

The Cloth Merchant

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain cloth merchant went to Ch'ing-chou, where he happened to stroll into an old temple, all tumble-down and in ruins. He was lamenting over this sad state of things, when a priest who stood by observed that a devout believer like himself could hardly do better than put the place into repair, and thus obtain favour in the eyes of Buddha. This the merchant consented to do; whereupon the priest invited him to walk into the private quarters of the temple, and treated him with much courtesy; but he went on to propose that our friend the merchant should also undertake the general ornamentation of the place both inside and out.¹ The latter declared he could not afford the expense, and the priest began to get very angry, and urged him so strongly that at last the merchant, in tenor, promised to give all the money he had. After this he was preparing to go away, but the priest detained him, saying, "You haven't given the money of your own free will, and consequently you'll be owing me a grudge: I can't do better than make an end of you at once." Thereupon he seized a knife, and refused to listen to all the cloth merchant's entreaties, until at length the latter asked to be allowed to hang himself, to which the priest consented; and, showing him into a dark room, told him to make haste about it.

At this juncture, a Tartar-General happened to pass by the temple; and from a distance, through a breach in the old wall, he saw a damsel in a red dress pass into the priest's quarters. This roused his suspicions and dismounting from his horse, he entered the temple and searched high and low, but without discovering anything. The dark room above-mentioned was locked and doubled-barred, and the priest refused to open it, saying the place was haunted. The General in a rage burst open the door, and there beheld the cloth merchant hanging from a beam. He cut him down at once, and in a short time he was brought round and told the General the whole story. They then searched for the damsel, but she was nowhere to be found, having been nothing more than a divine manifestation. The General cut off the priest's head and restored the cloth merchant's property to him, after which the latter put the temple in thorough repair, and kept it well supplied with lights and incense ever afterwards.

Mr. Chao, M.A., told me this story, with all its details.²

¹ The elaborate gilding and woodwork of an ordinary Chinese temple form a very serious item in the expense of restoration. Public subscriptions are usually the means employed for raising sufficient funds, the names of subscribers and amount given by each being published in some conspicuous position. Occasionally devout priests—black swans, indeed, in China—shut themselves up in boxes studded with nails, one of which they pull out every time a certain donation is given, and there they remain until every nail is withdrawn. But after all it is difficult to say whether they endure these trials so much for the faith's sake as for the funds from which they derive more of the luxuries of life, and the temporary notoriety gained by thus coming before the public. A Chinese proverb says, "The image-maker doesn't worship Buddha. He knows too much about it;" and the application of this saying may safely be extended to the majority of Buddhist priests in China.

² The moral being, of course, that Buddha protects those who look after his interests on earth.