

The Marble Arch

By P'ou Song-lin

When the troubles began to break out in Hankow, many families were alarmed. Those who were not ignorant of the powerful organisation of the revolutionists left the town as soon as possible, anticipating that it would soon be plundered and burnt.

The retired prefect, Kiun, was amongst the first to embark in order to go down the river. His house was situated at several lis from the river, on the confines of the suburbs, outside the fortified enclosure. He had only been married a short time, and was living with his father and mother.

When the baggage at last was ready, the bearers fixed it in the middle of their long bamboos and set off two by two, grumbling under the heavy load. The two old people followed; Kiun and his young wife, the charming Seaweed, helped them as well as they could.

In order to avoid crossing the centre of the town, they followed the crenellated wall by an almost deserted road. A young man and woman alone were sauntering in the same direction, carrying parcels on their shoulders.

"Where are you going to?" they asked, as it is the custom to do between travellers.

"As far as the river," replied Kiun.

"And you?"

"We also," said the young man.

"What is your precious name?"

"My contemptible name is Kiun. But you, deign to inform me about your family?"

"My name is Wang The-king. We are flying from the insurrection."

They thus talked while walking in company.

Seaweed took the advantage of a moment when the new-comers were a little in front to bend towards her husband.

"Do not let us get in the same junk with these strangers. The man has looked at me several times in a rude way; his eyes are unsteady and fickle; I am afraid of him."

Kiun made a sign of assent. But when they had arrived on the quay, Wang The-king gave himself so much trouble to find a junk and help to embark the luggage that the prefect, bound by the rites, could not avoid asking him to get on board the boat with him.

They unmoored; Wang The-king established himself on the prow with his wife, near the mariners; he spoke a long time with them while they were passing the last houses of the large city.

When night fell, they were in a part of the river where it got broader to such an extent that you could no longer distinguish the banks. The wind was blowing rather violently and the unfurling waves projected heavy showers on the mats which covered the quarter-deck.

Kiun, uneasy, went to the prow of the boat in order to question the master. The bright moon was rising, lighting the dark line of the bank. They approached in order to throw the anchor.

Wang The-king was on the narrow bridge; when Kiun came to his side, he coolly pushed the poor prefect overboard. Kiun's father was two paces behind; Wang ran to him and threw him also into the tumultuous waters of the rapid current. Kiun's mother, hearing a cry and a struggle, went to see what was happening, and she also was precipitated into the foaming river.

Seaweed, from the cabin, had seen all; but she took good care not to go outside; she moaned:

“Alas! my father-in-law and my mother-in-law are dead! My husband has been killed! I am going to die, too!”

While she was crying, Wang The-king entered the cabin.

“Fear nothing,” said he; “forget those people who are no more and won’t come back. I am going to take you home to the city of The-Golden-tombs. There I have fields and houses belonging to me; I will give them to you.”

The young woman kept back her sobs and said nothing; she thought it wise not to provoke the murderer.

Wang The-king, very satisfied with his prospects, went back to the mariners, gave them the greater part of what his victims had brought in silver and luggage; then he quietly took his dinner and retired to his cabin with his wife. The woman had a strange look, but she did not say anything, and they went to sleep.

Towards the hour of the Rat, the woman began to groan; then she started out of her sleep and cried to her husband:

“Kill me, repudiate me! I can no longer stay with you! Thunder and lightning will strike you! I have dreamt it; I will no longer be the wife of a murderer and a thief!”

Wang, furious, struck her. But as she continued, he took her in his arms and threw her into the river.

On the second day the boat arrived at The-Golden-tombs. Wang took Seaweed to his family. When his old mother asked what he had done with his first wife, he replied:

“She fell in the river, and I will marry this one.”

They were soon settled in the house. Wang wished to take liberties with Seaweed, who gently drove him back.

“We must not neglect the rites. Do not let us forget to empty first the marriage cup.”

Wang joyously accepted; and soon, seated opposite each other, they began exchanging cups of wine in the ritual way.

Seaweed, however, pretended to drink, and tried to make her lover tipsy; she contrived this little by little.

Wang, rendered sleepy by the wine, undressed himself, got on the bed, and ordered the young woman to put out the lamps and come to him.

She carefully blew the lamps and said:

“I will come in a minute!”

Then she quickly went to her luggage, took out a sword she had hidden there, and came back. Feeling with her hands in the darkness, she found the throat of the man and struck him as hard as she could: the man screamed and tried to get up; she struck again and again: there was a moaning, a gurgle, and then silence.

However, Wang’s mother, having heard some noise, came with a lantern. Seaweed killed her before the old woman could even say a word.

Then the young woman, having avenged her family, tried to cut her own throat, in order to join her husband. The sword was blunt and she was only able to scratch herself. She then remembered that, outside the house, there was a fairly big pond; she ran out and threw herself into the water.

Some neighbours saw her and ran to her help; other people came; lanterns were brought forth; the poor girl at last was taken out of the pond, and brought back to her house. But, when the new-comers entered the room, they saw the bodies and the blood.

“Murder! Murder!” cried they.

And they immediately sent a boy to call the police. The constables came and looked all over the room; they soon found in Seaweed's luggage a note prepared by the unfortunate woman and stating the truth about her family's death. The assistants were loud in their praise of her act:

"She avenged her husband; she has been witty enough to beguile the murderer; and now she has killed herself! Such an act of courage and virtue has not been heard of for centuries. We must ask the authorities to build her a marble arch to commemorate her history, and be an example to future generations."

While all this was going on, they tried to revive the woman; everything was done, but in vain. A coffin was then brought in, and the girl transferred to it, covered with her best garments and jewels. The lid was screwed on, and everybody left the house.

We must now come back to the evening when Wang pushed into the water Seaweed's husband. Kiun was a strong man and a very good swimmer; surprised by this sudden attack, all he could do at first was to keep his head out of the tumultuous water. He then thought to go back to the boat, but, on the foaming expanse nothing was to be seen; the rapid current had driven him too far. At last the water brought him to a curving beach, where he was able to land.

Walking disconsolately on the sand, he saw a human body rolled by the surge; he approached, and recognised his father; farther on he saw his mother; both he dragged out of the water. Most uneasy about his wife, he walked on the river's edge, straining his eyes; the moon was shining; he saw at last a human being holding a big piece of wood. He swam to her, pushed her to the beach, and took her he thought was his wife to the dry sand. He undid the upper garment in order to rub her members; when he saw she was not so cold, he wiped her hair out of her face. His stupor was immense in recognising Wang's wife.

The sun rose at last and warmed them. The young woman sighed, opened her eyes, and, completely herself again, told Kiun what she had seen:

"My husband is a murderer. In a dream I saw the King-of-Shadows himself sitting behind his tribunal and writing his name on the death-list. Besides, he is in love with your wife. If you wish it, we will go together straight to The Golden-tombs and do what we can to avenge ourselves."

Kiun, seeing a man coming to work in a field not far from there, went to him and told him in a few words what had happened; the man led them to his landlord, a rich man, who gave them food and warm dresses, sent men to bring the drowned bodies to a side house and have them properly buried. Then he advanced a certain sum of money to Kiun, who agreed to send it back when he should get to a place where he could find a correspondent of his bankers.

Then Kiun and his companion engaged a small boat and went down the river. When they got to The Golden-tombs, they questioned the people in the street about Wang. A month had elapsed since the events we have told of; the first man they questioned looked at them in wonder:

"How is it you don't know what happened? Wang is dead; he has been killed by a virtuous woman whose family he had murdered and who killed herself afterwards. You have only to go on; in the first street to your right you will see a new marble arch which has just been erected to commemorate virtuous Seaweed's courageous death."

Kiun thought his heart would burst; he dragged his companion to the marble arch and read the inscription. Then he bought a bundle of those imitations of gold and silver ingots made with paper which people burn on the tombs in order to send some money to the dead; he went to the tomb in the place indicated by the inscription.

There he reverently knelt, and, after having knocked the ground with his forehead, he burnt the paper-ingots, rose, and went away with Wang's wife.

When they were back in their boat, they discussed their plans and resolved to go down the river to Shanghai.

They were leaving the harbour, when a small boat crossed their way; two women sat on the bench. One of them reminded Kiun strangely of his late wife. The woman had looked up at him and seemed surprised. The retired prefect, moved by a mysterious strength, pronounced aloud a sentence which used to make his wife laugh when they were together happy in Hankow:

“I see wild geese flying high in the sky.”

Seaweed, when she was alive, used to answer by a phrase which had nothing to do with the first sentence, and had made them laugh very often by its stupidity. The woman in the boat said it too:

“The dog wants the cat’s biscuit; you quickly shut it in the house.”

Kiun, wondering whether it was Seaweed’s ghost, asked the mariners to go alongside the other boat; he jumped in it; the woman threw her arms round his neck, and they wept together.

“Are you alive? or is it only your ghost I hold in my arms?” asked he.

“I am alive!”

Then she told him her adventures; when she was put into the coffin, she had some jewels on. One of the assistants resolved to steal them; he waited till everybody was gone and the house empty; then he deliberately unscrewed the coffin’s lid and rifled what he could. He was trying to take a ring off her hand, when the supposed corpse rose and screamed.

The poor man thought his last hour had come and did not move. Seaweed, seeing her jewels in his hands, and seeing the coffin she was in, grasped the situation at a glance.

“You want my jewels! Have them if you like; you saved my life, and without you I would have been stifled in this gruesome box.”

The man at first dared not accept; then he said:

“In exchange for your kindness, I will tell you something. In the third house in the first street lives a rich widow; she is alone and would like to adopt a girl; go to her and tell her everything. She will be happy to give you a home.”

Then he helped her to get out of the coffin, screwed the lid again, and disappeared. Seaweed went straight to the house. The widow received her with the greatest kindness, and asked of her to let everybody believe she was dead; if not, there would have been a lawsuit.

Both women, now united by the closest affection, had been out on the river for pleasure’s sake when they saw Kiun’s bark. The widow, when the explanations were finished, opened her arms to Kiun she called him her son-in-law. Seaweed asked Wang’s wife to be the second wife of her husband. And they all lived long and happy.