

Love's-Slave

By P'ou Song-lin

In the City-between-the-rivers lived a young student named Lan. He had just passed successfully his second literary examination, and, walking in the Street-of-the-precious-stones, asked himself what he would now do in life.

While he was going, looking vacantly at the passers-by, he saw an old friend of his father, and hastened to join his closed fists and to salute him very low, as politeness orders.

"My best congratulations!" answered the old man. "What are you doing in this busy street?"

"Nothing at all; I was asking myself what profession I am now to pursue."

"What profession? Which one would be more honourable than that of teacher? It is the only one an 'elevated man' *Kiu-jen* of the second degree, can pursue. By the by, would you honour my house with your presence? My son is nearly eighteen. He is not half as learned as he should be, and, besides, he has a very bad temper. I feel very old; if I knew you would consent to give him the right direction and be a second father to him, I would not dread so much to die and leave him alone."

Lan bowed and said:

"I am much honoured by your proposition, and I accept it readily. I will go tomorrow to your palace."

Two hours after, a messenger brought to the young man a packet containing one hundred ounces of silver, with a note stating that this comparatively great sum represented his first year's salary.

In the evening he knocked at his pupil's door and was ushered into the sitting-room. The old man introduced him to the whole family: first his son, a lad with a decided look boding no good; then a young and beautiful girl of seventeen, his daughter, called Love's-slave. Lan was struck by the sweet and refined appearance of his pupil's sister.

"The sight of her will greatly help me to stay here," thought he.

The next morning, when his first lesson was ended, he strolled out into the garden, admiring here a flower and there an artificial little waterfall among diminutive mountain-rocks. Behind a bamboo-bush he suddenly saw Love's-slave and was discreetly turning back, when she stopped him by a few words of greeting.

Every day they thus met in the solitude of the flowers and trees and grew to love each other. Lan's task with his pupil was greater and harder than he had supposed; but for Love's-slave's sake, he would never have remained in the house.

After three months the old man fell ill; the doctors were unable to cure him; he died, and was buried in the family ground, behind the house.

When Lan, after the funeral, told his pupil to resume his lessons, he met with such a reception that he went immediately to his room and packed his belongings. Love's-slave, hearing from a servant what had happened, went straight to her lover's room and tried to induce him to stay.

"How can you ask that from me?" said he. "After such an insult, I would consider myself as the basest of men if I stayed. I have 'lost face'; I must go."

The girl, seeing that nothing could prevail upon his resolution, went out of the room, but silently closed and locked the outer gate.

Lan left on a table what remained of the silver given him by the old man, and wrote a note to inform his pupil of his departure.

When he tried the gate and found it locked, he did not know at first what to do. Then he remembered a place where he could easily climb over the enclosure, went there, threw his luggage over the wall, and let himself out in this somewhat undignified way.

Before going back to his house, he went round to the tomb of the old man and burnt some sticks of perfume. Kneeling down, he explained respectfully to the dead what had happened and excused himself for having left unfinished the task he had undertaken. Rising at last, he went away.

The next morning Love's-slave, pleased with her little trick, came to the student's room and looked for him; he was nowhere to be found. She saw the silver on the table, and, reading the note he had left, she understood that he would never come back.

Her grief stifled her; heavy tears at last began running down her rosy cheeks. She took the silver, went straight to her father's tomb, fastened the heavy metal to her feet, and unrolled a sash from her waist. Then, making a knot with the sash round her neck, she climbed up the lower branches of a big fir-tree, fastened the other end of the coloured silk as high as she could and threw herself down. A few minutes afterwards she was dead. She was discovered by a member of the family, and quietly buried in the same enclosure.

Lan, who did not know anything, came back two or three days after to see her. The servants told him the truth. Silently and sullenly, he went to the tomb, and long remained absorbed in his thoughts; dusk was gathering; the first star shone in the sky. All of a sudden, hearing a sound as of somebody laughing, he turned round. Love's-slave was before his eyes.

"I was waiting for you, my love," she said in a strange and muffled voice. "Why are you coming so late?"

As he wanted to kiss her, she stopped him:

"Oh dear! I am dead. But it is decreed that I will come again to life if a magician performs the ceremony prescribed in the Book-of-Transmutations."

Immaterial like an evening fog, she disappeared in the growing darkness.

Lan returned immediately to the town, and, entering the first Taoist temple he saw, he explained to the priest what he wanted.

"If she has said it is decreed she should come back to life, we have only to go and open her tomb, while here my disciples will sing the proper chapters of the Book. Let us go now."

Giving some directions to his companions, he took a spade and started with Lan. The moon was shining, so that without any lantern they were able to perform their gloomy task.

Once the heavy lid of the coffin was unscrewed and taken off, the body of the young girl appeared as fresh as if she had been sleeping.

When the cold night-air bathed her face, she raised her head, sneezed, and sat up; looking at Lan, she said in a low voice:

"At last, you have come! I am recalled to life by your love. But now I am feeble; don't speak harshly to me; I could not bear it."

Lan, kissing her lovingly, took her in his arms and brought her to his house. After some days she was able to walk and live like ordinary people do.

They married and lived happily together for a year. Then, one day, Lan, having come back half-drunk from a friend's house, was rebuked by her, and, incensed, pushed her back. She did not say a word but, fainting, she fell down. Blood ran from her nostrils and mouth; nothing could recall her departing spirit.

