

The Clay Image

By P'u Sung-ling

On the river I there lived a man named Ma, who married a wife from the Wang family, with whom he was very happy in his domestic life. Ma, however, died young; and his wife's parents were unwilling that their daughter should remain a widow, but she resisted all their importunities, and declared firmly she would never marry again. "It is a noble resolve of yours, I allow," argued her mother; "but you are still a mere girl, and you have no children. Besides, I notice that people who start with such rigid determinations always end by doing something discreditable, and therefore you had better get married as soon as you can, which is no more than is done every day." The girl swore she would rather die than consent, and accordingly her mother had no alternative but to let her alone. She then ordered a clay image to be made, exactly resembling her late husband;¹ and whenever she took her own meals, she would set meat and wine before it, precisely as if her husband had been there. One night she was on the point of retiring to rest, when suddenly she saw the clay image stretch itself and step down from the table, increasing all the while in height, until it was as tall as a man, and neither more nor less than her own husband. In great alarm she called out to her mother, but the image stopped her, saying, "Don't do that! I am but showing my gratitude for your affectionate care of me, and it is chill and uncomfortable in the realms below. Such devotion as yours casts its light back on generations gone by; and now I, who was cut off in my prime because my father did evil, and was condemned to be without an heir, have been permitted, in consequence of your virtuous conduct, to visit you once again, that our ancestral line may yet remain unbroken." Every morning at cock-crow her husband resumed his usual form and size as the clay image; and after a time he told her that their hour of separation had come, upon which husband and wife bade each other an eternal farewell. By-and-by the widow, to the great astonishment of her mother, bore a son, which caused no small amusement among the neighbours who heard the story; and, as the girl herself had no proof of what she stated to be the case, a certain beadle of the place, who had an old grudge against her husband, went off and informed the magistrate of what had occurred. After some investigation, the magistrate exclaimed, "I have heard that the children of disembodied spirits have no shadow; and that those who have shadows are not genuine." Thereupon they took Ma's child into the sunshine, and ho! there was but a very faint shadow, like a thin vapour. The magistrate then drew blood from the child, and smeared it on the clay image; upon which the blood at once soaked in and left no stain. Another clay image being produced and the same experiment tried, the blood remained on the surface so that it could be wiped away.² The girl's story was thus acknowledged to be true; and when the child grew up, and in every feature was the counterpart of Ma, there was no longer any room for suspicion.

¹ The clay image makers of Tientsin are wonderfully clever in taking likenesses by these means. Some of the most skilful will even manipulate the clay behind their backs, and then, adding the proper colours, will succeed in producing an exceedingly good resemblance. They find, however, more difficulty with foreign faces, to which they are less accustomed in the trade.

² Such is the officially authorised method of determining a doubtful relationship between a dead parent and a living child, substituting a bone for the clay image here mentioned.