

# The Potion of Lao-tsze

By Richard Garnett

And there the body lay, age after age,  
Mute, breathing, beating, warm, and undecaying,  
Like one asleep in a green hermitage,  
With gentle sleep about its eyelids playing,  
And living in its dreams beyond the rage  
Of death or life; while they were still arraying  
In liveries ever new the rapid, blind,  
And fleeting generations of mankind.

In the days of the Tang dynasty China was long happy under the sceptre of a good Emperor, named Sin-Woo. He had overcome the enemies of the land, confirmed the friendship of its allies, augmented the wealth of the rich, and mitigated the wretchedness of the poor. But most especially was he admired and beloved for his persecution of the impious sect of Lao-tsze, which he had well-nigh exterminated.

It was but natural that such an Emperor should congratulate himself upon his goodness and worth; yet, as no human bliss is perfect, sorrow could not fail to enter his mind.

“It is grievous to reflect,” said he to his courtiers, “that if, as ye all affirm, there hath not been any Emperor of equal merit with myself before my time, neither will any such rise after me, my subjects must inevitably be sufferers by my death.”

To which the courtiers unanimously responded, “O Emperor, live for ever!”

“Happy thought!” exclaimed the Emperor; “but wherewithal shall it be executed?”

The Prime Minister looked at the Chancellor, the Chancellor looked at the Treasurer, the Treasurer looked at the Chamberlain, the Chamberlain looked at the Principal Bonze, the Principal Bonze looked at the Second Bonze, who, to his great surprise, looked at him in return.

“When the turn comes to me,” murmured the inferior functionary, “I would say somewhat.”

“Speak!” commanded the Emperor.

“O Uncle of the stars,” said the Bonze, “there are those in your Majesty’s dominions who possess the power of lengthening life, who have, in fact, discovered the Elixir of Immortality.”

“Let them be immediately brought hither,” commanded the Emperor.

“Unhappily,” returned the Bonze, “these persons, without exception, belong to the abominable sect of Lao-tsze, whose members your Majesty long ago commanded to cease from existence, with which august order they have for the most part complied. In my own diocese, where for some years after your Majesty’s happy accession we were accustomed to impale twenty thousand annually, it is now difficult to find twenty, with the utmost diligence on the part of the executioners.”

“It has of late sometimes appeared to me,” said the Emperor, “that there may be more good in that sect than I have been led to believe by my counsellors.”

“I have always thought,” said the Prime Minister, “that they were rather misguided than wilfully wicked.”

“They are a kind of harmless lunatics,” said the Chancellor; “they should, I think, be made wards in Chancery.”

“Their money does not appear different from other men’s,” said the Treasurer.

“I,” said the Chamberlain, “have known an old woman who had known another old woman who belonged to this sect, and who assured her that she had been very good when she was a little girl.”

“If,” said the Emperor, “it appears that his Grace the Principal Bonze hath in any respect misled us, his property will necessarily be confiscated to the Imperial Treasury, and the Second Bonze will succeed to his office. It is needful, however, to ascertain before all things whether this sect does really possess the Elixir of Immortality, for on that the entire question of its deserts obviously depends. Our Counsellor the Second Bonze having, next to myself, the greatest interest in the matter, I desire him to make due inquiries and report to us at the next council, when I shall be prepared to state what fine will be imposed upon him, should he not have succeeded.”

That night all the members of the Lao-tsze sect inhabiting prisons under the jurisdiction of the Principal Bonze were decapitated, and the P. B. laid his own head upon his pillow with some approach to peace of mind, trusting that the knowledge of the Elixir of Immortality had perished with them.

The Second Bonze, having a different object to attain, proceeded in a different manner. He sent for his captives, and discoursed to them touching the evil arts of unprincipled courtiers, and the facility with which they mislead even the best intentioned princes. For years had he, the Second Bonze, pleaded the cause of toleration at court; and had at length succeeded in enlightening his Majesty to such an extent that there was every prospect of an edict of indulgence being shortly promulgated, provided always that the Elixir of Life was previously forthcoming.

The unfortunate heretics would have been only too thankful to prolong the Emperor’s life indefinitely in consideration of securing peace for their own, but they could only inform the Bonze of the general tradition of their sect. This was that the knowledge of Lao-tsze’s secret was confined to certain adepts, most of whom were plunged into so deep a trance that any communication with them was impossible. For the administration of the miraculous draught, it appeared, was attended with this inconvenience, that it threw the partaker into a deep sleep, lasting any time between ten years and eternity, according to the depth of his potation. During its continuance the ordinary operations of nature were suspended, and the patient awoke with precisely the same bodily constitution, old or young, as he had possessed on falling into his lethargy; and though still liable to wounds and accidents, he or she continued to enjoy undiminished health and vigour for a period equal to the duration of the trance, after which he sank back into the ranks of mortality, unless he could repeat the potion. All the adepts who had come to life under his present Majesty’s most clement reign had immediately emigrated: the only persons, therefore, capable of giving information were now buried in slumber, and of course would only speak when they should awake. They were mostly concealed in the recesses of caverns, those inhabited by wild beasts being usually preferred for the sake of better security, as no tiger or bear would harm a follower of Lao-tsze. The witnesses, therefore, advised the Bonze to ascertain the residences of the most ferocious tigers in his diocese, and to wait upon them personally, in the hope of thus discovering what he sought.

This suggestion was exceedingly unpalatable to the Bonze, who felt almost equally unwilling to venture himself into a wild beast’s den or to give any other person the chance of making the discovery. While he hesitated in unspeakable perplexity he was informed that an old man, about to expire at the age of an hundred and twenty years, desired to have speech with him. Thinking so venerable a personage likely to have at least a glimmering of the great secret, the Bonze hurried to his bedside.

“Our master, Lao-tsze,” began the old man, “forbids us to leave this world with anything undisclosed which may contribute to the advantage of our fellow-creatures. Whether he deemed the knowledge of the cup of immortality conducive to this end I cannot say, but the question doth not arise, for I do not possess it. Hear my tale, nevertheless. Ninety years ago, being a hunter, it was my hap to fall into the jaws of an enormous tiger, who bore me off to his cavern. I there found myself in the presence of two ladies, one youthful and of surpassing loveliness, the other haggard and wrinkled. The younger lady expostulated with the tiger, and he forthwith released me. My gratitude won the women’s confidence, and I learned that they were disciples of Lao-tsze who had repaired to the cavern to partake of the miraculous draught, which they were just about to do. They were, it appeared, mother and daughter, and I distinctly remember that the composition of the beverage was known to the daughter only. This impressed me, for I should naturally have expected the contrary. The tiger escorted me home. I forswore hunting, and became, and have secretly continued, a disciple of Lao-tsze. I will now indicate the position of the cavern to thee: whether the ladies will still be found in it is beyond my power to say.”

And having pointed out the direction of the cavern, he expired.

The thing had to be done. The Bonze dressed himself up as much like a votary of Lao-tsze as possible, provided himself with a body-guard of *bona fide* disciples, and, accompanied by a small army of huntsmen and warriors as well, marched in quest of the den of the tiger. It was discovered about nightfall, and having tethered a small boy near the entrance, that his screams when being devoured might give notice of the tiger’s issue from or return to his habitation, the Bonze and his myrmidons took up a flank position and awaited the dawn. The distant howls of roaming beasts of prey entirely deprived the holy man of his rest, but nothing worse befell him, and when in the morning the small boy, instead of providing the tiger with a breakfast, was heard crying for his own, the besiegers mustered up courage to enter the cavern. The glare of their torches revealed no tiger: but, to the Bonze’s inexpressible delight, two females lay on the floor of the cave, corresponding in all respects to the description of the old man. Their costume was that of the preceding century. One was wrinkled and hoary; the inexpressible loveliness of the other, who might have seen seventeen or eighteen summers, extorted a universal cry of admiration, followed by a hush of enraptured silence. Warm, flexible, fresh in colour, breathing naturally as in slumber, the figures lay, the younger woman’s arm underneath the elder woman’s neck, and her chin nestling on the other’s shoulder. The countenance of each seemed to indicate happy dreams.

“Can this indeed be but a trance?” simultaneously questioned several of the Bonze’s followers.

“*Fiat experimentum in corpore vili!*” exclaimed the Bonze; and he thrust his long hunting spear into the elder woman’s bosom. Blood poured forth freely, but there was no change in the expression of the countenance. No struggle announced dissolution; not until the body grew chill and the limbs stiff could they be sure the old woman was indeed dead.

“Carry the young woman like porcelain,” ordered the priest, and like the most fragile porcelain the exquisite young beauty was borne from the cavern smiling in her trance and utterly unconscious, while the corpse of her aged companion was abandoned to the hyænas. So often did the bearers pause too look on her beauty that it was found necessary to drape the countenance entirely, until reaching the closed sedan in which, vigilantly watched by the Bonze, she was transported to the Imperial palace.

And so she was brought to the Emperor, and he worshipped her. She was laid on a couch of cloth of gold in the Imperial apartments. Wonderful was the contrast between her youthful

beauty, so still in its repose, and the old haggard Emperor, fevered with the lust of beauty and love of life.

“O Majesty,” said his wisest counsellor, “is there any sect in thy dominions that possesses the secret of perpetual youth?”

And the Emperor made proclamation, but no such sect could be found. And he mourned exceedingly, and caused strong perfumes to be burned around the sleeper, and conches to be blown and gongs beaten in her ears, hoping that she would awake ere he was dead or wholly decrepit. But she stirred not. And he shut himself up with her and passed his time praying to Fo for her awakening.

But one day the door of the chamber was beaten down, and his old wife came in passionately upbraiding him.

“Sin-Woo,” she cried, “thou hast not the heart of a man! Thou wouldest be deathless, leaving me to die! I shall be laid in the grave, and thou wilt reign with another! Wherefore have I been true to thee, if not that our ashes might mingle at the last? Thou hoary sensualist!”

“Su-Ti,” said the Emperor, with feeling, “thou dost grievously misjudge me. I am no heartless sensualist, no butterfly sipper at the lips of beauty. Is not my soul entirely possessed by this divine creature, whom I love with an affection infinitely exceeding that which I have enter-tamed for thee at any period? And how knowest thou,” added he, striving to soothe her, “that I will not give thee to drink of the miraculous potion?”

“And keep my grey hairs and wrinkles through all time! Nay, Sin-Woo, I am no fool like thee, and were I so, I am not in love with any youth. And know I not that even if I would accept the boon, thou would’st never give it?”

And she rushed away in fury and hanged herself by her Imperial girdle. Whereupon all the other wives and concubines of the Emperor did likewise, as custom and reason prescribe. All the palace was filled with lamentation and funerals. But the Emperor lamented not, nor turned his gaze from the sleeper, nor did the sleeper awaken.

And his son came to him angry with exceeding wrath.

“Thou hast murdered my mother. Thou would’st rob me of the crown that is rightfully mine. I, born to be an Emperor, shall die a subject! Nay, but I will save thee from thyself. I will pierce thy leman with the sword, or burn her with fire.”

And the Emperor, fearing he would do as he threatened, commanded him to be slain, as also his brothers and sisters. And he paid no heed to the affairs of State, but gave all into the hand of the Second, now the Principal Bonze. And the laws ceased to be observed, and rebellions broke out in the provinces, and enemies invaded the country, and there was famine in the land.

And now the Emperor was well-nigh ten years nearer to the gates of death than when the Sleeping Beauty had been brought to his court. The love of beauty was nearly quenched in him, but the longing for life grew more intense. He became angry with the sleeper, that she awakened not, and with his little remaining strength smote her fiercely on the cheeks, but she gave no sign of reviving. Remembering that if he gained the potion of immortality he would himself be plunged into a trance, he made all preparations for the interregnum. He decreed that he was to be seated erect on his throne, with all his imperial insignia, and it was to be death to any one who should presume to remove any of them. His slumbering figure was to preside at all councils, and to be consulted in every act of state, and all ministers and officers were to do homage daily. The revived Sleeping Beauty was to partake of the draught anew, at the same time and in the same manner as himself, that she might awake with him, and that he might find her charms unimpaired. All the ministers swore solemnly to observe these regulations; firmly purposing to

burn the sleeper, if sleep he ever did, at the very first opportunity, and scatter his ashes to the winds. Then they would fight for the Empire among themselves; each, meanwhile, was mainly occupied in striving to gain the rebels over to his interest, insomuch that the people grew more miserable day by day.

And as the aged Emperor waxed more and more feeble, he began to see visions. Legions of little black imps surrounded him crying, "We are thy sins, and would be punished—would'st thou by living for ever deprive us of our due?" And fair female forms came veiled with drooping heads, and murmured, "We are thy virtues, and would be rewarded—would'st thou cheat us?" And other figures came, dark but lovely, and whispered, "We are thy dead friends who have long waited for thee—would'st thou take to thyself new friends, and forget us?" And others said, "We are thy memories—wilt thou live on till we are all withered in thy heart?" And others said, "We are thy strength and thy beauty, thy memory and thy wit—canst thou live, knowing thou wilt never see us more?" And at last came two warders, officers of the King of Death, and one of them was laughing. And the other asked why he laughed, and he replied:

"I laugh at the Emperor, who thinks to escape our master, not knowing that the moment of his decease was engraved with a pen of iron upon a rock of adamant a million million years or ever this world was."

"And when comes it?" asked the other.

"In ten minutes," said the first.

When the Emperor heard this he was wild with terror, and tottered to the couch on which the Sleeping Beauty lay. "Oh, awake!" he cried, "awake and save me ere it is too late!" And, oh wonder! the sleeper stirred, and opened her eyes.

If she had been so beautiful while sleeping, what was she when awake! But the love of life had overcome the love of beauty in the Emperor's bosom, and he saw not the eyes like stars, and the bloom as of peaches and lilies, or the aspect grand and smiling as daybreak. He could only cry, "Give me the potion, lest I die, give me the potion!"

"That cannot I," she said. "The secret was known only to my daughter."

"Who is thy daughter?"

"The hoary woman, she who slept with me in the cavern."

"That aged crone thy daughter, daughter to thee so youthful and so fresh?"

"Even so," she said. "I bore her at sixteen, and slumbered for seventy years. When I awoke she was withered and decrepit: I youthful as when I closed my eyes. But she had learned the secret, which I never knew."

"The Bonze shall be crucified!" yelled the Emperor.

"It is too late," said she; "he is torn in pieces already."

"By whom?"

"By the multitude that are now coming to do the like unto thee."

And as she spoke the doors were burst open, and in rushed the people, headed by the most pious Bonze in the Empire (after the late Principal Bonze), who plunged a sword into the Emperor's breast, exclaiming:

"He who despises this life in comparison with another deserves to lose the life which he has." Words, saith the historian Li, which have been thought worthy to be inscribed in letters of gold in the Hall of Confucius.

And the people were crying, "Kill the sorceress!" But she looked upon them, and they cried, "Be our Empress!"

"Remember," said she, "that ye will have to bear with me for a hundred years!"

“Would,” said they, “that it might be a hundred thousand!”

So she took the sceptre, and reigned gloriously. Among her good acts is enumerated her toleration of the followers of Lao-tsze. Since, however, they have ceased to be persecuted by man, it is observed that wild beasts have lost their ancient respect for them, and devour them with no less appetite than the members of other sects and denominations.