

# Foot-Ball on the Tung-T'ing Lake

By P'u Sung-ling

Wang Shih-hsiu was a native of Lu-chou and such a lusty fellow that he could pick up a stone mortar.<sup>1</sup> Father and son were both good foot-ball players; but when the former was about forty years of age he was drowned while crossing the Money Pool. Some eight or nine years later our hero happened to be on his way to Hunan; and anchoring in the Tung-t'ing lake, watched the moon rising in the east and illuminating the water into a bright sheet of light. While he was thus engaged, lo! from out of the lake emerged five men, bringing with them a large mat, which they spread on the surface of the water so as to cover about six yards square.. Wine and food were then arranged upon it, and Wang heard the sound of the dishes knocking together, but it was a dull, soft sound, not at all like that of ordinary crockery. Three of the men sat down on the mat and the other two waited upon them. One of the former was dressed in yellow, the other two in white, and each wore a black turban. Their demeanour as they sat there side by side was grave and dignified; in appearance they resembled three of the ancients, but by the fitful beams of the moon Wang was unable to see very clearly what they were like. The attendants wore black serge dresses, and one of them seemed to be a boy, while the other was many years older. Wang now heard the man in the yellow dress say, "This is truly a fine moonlight night for a drinking bout;" to which one of his companions replied, "It quite reminds me of the night when Prince Kuang-li feasted at Pear-blossom Island." The three then pledged each other in bumping goblets, talking all the time in such a low tone that Wang could not hear what they were saying. The boatmen kept themselves concealed, crouching down at the bottom of the boat; but Wang looked hard at the attendants, the elder of whom bore a striking resemblance to his father, though he spoke in quite a different tone of voice. When it was drawing towards midnight, one of them proposed a game at ball; and in a moment the boy disappeared in the water, to return immediately with a huge ball—quite an armful in fact—apparently full of quicksilver, and lustrous within and without. All now rose up, and the man in the yellow dress bade the old attendant join them in the game. The ball was kicked up some ten or fifteen feet in the air, and was quite dazzling in its brilliancy; but once, when it had gone up with a whish-h-h-h, it fell at some distance off, right in the very middle of Wang's boat. The occasion was irresistible, and Wang, exerting all' his strength, kicked the ball with all his might. It seemed unusually light and soft to the touch, and his foot broke right through. Away went the ball to a good height, pouring forth a stream of light like a rainbow from the hole Wang had made, and making as it fell a curve like that of a comet rushing across the sky. Down it glided into the water, where it fizzed a moment and then went out. "Ho, there!" cried out the players in anger, "what living creature is that who dares thus to interrupt our sport?" "Well kicked—indeed!" said the old man, "that's a favourite dropkick of my own." At this, one of the two in white clothes began to abuse him saying, "What! you old baggage, when we are all so annoyed in this manner, are you to come forward and make a joke of it? Go at once with the boy and bring back to us this practical joker, or your own back will have a taste of the stick." Wang was of course unable to flee; however, he was not a bit afraid, and grasping a sword stood there in the middle of the boat. In a moment, the old man and boy arrived, also armed, and then Wang knew that the former was really his father,, and called out to

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<sup>1</sup> Used for pounding rice.

him at once, "Father, I am your son." The old man was greatly alarmed, but father and son forgot their troubles in the joy of meeting once again. Meanwhile, the boy went back, and Wang's father bade him hide, or they would all be lost. The words were hardly out of his mouth when the three men jumped on board the boat. Their faces were black as pitch, their eyes as big as pomegranates, and they at once proceeded to seize the old man. Wang struggled hard with them, and managing to get the boat free from her moorings, he seized his sword and cut off one of his adversaries' arms. The arm dropped down and the man in the yellow dress ran away; whereupon one of those in white rushed at Wang, who immediately cut off his head, and he fell into the water with a splash, at which the third disappeared. Wang and his father were now anxious to get away, when suddenly a great mouth arose from the lake, as big and as deep as a well, and against which they could hear the noise of the water when it struck. This mouth blew forth a violent gust of wind, and in a moment the waves were mountains high and all the boats on the lake were tossing about. The boatmen were terrified, but Wang seized one of two huge stones there were on board for use as anchors,<sup>2</sup> about 130 lb. in weight, and threw it into the water, which immediately began to subside; and then he threw in the other one, upon which the wind dropped, and the lake became calm again. Wang thought his father was a disembodied spirit, but the old man said, "I never died. There were nineteen of us drowned in the river, all of whom were eaten by the fish-goblins except myself: I was saved because I could play foot-ball. Those you saw got into trouble with the Dragon King, and were sent here. They were all marine creatures, and the ball they were playing with was a fish-bladder." Father and son were overjoyed at meeting again, and at once proceeded on their way. In the morning they found in the boat a huge fin—the arm that Wang had cut off the night before.

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<sup>2</sup> These are bound in between several sharp-pointed stakes, and serve their purpose very well in the inland waters of China.