

# Metempsychosis

By P'u Sung-ling

Mr. Lin, who took his master's degree in the same year as the late Mr. Wên Pi,<sup>1</sup> could remember what had happened to him in his previous state of existence, and once told the whole story, as follows:—I was originally of a good family, but, after leading a very dissolute life, I died at the age of sixty-two. On being conducted into the presence of the King of Purgatory, he received me civilly, bade me be seated, and offered me a cup of tea. I noticed, however, that the tea in His Majesty's cup was clear and limpid, while that in my own was muddy, like the lees of wine. It then flashed across me that this was the potion which was given to all disembodied spirits to render them oblivious of the past;<sup>2</sup> and, accordingly, when the King was looking the other way, I seized the opportunity of pouring it under the table, pretending afterwards that I had drunk it all up. My record of good and evil was now presented for inspection, and when the King saw what it was, he flew into a great passion, and ordered the attendant devils to drag me away, and send me back to earth as a horse. I was immediately seized and bound, and the devils carried me off to a house, the door-sill of which was so high I could not step over it. While I was trying to do so, the devils behind lashed me with all their might, causing me such pain that I made a great spring, and—lo and behold! I was a horse in a stable. "The mare has got a nice colt," I then heard a man call out; but, although I was perfectly aware of all that was passing, I could say nothing myself. Hunger now came upon me, and I was glad to be suckled by the mare; and by the end of four or five years I had grown into a fine strong horse, dreadfully afraid of the whip, and running away at the very sight of it. When my master rode me, it was always with a saddle-cloth, and at a leisurely pace, which was bearable enough; but when the servants mounted me barebacked, and dug their heels into me, the pain struck into my vitals; and at length I refused all food, and in three days I died. Reappearing before the King of Purgatory, His Majesty was enraged to find that I had thus tried to shirk working out my time; and, flaying me forthwith, condemned me to go back again as a dog. And when I did not move, the devils came behind me and lashed me until I ran away from them into, the open country, where, thinking I had better die right off, I jumped over a cliff, and lay at the bottom unable to move. I then saw that I was among a litter of puppies, and that an old bitch was licking and suckling me by turns; whereby I knew that I was once more among mortals. In this hateful form I continued for some time, longing to kill myself, and yet fearing to incur the penalty of shirking. At length, I purposely bit my master in the leg, and tore him badly; whereupon he had me destroyed, and I was taken again into the presence of the King, who was so displeased with my vicious behaviour that he condemned me to become a snake, and shut me up in a dark room, where I could see nothing. After a while I managed to climb up the wall, bore a hole in the roof, and escape; and immediately I found myself lying in the grass, a veritable snake. There I registered a vow that I would harm no living thing, and I lived for some years, feeding upon berries and suchlike, ever remembering neither to take my own life, nor by injuring any one to incite them to take it, but longing all the while for the happy

---

<sup>1</sup> In A.D. 1621.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Yü li ch'ao* this potion is administered by an old beldame, named Mother Mêng, who sits upon the Terrace of Oblivion. "Whether they swallow much or little; it matters not; but sometimes there are perverse devils who altogether refuse to drink. Then beneath their feet sharp blades start up, and a copper tube is forced down their throat, by which means they are compelled to swallow some."

release, which did not come to me. One day, as I was sleeping in the grass, I heard the noise of a passing cart, and, on trying to get across the road out of its way, I was caught by the wheel, and cut in two. The King was astonished to see me back so soon, but I humbly told my story, and, in pity for the innocent creature that loses its life, he pardoned me, and permitted me to be born again at my appointed time as a human being.

Such was Mr. Lin's story. He could speak as soon as he came into the world; and could repeat anything he had once read. In the year 1621 he took his master's degree, and was never tired of telling people to put saddle-cloths on their horses, and recollect that the pain of being gripped by the knees is even worse than the lash itself.