

In the Infernal Regions

By P'u Sung-ling

Hsi Fang-p'ing was a native of Tung-an. His father's name was Hsi Lien—a hasty-tempered man, who had quarrelled with a neighbour named Yang. By-and-by Yang died; and some years afterwards, when Lien was on his death-bed, he cried out that Yang was bribing the devils in hell to torture him. His body then swelled up and turned red, and in a few moments he had breathed his last. His son wept bitterly, and refused all food, saying, "Alas! my poor father is now being maltreated by cruel devils; I must go down and help to redress his wrongs." Thereupon he ceased speaking, and sat for a long time like one dazed, his soul having already quitted its tenement of clay. To himself he appeared to be outside the house, not knowing in what direction to go, so he inquired from one of the passers-by which was the way to the district city.¹ Before long he found himself there, and, directing his steps towards the prison, found his father lying outside² in a very shocking state. When the latter beheld his son, he burst into tears, and declared that the gaolers had been bribed to beat him, which they did both day and night, until they had reduced him to his present sorry plight. Then Fang-p'ing turned round in a great rage, and began to curse the gaolers. "Out upon you!" cried he; "if my father is guilty he should be punished according to law, and not at the will of a set of scoundrels like you." Thereupon he hurried away, and prepared a petition, which he took with him to present at the morning session of the City God; but his enemy, Yang, had meanwhile set to work, and bribed so effectually, that the City God dismissed his petition for want of corroborative evidence.³ Fang-p'ing was furious, but could do nothing; so he started at once for the prefectural city, where he managed to get his plaint received, though it was nearly a month before it came on for hearing, and then all he got was a reference back to the district city, where he was severely tortured, and escorted back to the door of his own home, for fear he should give further trouble. However, he did not go in, but stole away and proceeded to lay his complaint before one of the ten Judges of Purgatory; whereupon the two mandarins who had previously ill-used him, came forward and secretly offered him a thousand ounces of silver if he would withdraw the charge. This he positively refused to do; and some days subsequently the landlord of the inn, where he was staying, told him he had been a fool for his pains, and that he would now get neither money nor justice, the Judge himself having already been tampered with. Fang-p'ing thought this was mere gossip, and would not believe it; but, when his case was called, the Judge utterly refused to hear the charge, and ordered him twenty blows with the bamboo, which were administered in spite of all his protestations. He then cried out, "Ah! it's all because I have no money to give you;" which so incensed the Judge, that he told the lictors to throw Fang-p'ing on the fire-bed. This was a great iron couch, with a roaring fire underneath, which made it red-hot; and upon that the devils cast Fang-p'ing, having first stripped off his clothes, pressing him down on it, until the fire ate into his very bones,

¹ The Infernal Regions are supposed to be pretty much a counter-part of the world above, except in the matter of light.

² The visitor to Canton cannot fail to observe batches of prisoners with chains on them sitting in the street outside the prisons, many of them engaged in plying their particular trades.

³ The judge in a Chinese court is necessarily very much dependent on his secretaries; and, except in special cases, he takes his cue almost entirely from them. They take theirs from whichever party to the case knows best how to "cross the palm."

though in spite of that he could not die. After a while the devils said he had had enough, and made him get off the iron bed, and put his clothes on again. He was just able to walk, and when he went back into court, the Judge asked him if he wanted to make any further complaints. "Alas!" cried he, "my wrongs are still unredressed, and I should only be lying were I to say I would complain no more." The Judge then inquired what he had to complain of; to which Fang-p'ing replied that it was of the injustice of his recent punishment. This, enraged the Judge so much that he ordered his attendants to saw Fang-p'ing in two. He was then led away by devils, to a place where he was thrust in between a couple of wooden boards, the ground on all sides being wet and sticky with blood. Just at that moment he was summoned to return before the Judge, who asked him if he was still of the same mind; and, on his replying in the affirmative, he was taken back again, and bound between the two boards. The saw was then applied, and as it went through his brain he experienced, the most cruel agonies, which, however, he managed to endure without uttering a cry. "He's a tough customer," said one of the devils, as the saw made its way gradually through his chest; to which the other replied, "Truly, this is filial piety; and, as the poor fellow has done nothing, let us turn the saw a little out of the direct line, so as to avoid injuring his heart." Fang-p'ing then felt the saw make a curve inside him, which caused him even more pain than before; and, in a few moments, he was cut through right down to the ground, and the two halves of his body fell apart, along with the boards to which they were tied, one on either side. The devils went back to report progress, and were then ordered to join Fang-p'ing together again, and bring him in. This they accordingly did, —the cut all down Fang-p'ing's body hurting him dreadfully, and feeling as if it would re-open every minute. But, as Fang-p'ing was unable to walk, one of the devils took out a cord and tied it round his waist, as a reward, he said, for his filial piety. The pain immediately ceased, and Fang-p'ing appeared once more before the Judge, this time promising that he would make no more complaints. The Judge now gave orders that he should be sent up to earth, and the devils, escorting him out of the north gate of the city, showed him his way home, and went away. Fang-p'ing now saw that there was even less chance of securing justice in the Infernal Regions than upon the earth above; and, having no means of getting at the Great King to plead his case, he bethought himself of a certain upright and benevolent God, called Erh Lang, who was a relative of the Great King's, and him he determined to seek. So he turned about and took his way southwards, but was immediately seized by some devils, sent out by the Judge to watch that he really went back to his home. These devils hurried him again into the Judge's presence, where he was received, contrary to his expectation, with great affability; the Judge himself praising his filial piety, but declaring that he need trouble no further in the matter, as his father had already been born again in a wealthy and illustrious family. "And upon you," added the Judge, "I now bestow a present of one thousand ounces of silver to take home with you, as well as the old age of a centenarian, with which I hope you will be satisfied." He then showed Fang-p'ing the stamped record of this, and sent him away in charge of the devils. The latter now began to abuse him for giving them so much trouble, but Fang-p'ing turned sharply upon them, and threatened to take them back before the Judge. They were then silent, and marched along for about half-a-day, until at length they reached a village, where the devils invited Fang-p'ing into a house, the door of which was standing half-open. Fang-p'ing was just going in, when suddenly the devils gave him a shove from behind, and . . . there he was, born again on earth as a little girl. For three days he pined and cried, without taking any food, and then he died. But his spirit did not forget Erh Lang, and set out at once in search of that God. He had not gone far when he fell in with the retinue of some high personage, and one of the attendants seized him for getting in the way, and hurried him before his master. He was

taken to a chariot, where he saw a handsome young man, sitting in great state; and thinking that now was his chance, he told the young man, who he imagined to be a high mandarin, all his sad story from beginning to end. His bonds were then loosed, and he went along with the young man until they reached a place where several officials came out to receive them; and to one of these he confided Fang-p'ing, who now learnt that the young man was no other than God himself, the officials being the nine princes of heaven, and the one to whose care he was entrusted no other than Erh Lang. This last was very tall, and had a long white beard, not at all like the popular representation of a God; and when the other princes had gone, he took Fang-p'ing into a courtroom, where he saw his father and their old enemy, Yang, besides all the lictors and others who had been mixed up in, the case. By-and-by, some criminals were brought in in cages, and these turned out to be the Judge, Prefect, and Magistrate. The trial was then commenced, the three wicked officers trembling and shaking in their shoes; and when he had heard the evidence, Erh Lang proceeded to pass sentence upon the prisoners, each of whom he sentenced, after enlarging upon the enormity of their several crimes, to be roasted, boiled, and otherwise put to most excruciating tortures. As for Fang-p'ing, he accorded him three extra decades of life, as a reward for his filial piety, and a copy of the sentence was put in his pocket. Father and son journeyed along together, and at length reached their home; that is to say, Fang-p'ing was the first to recover consciousness, and then bade the servants open his father's coffin, which they immediately did, and the old man at once came back to life. But when Fang-p'ing looked for his copy of the sentence, lo! it had disappeared. As for the Yang family, poverty soon overtook them, and all their lands passed into Fang-p'ing's hands; for as sure as any one else bought them, they became sterile forthwith, and would produce nothing; but Fang-p'ing and his father lived on happily both reaching the age of ninety and odd years.