

The Man Who Was Thrown Down A Well

By P'u Sung-ling

Mr. Tai, of An-ch'ing, was a wild fellow when young. One day as he was returning home tipsy,¹ he met by the way a dead cousin of his named Chi; and having, in his drunken state, quite forgotten that his cousin was dead, he asked him where he was going. "I am already a disembodied spirit," replied Chi; "don't you remember?" Tai was a little disturbed at this; but, being under the influence of liquor, he was not frightened, and inquired of his cousin what he was doing in the realms below. "I am employed as scribe," said Chi, "in the court of the Great King." "Then you must know all about our happiness and misfortunes to come," cried Tai. "It is my business," answered his cousin, "so of course I know. But I see such an enormous mass that, unless of special reference to myself or family, I take no notice of any of it. Three days ago, by the way, I saw your name in the register." Tai immediately asked what there was about himself, and his cousin replied, "I will not deceive you; your name was put down for a dark and dismal hell." Tai was dreadfully alarmed, and at the same time sobered, and entreated his cousin to assist him in some way. "You may try," said Chi, "what merit will do for you as a means of mitigating your punishment; but the register of your sins is as thick as my finger, and nothing short of the most deserving acts will be of any avail. What can a poor fellow like myself do for you? Were you to perform one good act every day, you would not complete the necessary total under a year and more, and it is now too late for that. But henceforth amend your ways, and there may still be a chance of escape for you." When Tai heard these words he prostrated himself on the ground, imploring his cousin to help him; but, on raising his head, Chi had disappeared; he therefore returned sorrowfully home, and set to work to cleanse his heart and order his behaviour.

Now Tai's next-door neighbour had long suspected him of paying too much attention to his wife; and one day meeting Tai in the fields shortly after the events narrated above, he inveigled him into inspecting a dry well, and then pushed him down. The well was many feet deep, and the man felt certain that Tai was killed; however, in the middle of the night he came round, and sitting up at the bottom, he began to shout for assistance, but could not make any one hear him. On the following day, the neighbour, fearing that Tai might possibly have recovered consciousness, went to listen at the mouth of the well; and hearing him cry out for help, began to throw down a quantity of stones. Tai took refuge in a cave at the side, and did not dare utter another sound; but his enemy knew he was not dead, and forthwith filled the well almost up to the top with earth. In the cave it was as dark as pitch, exactly like the Infernal Regions; and not being able to get anything to eat or drink, Tai gave up all hopes of life. He crawled on his hands

¹ I have already discussed the subject of drunkenness in China (*Chinese Sketches*, pp. 1:3, 114), and shall not return to it here, further than to quote a single sentence, to which I adhere as firmly now as when the book in question was published:—"Who ever sees in China a tipsy man reeling about a crowded thoroughfare, or lying with his head in a ditch by the side of some country road?"

It is not, however, generally known that the Chinese, with their usual quaintness, distinguish between five kinds of drunkenness, different people being differently affected, according to the physical constitution of each. Wine may fly (1) to the heart, and produce maudlin emotions or (2) to the liver, and incite to pugnacity; Or (3) to the stomach, and cause drowsiness, accompanied by a flushing of the face; or (4) to the lungs, and induce hilarity; or (5) to the kidneys, and excite desire.

and knees further into the cave, but was prevented by water from going further than a few paces, and returned to take up his position at the old spot. At first he felt hungry; by-and-by, however, this sensation passed away; and then reflecting that there, at the bottom of a well, he could hardly perform any good action, he passed his time in calling loudly on the name of Buddha. Before long he saw a number of Will-o'-the-Wisps flitting over the water and illuminating the gloom of the cave; and immediately prayed to them, saying, "O Will-o'-the-Wisps, I have heard that ye are the shades of wronged and injured people. I have not long to live, and am without hope of escape; still I would gladly relieve the monotony of my situation by exchanging a few words with you." Thereupon, all the Wills came flitting across the water to him; and in each of them was a man of about half the ordinary size. Tai asked them whence they came; to which one of them replied, "This is an old coal-mine. The proprietor, in working the coal, disturbed the position of some graves;² and Mr. Lung-fei flooded the mine and drowned forty-three workmen. We are the shades of those men." He further said he did not know who Mr. Lung-fei was, except that he was secretary to the City God, and that in compassion for the misfortunes of the innocent workmen, he was in the habit of sending them a quantity of gruel every three or four days. "But the cold water," added he, "soaks into our bones, and there is but small chance of ever getting them removed. If, Sir, you some day return to the world above, I pray you fish up our decaying bones and bury them in some public burying-ground. You will thus earn for yourself boundless gratitude in the realms below." Tai promised that if he had the luck to escape he would do as they wished; "but how," cried he, "situated as I am, can I ever hope to look again upon the light of day?" He then began to teach the Wills to say their prayers, making for them beads³ out of bits of mud, in order to keep record of the number of invocations uttered. He could not tell night from morning; he slept when he felt tired, and when he waked he sat up. Suddenly, he perceived in the distance the light of lamps, at which the shades all rejoiced, and said, "It is Mr. Lung-fei with our food." They then invited Tai to go with them; and when he said he couldn't because of the water, they bore him along over it so that he hardly seemed to walk. After twisting and turning about for nearly a quarter of a mile, he reached a place at which the Wills bade him walk by himself; and then he appeared to mount a flight of steps, at the top of which he found himself in an apartment lighted by a candle as thick round as one's arm. Not having seen the light of fire for some time, he was overjoyed and walked in; but observing an old man in a scholar's dress and cap seated in the post of honour, he stopped, not liking to advance further. But the old man had already caught sight of him, and asked him how he, a living man, had come there. Tai threw himself on the ground at his feet, and told him all; whereupon the old man cried out, "My great-grandson!" He then bade him get up; and offering him a seat, explained that his own name was Tai Ch'ien, and that he was otherwise known as Lung-fei. He said, moreover, that in days gone by a worthless grandson of his named T'ang had associated himself with a lot of scoundrels and sunk a well near his grave, disturbing the peace of his everlasting night; and that therefore he had flooded the place with salt water and drowned them. He then inquired as to the general condition of the family at that time.

Now Tai was a descendant of one of five brothers, from the eldest of whom T'ang himself was also descended; and an influential man of the place had bribed T'ang to open a mine alongside the family grave. His brothers were afraid to interfere; and by-and-by the water rose and

² A religious and social offence of the deepest dye, sure to entail punishment in the world to come, even if the perpetrator escapes detection in this life.

³ The Buddhist rosary consists of 108 beads, which number is the same as that of the compartments in the *Phrabar*, or sacred footprint of Buddha.

drowned all the workmen; whereupon actions for damages were commenced by the relatives of the deceased, and T'ang and his friend were reduced to poverty, and T'ang's descendants to absolute destitution. Tai was a son of one of T'ang's brothers, and having heard this story from his seniors, now repeated it to the old man. "How could they be otherwise than unfortunate," cried the latter, "with such an unfilial progenitor? But since you have come hither, you must on no account neglect your studies." The old man then provided him with food and wine, and spreading a volume of essays according to the old style before him, bade him study it most carefully. He also gave him themes for composition, and corrected his essays as if he had been his tutor. The candle remained always burning in the room, never needing to be snuffed and never decreasing. When he was tired he went to sleep, but he never knew day from night. The old man occasionally went out, leaving a boy to attend to his great-grandson's wants. It seemed that several years passed away thus, but Tai had no troubles of any kind to annoy him. He had no other book except the volume of essays, one hundred in all, which he read through more than four thousand times. One day the old man said to him, "Your term of expiation is nearly completed, and you will be able to return to the world above. My grave is near the coal-mine, and the grosser breeze plays upon my bones. Remember to remove them to the eastern plain." Tai promised he would see to this; and then the old man summoned all the shades together and instructed them to escort Tai back to the place where they had found him. The shades how bowed one after the other, and begged Tai to think of them as well, while Tai himself was quite at a loss to guess how he was going to get out.

Meanwhile, Tai's family had searched for him everywhere, and his mother had brought his case to the notice of the officials, thereby implicating a large number of persons, but without getting any trace of the missing man. Three or four years passed away, and there was a change of magistrate; in consequence of which the search was relaxed, and Tai's wife, not being happy where she was, married another husband. Just then an inhabitant of the place set about repairing the old well, and found Tai's body in the cave at the bottom. Touching it, he found it was not dead, and at once gave information to the family. Tai was promptly conveyed home, and within a day he could tell his own story.

Since he had been down the well, the neighbour who pushed him in had beaten his own wife to death; and his father-in-law having brought an action against him, he had been in confinement for more than a year while the case was being investigated.⁴ When released he was a mere bag of bones;⁵ and then hearing that Tai had come back to life, he was terribly alarmed and fled away. The family tried to persuade Tai to take proceedings against him, but this he would not do, alleging that what had befallen him was a proper punishment for his own bad behaviour, and had nothing to do with the neighbour. Upon this, the said neighbour ventured to return; and when the water in the well had dried up, Tai hired men to go down and collect the bones, which he put in coffins and buried all together in one place. He next hunted up Mr. Lung-fei's name in the family tables of genealogy, and proceeded to sacrifice all kinds of nice things at his tomb. By-and-by the Literary Chancellor heard this strange story, and was also very pleased with Tai's compositions; accordingly, Tai passed successfully through his examinations, and, having taken

⁴ That is, as to whether or not there were extenuating circumstances, in which case no punishment would be inflicted.

⁵ Such is the invariable result of confinement in a Chinese prison, unless the prisoner has the wherewithal to purchase food.

his master's degree, returned home and reburied Mr. Lung-fei on the eastern plain, repairing thither regularly every spring without fail.⁶

⁶ To worship at his tomb.