

The River of Sorrows

By P'ou Song-lin

Along the path leading to the city of All-virtues, in the obscure night, a poor coolie, grumbling under a heavy load of salt, was trudging on as fast as he could.

"I shall never get there before the hour of the Rat, and my wife will say again; 'Wang The-tenth has drunk too many cups of wine.' She does not know the weight of that stuff

As he was thus thinking, two men suddenly jumped from either side of the road and held him by the arms.

"What do you want?" cried the poor man. "I am only an unhappy carrier, and my load is only salt, very common salt."

"We don't want your salt, and you had better throw it down. We are sent from the Regions below and we want you to come down with us."

"Am I dead already?" asked The-tenth. "I did not know. I must tell my wife. Can't you come again to-morrow night?"

"Impossible to wait. You must come immediately. But I don't think you are dead. It is only to work for a few days down below."

"This is rather strange," replied The-tenth. "With all the people who have died since the world has been the world you still want living men? We don't go and ask you to do our work, do we?"

While thus arguing, he felt himself suffocated by a heavy smell and lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he was on the bank of a fairly large river. Hundreds of men were standing in the water; some of them carried baskets; others, with spades and different utensils, were dragging out what they could from the bottom. Soldiers with heavy sticks struck those who stopped even for a second.

On the bank several men were standing, and a number of others came from time to time. A magistrate was sitting behind a big red table, turning over the pages of a book. At last, he called "Wang The-tenth."

"Wang The-tenth!" repeated the soldiers. And they threw the poor man down in a kneeling position in front of the magistrate, who looked on the book and said:

"You have been an undutiful son; do you remember the day when you told your father he was a fool?"

Then speaking to the soldiers, he said:

"To the river!"

The guards pushed the man, gave him a basket, and ordered him to help in the cleaning of the river.

The water was red and thick; its stench was abominable; the bodies of the workmen were all red, and The-tenth discovered it was blood. He looked at the first basket he took to the bank; it was only putrid flesh and broken bones.

Thus he worked day by day without stopping. When he was not going fast enough, the guards struck him with their sticks, and their sticks were bones. In the deep places he had to put his head into the water and felt the filthy stuff fill his nostrils and mouth.

Among the workers he recognised many people he used to know. A great number died and were carried away by the stream.

At last two guards called his name, helped him to the bank, and suddenly he found himself again on the path leading to the city of All-virtues.

Now, on the night when The-tenth was taken away, his wife waited for him. Troubled not to see him, she started as soon as the sun beamed, and looked for him on the road. She soon found his body lying unconscious. Trying in vain to revive him, she thought him dead, and wept bitterly.

Not being strong enough to bring home his body, she came back to town in order to ask the help of her family. In the afternoon, clad in the white dress of mourning, and accompanied by her four brothers, she started again.

What was her astonishment and fear when, approaching the place where she had found the body, she saw her husband walking towards her. He was all covered with blood, and the stench was so strong that everybody pinched his nose.

When he had explained what had happened, they all returned to the village. The-tenth knelt reverently before his ancestors' tablet, offered butter and rice, and burnt incense.

This very day he asked a Taoist priest what was the river he had worked in. The priest explained to him it was called the River-of-sorrows. It took its source in the outer world in every tear that was shed. The people that killed themselves out of despair were floated down its stream to the kingdom of shadows.

Sometimes the sorrows on earth were so great that people killed themselves by thousands and did not shed any tears; the blood then was too thick to wash away the decayed remains, and the river-bed had to be cleaned lest it should overflow and drown the whole world. Living men alone were employed in this work, for only living men can cure living men's sorrows.