

# The *Shui-Mang* Plant

By P'u Sung-ling

The *shui-mang* is a poisonous herb. It is a creeper, like the bean, and has a similar red flower. Those who eat of it die, and become *shui-mang* devils, tradition asserting that such devils are unable to be born again unless they can find some one else who has also eaten of this poison to take their place. These *shui-mang* devils abound in the province of Hunan, where, by the way, the phrase "same-year man" is applied to, those born in the same year, who exchange visits and call each other brother, their children addressing the father's "brother" as uncle. This has now become a regular custom there.<sup>1</sup>

A young man named Chu was on his way to visit a same-year friend of Iris, when he was overtaken by a violent thirst. Suddenly he came upon an old woman sitting by the roadside under a shed and distributing tea gratis,<sup>2</sup> and immediately walked up to her to get a drink. She invited him into the shed, and presented him with a bowl of tea in a very cordial spirit; but the smell of it did not seem like the smell of ordinary tea, and he would not drink it, rising up to go away. The old woman stopped him, and called out, "San-niang! bring some good tea." Immediately a young girl came from behind the shed, carrying in her hands a pot of tea. 'She was about fourteen or fifteen years old, and of very fascinating appearance, with glittering rings and bracelets on her fingers and arms. As Chu received the cup from her his reason fled; and drinking down the tea she gave him, the flavour of which was unlike any other kind, he proceeded to ask for more. Then, watching for a moment when the old woman's back was turned, he seized her wrist and drew a ring from her finger. The girl blushed and smiled; and Chu, more and more inflamed, asked her where she lived. "Come again this evening," replied she, "and you'll find me here." Chu begged for a handful of her tea, which he stowed away with the ring, and took his leave. Arriving at his destination, he felt a pain in his heart, which he at once attributed to the tea, telling his friend what had occurred. "Alas! you are undone," cried the other.;" they were *shui-mang* devils. My father died in the same way, and we were unable to save him. There is no help for you." Chu was terribly frightened, and produced the handful of tea, which his friend at once pronounced to be leaves of the *shui-mang* plant. He then showed, him the ring, and told him what the girl had said; whereupon his friend, after some reflection, said, "She must be San-niang, of the K'ou family." "How could you know her name?" asked Chu, hearing his friend use the same words as the old woman. "Oh," replied he, "there was a nice-looking girl of that name who died some years ago from eating of the same herb. She is doubtless the girl you saw." Here some one observed that if the person so entrapped by a devil only knew its name, and could procure an old pair of its shoes, he might save himself by boiling them in water and drinking the liquor as medicine. Chu's friend thereupon rushed off at once to the K'ou family, and implored them to give him an old pair of their daughter's shoes; but they, not wishing to prevent their daughter from finding a substitute in Chu, flatly refused his request. So he went back in anger and told Chu, who ground his teeth with rage, saying, "If I die, she shall not obtain her transmigration

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<sup>1</sup> The common application of the term "same-year men" is to persons who have graduated at the same time.

<sup>2</sup> This is by no means an uncommon form of charity. During the temporary distress at Canton, in the summer of 1877, large tubs of gruel were to be seen standing at convenient points, ready for any poor person who might wish to stay his hunger. It is thus, and by similar acts of benevolence, such as building bridges, repairing roads, &c, &c., that the wealthy Chinaman strives to maintain an advantageous balance in his record of good and evil.

thereby." His friend then sent him home; and just as he reached the door he fell down dead. Chu's mother wept bitterly over his corpse, which was in due course interred; and he left behind one little boy barely a year old. His wife did not remain a widow, but in six months married again and went away, putting Chu's son under the care of his grandmother, who was quite unequal to any toil, and did nothing but weep morning and night. One day she was carrying her grandson about in her arms, crying bitterly all the time, when suddenly in walked Chu. His mother, much alarmed, brushed away her tears, and asked him what it meant. "Mother," replied he, "down in the realms below I heard you weeping. I am therefore come to tend you. Although a departed spirit, I have a wife, who has likewise come to share your toil. Therefore do not grieve." His mother inquired who his wife was, to which he replied, "When the K'ou family sat still and left to my fate I was greatly incensed against them; and after death I sought for San-niang, not knowing where she was. I have recently seen my old same-year friend, and he told me where she was. She had come to life again in the person of the baby-daughter of a high official named Jen; but I went thither and dragged her spirit back. She is now my wife, and we get on extremely well together." A very pretty and well-dressed young lady here entered, and made obeisance to Chu's mother, Chu saying, "This is San-niang, of the K'ou family; " and although not a living being, Mrs. Chu at once took a great fancy to her. Chu sent her off to help in the work of the house, and, in spite of not being accustomed to this sort of thing, she was so obedient to her mother-in-law as to excite the compassion of all. The two then took up their quarters in Chu's old apartments, and there they continued to remain.

Meanwhile San-niang asked Chu's mother to let the K'ou family know; and this she did, notwithstanding some objections raised by her son. Mr. and Mrs. K'ou were much astonished at the news, and, ordering their carriage, proceeded at once to Chu's house. There they found their daughter, and parents and child fell into each other's arms. San-niang entreated them to dry their tears; but her mother, noticing the poverty of Chu's household, was unable to restrain her feelings. "We are already spirits," cried San-niang; "what matters poverty to us? Besides, I am very well treated here, and am altogether as happy as I can be." They then asked her who the old woman was, to which she replied, "Her name was Ni. She was mortified at being too ugly to entrap people herself, and got me to assist her. She has now been born again at a soy-shop in the city." Then, looking at her husband, she added, "Come, since you are the son-in-law, pay the proper respect to my father and mother, or what shall I think of you?" Chu made his obeisance, and San-niang went into the kitchen to get food ready for them, at which her mother became very melancholy, and went away home, whence she sent a couple of maid-servants, a hundred ounces of silver, and rolls of cloth and silk, besides making occasional presents of food and wine, so that Chu's mother lived in comparative comfort. San-niang also went from time to time to see her parents, but would never stay very long, pleading that she was wanted at home, and such excuses; and if the old people attempted to keep her, she simply went off by herself. Her father built a nice house for Chu with all kinds of luxuries in it; but Chu never once entered his father-in-law's door.

Subsequently a man of the village who had eaten *shui-mang*, and had died in consequence, came back to life, to the great astonishment of everybody. However, Chu explained it, saying, "I brought him back to life. He was the victim of a man named Li Chiu; "but I drove off Li's spirit when it came to make the other take his place." Chu's mother then asked her son why he did not get a substitute for himself; to which he replied, "I do not like to do this. I am anxious to put an end to, rather than take advantage of, such a system. Besides, I am very happy waiting on you, and have no wish to be born again." From that time all persons who had poisoned themselves

with *shui-mang* were in the habit of feasting Chu and obtaining his assistance in their trouble. But in ten years' time his mother died, and he and his wife gave themselves up to sorrow, and would see no one, bidding their little boy put on mourning, beat his breast, and perform the proper ceremonies. Two years after Chu had buried his mother, his son married the granddaughter of a high official named Jen. This gentleman had had a daughter by a concubine, who had died when only a few months old; and now, hearing the strange story of Chu's wife, he came to call on, her' and arrange the marriage. He then gave his granddaughter to Chu's son, and a free intercourse was maintained between the two families. However, one day Chu said to his son, "Because I have been of service to my generation, God has appointed me Keeper of the Dragons; and I am now about to proceed to my post." Thereupon four horses appeared in the court-yard, drawing a carriage with yellow hangings, the flanks of the horses being covered with scale-like trappings. Husband and wife came forth in full dress, and took their seats, and, while son and daughter-in-law were weeping their adieus, disappeared from view. That very day the K'ou family saw their daughter arrive, and, bidding them farewell she told them the same story. The old people would have kept her, but she said, "My husband is already on his way," and, leaving the house, parted from them for ever. Chu's son was named Ngo, and his literary name was Li-ch'ên. He begged San-niang's bones from the K'ou family, and buried them by the side of his father's.