skin. By the light of day he would examine eyelids for wrinkles camouflaged by a streak of kohl, or gray roots in a head of otherwise raven hair. He well understood the marvels of unguents and elixirs, and knew how far a woman would go to make herself attractive. He felt his lucidity would protect him from the worst.

Feeling reassured, Hong rested his head against the beech's rough bark and studied the valley below, where the folds of night were already gathering. In the depths, green vipers might be spiraling up the vines while centipedes set forth, their bodies swaying as gracefully as a courtesan's. He sometimes imagined that by moonlight, fantastic creatures came to life in the heart of this vegetable sea, born of the mosses' damp heat and fed by the grasses' magical attributes. Touching a star-shaped flower, snakes might turn into girls, their bodies hugging the graceful curves of a young tree. Brushing bamboo shoots, a tree frog could change into a lively maiden swimming in the river, her long legs kicking up a crown of watery pearls. Caressed by moonbeams, the corolla of orchids became the fluttering folds of a dress from which emerged a woman like a goddess...

At that image, Hong couldn't help but moan. Thinking of the wild flower immediately brought to mind Miss Orchid, whom he sometimes ran into under the Eastern Gate arcade. She would give him a distracted glance, which set him on fire, before lightly tripping off, their brief encounter already forgotten. Hypnotized by the otherworldly beauty of her face, Hong admired her proud bearing and swaying hips. But he might as well be sighing for the wind or weeping over a shadow, because already nothing remained of Miss Orchid but the memory of her passage and a fragrance that he vainly tried to retain.

This sad realization brought the young man back down to earth, and he painfully got to his feet. In the gathering twilight, trees and vines were starting to blur into a damp, scented grayness. Best not to hang around here if he wanted to be home in time for dinner.

Hong was brushing off his pants when he noticed a figure walking on the path to town. His eyes half closed, he tried to identify the swinging gait he thought he recognized.

"What in the world are you doing here, Mrs. Camelia?" he called loudly.

The woman turned in surprise and stumbled toward him.

"Oh, Mr. Hong, I'm so happy to see you," she answered, pushing aside the mane of hair falling down her back. "I hurt my knee, and this path seems endless."

Full of solicitude, Hong hurried to her. It was the wife of old Chang, whose paintbrush store stood on the same square as the herbalist where he worked. Mrs. Camelia was past thirty, but she had been spared ever being pregnant, unlike most women her age, and still had a good figure.

"Whatever you do, don't force yourself," he advised. "That could make it worse."

"Do you think so? But I really must keep going."

She took a step, and repressed a small grimace of pain.

"How stupid of me! I just wanted to go for a walk and got lost, then I slipped on a stone trying to climb up to the path."

She shook her head, cheeks pink with annoyance, and hiked her dress up a little to inspect her shoes. Hong couldn't help but notice her graceful instep, which a pearl-trimmed slipper set off to good advantage.

"Your being here is a great comfort to me, especially as it's getting dark," she said, her eyes shining with tears of pain.

Gritting her teeth, she bravely tried to take a step, but managed only to hobble.

Hong was moved by so much courage.

"You won't get far that way. Let me help you. Here, put your arm around my neck, and I'll hold you up," he shyly suggested.

Mrs. Camelia gave him a grateful smile and put her slim arm around his shoulder, a touch that gave Hong an unexpected shiver. He blushed scarlet, and coughed to cover his embarrassment. Inwardly, he cursed his rush of emotion. After all, this woman was not only older than him, she was married to a man he saw occasionally.

"Your husband must be in a panic over your absence," he said, to show that his intentions were completely honorable. "We better hurry, or he will call out the tribunal marshals."

She leaned against him, smiling wearily.

"As it happens, he thinks I'm staying with a woman friend tonight. He doesn't like me roaming around, so I made up a little excuse so I could go out. Just as well, because this way he won't be too worried."

As she said that, Mrs. Camelia almost lost her balance and Hong was just able to catch her by the waist. It was quite a slender waist, and his fingers could make out the charming outline of her hip, all curved and round. A bead of sweat ran insidiously down his back, his heart began to pound, and he had to take a deep breath to master his feelings. But a glance at the poor creature clinging to him as her savior eased his mind. This was an honest married woman, who certainly wouldn't try to trap him like some girl looking for a husband. In her misfortune, she had put herself under his protection, and he was determined to help her.

"Be brave, Mrs. Camelia. Together, we'll make it to town one way or the other, by the hour of the Rat, if necessary."

As they cautiously walked along, the branches overhead began to disappear in the darkness. Hong could feel his companion weakening, and she pressed against him. When they passed a leafy ash tree, she moaned and gently pushed him away.

"I can't take another step, Mr. Hong! Go home alone. I'll stay here, in the shelter of the trees. Tomorrow you can ask my husband to send hammock porters to fetch me."

"Not on your life!" he objected. "If you can't go any farther, we'll spend the night here. I mean, I'll stand guard while you sleep, in case a tiger comes prowling."

Mrs. Camelia relaxed slightly and murmured:

"On the other side of this hill, there's a cave where we could spend the night. It would be safer."

Hong shuddered.

"The Cave of a Thousand Souls? You can't be serious! I've heard terrible stories about that cursed place!"

"What a child you are!" she answered, her eyes bright with amusement. "Those are just fairy tales!"

"No they aren't! Anyone who goes in that cave winds up dying in agony. Everybody says so!"

Mrs. Camelia looked Hong in the eye.

"Please forgive me," she said, sounding apologetic. "I forgot that the young are as impressionable as old grandmothers. In that case, I'll just stretch out here while you go on to town. Be sure to alert my husband!"

She waved him away and started looking for a comfortable spot under the ash.

This got Hong's back up. Mrs. Camelia was in no position to call him a coward! After all, she had gotten herself lost, the silly goose, and then managed to hurt her knee. Since when did a middle-aged woman get to mock a lively young man like him, anyway?

"All right! If that's the way it is, let's go to this famous cave right now," he ordered irritably. "Better hurry if you want to get there before nightfall."

She came close, and he firmly took her by the waist, glad to show that he wasn't a man to be ridiculed. She really did get on his nerves, with her scornful hints and barely disguised contempt. The day hadn't come when he would let a woman make fun of him. Poor old Chang, he thought. It must be no picnic having a wife as sharp-tongued as this one.

Exasperated, Hong hustled them along, while his companion gave little cries of protest. Soon they came to a cliff, the outlier of a mountain that stretched off in a rocky spine northward. They climbed up to its base as the sky was turning purple, and found themselves before an opening in the rock, a mouth as black as a demon's throat: the Cave of a Thousand Souls.

Hong's belly involuntarily tensed, but he frowned when he noticed Mrs. Camelia smiling slightly at him.

"Come on!" he said. "We'll make ourselves at home inside, just as you suggested."

His throat tight, Hong led Mrs. Camelia into the lair, then stopped for a moment while his eyes adjusted to the near-total darkness. The shadows gathering outside seemed translucent compared to the cave's almost palpable blackness. Its roof was apparently quite high, and something like a breath or a premonition told him that they were not alone.

Hong carefully lit the oil lantern he always carried on his outings.

Suddenly a dark cloud rushed down toward them, an army of lacy wings like the sails of a fleet of warships, accompanied by a roar of rushing air. This living wave swept in a circle before withdrawing. Hong stood paralyzed, frozen by fear, arms raised to protect himself. Mrs. Camelia shrieked and threw herself against him.

"Bats!" said Hong, once the wave had passed. "They've flown deeper into the cave."

An unpleasant smell rose from the cave floor, which was covered with bat droppings. Hong pulled his companion a little farther, to a clean patch of ground next to a large boulder. Beyond the rock, outside the lamp's circle of amber light, lay darkness, dank and unfathomable.

"Since you know all about herbs, I wonder if you could examine my knee?" asked Mrs. Camelia, leaning against the big boulder.

Hong studied her in the lamplight. His authority had clearly brought her to heel, he thought with satisfaction, and she now wanted to show her submission. With her eyes chastely downcast, and speaking in a lower voice, she had abandoned that unbearable arrogance that had so annoyed him earlier. High time, too. She finally understood who was in charge here.

"Very well," he said haughtily, affirming his superiority. "I'll see what I can do."

Hong knelt and took the hem of her dress. With a movement he hoped was firm, he bared her ankle. It appeared normal, and he lightly felt her skin, whose unusual softness unnerved him.

"Allow me to point out that the pain is not in my foot, but in my knee," said Mrs. Camelia, raising the hem of her dress herself.

"I'm getting there," he snapped, as the shape of an attractive calf appeared to his staring eyes.

Hong had never gotten so close to a woman's leg in his life, and he couldn't help but shiver. Panting now, he studied the curve of the muscle and the grain of the skin, whose paleness glowed with unexpected sensuality. The dress continued to rise until the knee appeared. It showed no bruising of any kind.

"You don't have a sprain," he croaked, "but I'm going to make sure nothing else is wrong."

He began to knead the joint, surprised by its limberness. As his trembling fingers explored the skin behind the knee, Hong realized he was feeling very warm. His clothes suddenly seemed constricting. His pants felt tight and his jacket was damp with sweat. Raising his head, he caught Mrs. Camelia looking down at him with a strange half smile on her face.

He had no time to ask why, because she suddenly slumped back against the boulder. Knocked off balance, Hong tried to grab her dress, but his hand slipped and wound up claspings her hot thigh instead. In a panic, he was trying to get free when Mrs. Camelia firmly grabbed his wrist. Hong braced himself, expecting a slap, but it didn't come. Instead, Mr. Chang's wife forced his hand deep under her dress, where his fingers encountered a sweetness not of this world. Kneeling, his hand caught in that exquisite hollow, Hong felt he was about to faint. But his companion roughly pulled him up and shoved his face into the folds of her dress at the level of the enchanted cavern. On the point of suffocating, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the musky, feline odor emanating from Mrs. Camelia's body. He breathed in an animal, carnal scent born of dampness and desire.

"Come here," she growled, clutching him.

Now on his feet, Hong saw she was grinning widely as she greedily licked his lips. With a throaty laugh, she grabbed part of his person.

"My, my! Not so relaxed anymore, are you, little Hong? You're quite tense, not to say stiff with fear."

Braced against the boulder, Mrs. Camelia wrapped a leg around Hong's waist, trapping him in an iron grip. With the most precious part of him caught in the woman's hand and his blood racing, he took the only decision that made any sense: he surrendered.

And so it was that in the Cave of a Thousand Souls Mrs. Camelia introduced young Hong to the Rabbit Quivering in the Velvet Lair, before straddling him to execute the sublime Two Seagulls Fly Past the Moon. Outside the cave, the stars moved across the Silver River while she taught him the secret of the Spider Web Trapping the Silkworm, then demonstrated the delicate Mist and Rain Flowing in Spring. Hong experienced the greatest ecstasy of his life doing the Exalting Kiss of the Chimera, and thought he would die while Climbing the Summit of the Gods.

Above them, in an ever-changing aerial ballet, beat thousands of bat wings, as Hong let himself be borne away on luminous waves of pleasure. They finally cast him up, satiated and released, on the shadowy beaches of sleep.

When he awoke, the oil lantern was out. A milky dawn light filtered in from the cave entrance. Hong raised himself on an elbow, his loins sore and his throat dry. Memories of the night before returned, and he looked for Mrs. Camelia beside him. In vain. Had she gone out to get some fresh air after that night like no other? Or was she hiding in some dark corner, ready to inflict yet more delicious torments on him?

But nothing stirred in the gloom, so Hong stood up and called to her. Only the echo answered, amplified and distorted. He grinned. The sly vixen was probably laying a trap for him, which he would happily throw himself into. Excited, he cheerfully stepped around the large boulder.

And stopped dead.

With the hairs on his neck standing straight up, Hong stared at the corpse lying at his feet. Its legs were spread apart and scraps of clothing pitifully draped what was left of the body, whose flesh seemed to have dissolved. All that remained were gleaming white bones and a skull, its jaws open as if in a silent scream.

His heart in his mouth, Hong stumbled blindly out of the cave. Behind him, the flight of bats rose wingtip to wingtip like a huge wave about to break.

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#### About the Author

**Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut** (1962– ) was born in Hue, Vietnam, studied in the United States, and lives near Paris. She is a mechanical engineer, a tireless traveler, and the author of the popular Mandarin Tan book series. Set in 17th-century Vietnam, the novels relate the travels and adventures of a young civil judge and his friend, the obese and greedy but erudite Doctor Pork. The novels are a rich mine of Vietnamese culture, history, politics, food, and religion. This excerpt is the first chapter of *Les Travers du docteur Porc* (Philippe Picquier, 2007).

#### About the Translator

**William Rodarmor** (1942– ) is a veteran French literary translator. His translation of *Tamata and the Alliance*, by Bernard Moitessier, won the 1996 Lewis Galantière Award from the American Translators Association. Rodarmor recently edited and translated two anthologies in Whereabouts Press's "Traveler's Literary Companion" series: *French Feast* (2011) and *France* (2008). His other accomplishments include sailing solo from Tahiti to Hawaii in 1971 and winning *The New Yorker* magazine's cartoon caption contest in 2010.