

The Fresco

By P'ou Song-lin

In the Great Highway of Eternal Fixity, Mong Flowing-spring and his friend Choo Little-lotus were slowly walking, clothed in the long light green dress of the students.

They had both just passed with success their third literary examination, and were enjoying the pleasures of the capital before returning to their distant province.

As they were both of small means, they were looking now (and at the same time filling their eyes with the movement of the street) for a lodging less expensive than the inn where they had put up on arriving at Pekin.

Leaving the Great Highway, they strolled far into a labyrinth of lanes more and more silent. They soon lost themselves.

Undecided, they had stopped, when they spied out the red lacquered portal of a temple of the Mysterious-way.

Pushing the heavy sides of the door, they entered; an old man with his hair tightly drawn together in a black cap, majestic in his grey dress, stood behind the door and appeared to be waiting for them.

"Your coming lightens my humble dwelling," he said in bowing. "I beg you will enter."

"I do not dare! I do not dare!" murmured the two students, bowing in their turn.

They nevertheless entered, crossing the yard on which the portal opened, which was closed, at the end, by the little temple in open woodwork close under the mass of roofs of green tiles.

They went up three steps, then, pushing a narrow and straight door, they entered. In the half-shadow they distinguished on the white altar a statue of Tche Kong The-Supreme-Lord, with a golden face and griffins' feet like the claws of an eagle.

The walls on each side of the altar were painted in frescoes; on the wall on the right you saw goddesses in the midst of flowers. One of these young girls, with a low chignon, was gathering a peony and was slightly smiling. Her mouth, like a cherry, seemed as if it were really opening; one would have sworn that her eyelids fluttered.

Mong Flowing-spring, his eyes fixed on the painting, remained a long time without moving, absorbed in his admiration of the work of art, and disturbed beyond expression by the beauty of the goddess with the low chignon.

"Why is she not living?" said he. "I would willingly give my life for a moment of her love!"

Suddenly he started; the young goddess raised herself upright, bursting with laughter, and got down from the wall. She crossed the door, went down the staircase, stepped over the yard and left the place.

Flowing-spring followed her without reflecting. He saw her going away with a light step, and turn down the first lane; the young student ran behind her.

As he turned the corner, he saw her stop at the entrance of a small house. She was gracefully waving her hand, and, with sly glances, made him signs to come.

He hastened forward and entered in his turn. In the silent house there was nobody, no one but the goddess standing in her long mauve dress and nibbling the flower that she had picked and that she still held in her hand.

"I bow down," said the student, who knelt to salute her.

"Rise! you exceed the rites prescribed," she replied.

“I bend my head, not being able to bear the splendour of your beauty.”

As she did not seem to be discontented he continued telling her his admiration and his desire. He approached, touched her hand; she started, but did not draw back. He then took her in his arms; she did not make much resistance.

The moments passed rapidly. They spoke to each other in a low voice, when, suddenly in the street, a noise of heavy boots resounded; steps stopped before the door; the lock was shaken; oaths were heard.

The young girl grew pale; she told Flowing-spring to hide himself under the bed. The student felt his heart become quite small; he crouched down in the shadow, not even being able to breathe. From the depth of his hiding-place, he saw an officer enter, his face in black lacquer, covered with a golden cuirass and surrounded by a troop of young girls in long dresses of bright colours.

“I smell an odour of human flesh!” grumbled the officer, walking heavily and going round the room.

“Hide yourself well!” the goddess murmured to her lover, raising herself from the bed and white with terror. “If you can escape from him, wait till we have left, and open the little door at the end of the garden; then run away quickly!”

“There is a man here! I smell him! He must be delivered to me! If not, I shall punish the person who has hidden him.”

“We know nothing!” all the young women said together.

“Very well! Let us go out.”

Then, following the gracious troop which the goddess had joined, he crossed the threshold.

Flowing-spring, hidden under the bed, waited till the noise of the boots had gone away. Then he glided with caution from his refuge.

Half bent, listening with anxiety in fear of being surprised, he flew from the room and crossed the garden.

During this time Choo Little-lotus, having remained in the temple, had not remarked the departure of his friend. But, turning round and not any longer seeing him, he questioned the old magician.

“Your friend is not far off,” he replied.

Then, showing him the wall, he said:

“Look! here he is!”

And, indeed, in the centre of the fresco, the image of Flowing-spring was painted; he was crouched in among the flowers, straining his ear. The image moved, and, suddenly, the student separated himself from the wall and advanced, looking sad and anxious.

Choo Little-lotus, terrified, was looking at him. The other told him his adventure. As he spoke a terrible clap of thunder was heard. The two friends instinctively shut their eyes; when they opened them, their glance fell on the fresco: the goddesses had taken their places there again, in the midst of the flowers; but the young girl with the low chignon was no longer there.

The magician smiled at Flowing-spring:

“Love has touched her. She has become a woman and is waiting for you in your village.”