

The Corpse the Blood-Drinker

By P'ou Song-lin

Night was slowly falling in the narrow valley. On the winding path cut in the side of the hill about twenty mules were following each other, bending under their heavy load; the muleteers, being tired, did not cease to hurry forward their animals, abusing them with coarse voices.

Comfortably seated on mules with large pack-saddles, three men were going along at the same pace as the caravan of which they were the masters. Their thick dresses, their fur boots, and their red woollen hoods protected them from the cold wind of the mountain.

In the darkness, rendered thicker by a slight fog, the lights of a village were shining, and soon the mules, hurrying all together, jostling their loads, crowded before the only inn of the place.

The three travellers, happy to be able to rest, got down from their saddles when the innkeeper came out on the step of his door and excused himself, saying all his rooms were taken.

"I have still, it is true, a large hall the other side of the street, but it is only a barn, badly shut. I will show it to you."

The merchants, disappointed, consulted each other with a look; but it was too late to continue their way; they followed their landlord.

The hall that was shown to them was big enough and closed at the end by a curtain. Their luggage was brought; the bed-clothes rolled on the pack-saddles were spread out, as usual, on planks and trestles.

The meal was served in the general sitting-room, in the midst of noise, laughing, and movement—smoking rice, vegetables preserved in vinegar, and lukewarm wine served in small cups. Then every one went to bed; the lights were put out and profound silence prevailed in the sleeping village.

However, towards the hour of the Rat, a sensation of cold and uneasiness awoke one of the three travellers named Wang Fou, Happiness-of-the-kings. He turned in his bed, but the snoring of his two companions annoyed him; he could not get to sleep. Again, seeing that his rest was finished, he got up, relit the lamp which was out, took a book from his baggage, and stretched himself out again. But if he could not sleep, it was just as impossible to read. In spite of himself, his eyes quitted the columns of letters laid out in lines and searched into the darkness that the feeble light did not contrive to break through.

A growing terror froze him. He would have liked to awaken his companions, but the fear of being made fun of prevented him.

By dint of looking, he at last saw a slight movement shake the big curtain which closed the room. There came from behind a crackling of wood being broken. Then a long, painful threatening silence began again.

The merchant felt his flesh thrill; he was filled with horror, in spite of his efforts to be reasonable.

He had put aside his book, and, the coverlet drawn up to his nose, he fixed his enlarged eyes on the shadowy corners at the end of the room.

The side of the curtain was lifted; a pale hand held the folds. The stuff, thus raised, permitted a being to pass, whose form, hardly distinct, seemed penetrated by the shadow.

Happiness-of-kings would have liked to scream; his contracted throat allowed no sound to escape. Motionless and speechless, he followed with his horrified look the slow movement of the apparition which approached.

He, little by little, recognised the silhouette of a female, seen by her short quilted dress and her long narrow jacket. Behind the body he perceived the curtain again moving.

The spectre, in the meantime bending over the bed of one of the sleeping travellers, appeared to give him a long kiss.

Then it went towards the couch of the second merchant. Happiness-of-kings distinctly saw the pale figure, the eyes, from which a red flame was shining, and sharp teeth, half-exposed in a ferocious smile, which opened and shut by turns on the throat of the sleeper.

A start disturbed the body under the cover, then all stopped: the spectre was drinking in long draughts.

Happiness-of-kings, seeing that his turn was coming, had just strength enough to pull the coverlet over his head. He heard grumblings; a freezing breath penetrated through the wadded material.

The paroxysm of terror gave the merchant full possession of his strength; with a convulsive movement he threw his coverlet on the apparition, jumped out of his bed, and, yelling like a wild beast, he ran as far as the door and flew away in the night.

Still running, he felt the freezing breath in his back, he heard the furious growlings of the spectre.

The prolonged howling of the unhappy man filled the narrow street and awoke all the sleepers in their beds, but none of them moved; they hid themselves farther and farther under their coverlets. These inhuman cries meant nothing good for those who should have been bold enough to go outside.

The bewildered fugitive crossed the village, going faster and faster. Arriving at the last houses, he was only a few feet in advance and felt himself fainting.

The road at the extremity of the village was bordered with narrow fields shaded with big trees. The instinct of a hunted animal drove on the distracted merchant; he made a brisk turn to the right, then to the left, and threw himself behind the knotted trunk of a huge chestnut-tree. The freezing hand already touched his shoulder; he fell senseless.

In the morning, in broad daylight, two men who came to plough in this same field were surprised to perceive against the tree a white form, and, on the ground, a man stretched out. This fact coming after the howling in the night appeared strange to them; they turned back and went to find the Chief of the Elders. When they returned, the greater part of the inhabitants of the village followed them.

They approached and found that the form against the tree was the corpse of a young woman, her nails buried in the bark; from her mouth a stream of blood had flowed and stained her white silk jacket. A shudder of horror shook the lookers-on: the Chief of the Elders recognised his daughter dead for the last six months whose coffin was placed in a barn, waiting for the burial, a favourable day to be fixed by the astrologers.

The innkeeper recognised one of his guests in the man stretched on the ground, whom no care could revive.

They returned in haste to find out in what condition the coffin was: the door of the barn was still open. They went in; a coverlet was thrown on the ground near the entrance; on two beds the great sun lit up the hollow and greenish aspect of the corpses whose blood had been emptied.

Behind the drawn curtain the coffin was found open. The corpse of the young woman evidently had not lost its inferior soul, the vital breath. Like all beings deprived of conscience and reason, her ferocity was eager for blood.