

The King

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain Governor of Hu-nan despatched a magistrate to the capitol in charge of treasure to the amount of six hundred thousand ounces of silver. On the road the magistrate encountered a violent storm of rain, which so delayed him that night came on before he was able to reach the next station. He therefore took refuge in an old temple; but, when morning came, he was horrified to find that the treasure had disappeared. Unable to fix the guilt on any one, he returned forthwith to the Governor and told him the whole story. The latter, however, refused to believe what the magistrate said, and would have had him severely punished, but that each and all of his attendants stoutly corroborated his statements; and accordingly he bade him return and endeavour to find the missing silver. When the magistrate got back to the temple, he met an extraordinary-looking blind man, who informed him that he could read people's thoughts, and further went on to say that the magistrate had come there on a matter of money. The latter replied that it was so, and recounted the misfortune that had overtaken him; whereupon the blind man called for sedan-chairs, and told the magistrate to follow and see for himself, which he accordingly did, accompanied by all his retinue. If the blind man said east, they went east; or if north, north; journeying along for five days until far among the hills, where they beheld a large city with a great number of inhabitants. They entered the gates and proceeded on for a short distance, when suddenly the blind man cried "Stop!" and, alighting from his chair, pointed to a lofty door, facing the west at which he told the magistrate to knock and make what inquiries were necessary. He then bowed and took his leave, and the magistrate obeyed his instructions, whereupon a man came out in reply to his summons. He was dressed in the fashion of the Han dynasty, and did not say what his name was; but as soon as the magistrate informed him wherefore he had come, he replied that if the latter would wait a few days he himself would assist him in the matter. The man then conducted the magistrate within, and giving him a room to himself, provided him regularly with food and drink. One day he chanced to stroll away to the back of the building, and there found a beautiful garden with dense avenues of pine-trees and smooth lawns of fine grass. After wandering about for some time among the arbours and ornamental buildings, the magistrate came to a lofty kiosque, and mounted the steps, when he saw hanging on the wall before him a number of human skins, each with its eyes, nose, ears, mouth, and heart.¹ Horrified at this, he beat a hasty retreat to his quarters, convinced that he was about to leave his own skin in this out-of-the-way place, and giving himself up for lost. He reflected, however, that he should probably gain nothing by trying to escape, and made up his mind to wait; and on the following day the same man came to fetch him, saying he could now have an audience. The magistrate replied that he was ready; and his conductor then mounted a fiery steed, leaving the other to follow on foot. By-and-by they reached a door like that leading into a Viceroy's *yamên*, where stood on either side crowds of official servants, preserving the utmost silence and decorum. The man here dismounted and led the magistrate inside; and after passing through another door they came into the presence of a king, who wore a cap decorated with pearls, and an embroidered sash, and sat facing the south. The magistrate rushed forward

¹ Corresponding with our five "senses," the heart taking the place of the brain, and being regarded by Chinese doctors as the seat not only of intelligence and the passions, but also of all sensation.

and prostrated himself on the ground; upon which the king asked him if he was the Hu-nan official who had been charged with the conveyance of treasure. On his answering in the affirmative, the king said, "The money is all here; it's a mere trifle, but I have no objection to receive it as a present from the Governor." The magistrate here burst into tears, and declared that his term of grace had already expired: that he would be punished if he went back thus, especially as he would have no evidence to adduce in substantiation of his story. "That is easy enough," replied the king, and put into his hands a thick letter, which he bade him give to the Governor, assuring him that this would prevent him from getting into any trouble. He also provided him with an escort; and the magistrate, who dared not argue the point further, sorrowfully accepted the letter and took his departure. The road he travelled along was not that by which he had come; and when the hills ended, his escort left him and went back. In a few days more he reached Ch'ang-sha, and respectfully informed the Governor of what had taken place; but the Governor thought he was telling more lies, and in a great rage bade the attendants bind him hand and foot. The magistrate then drew the letter forth from his coat; and when the Governor broke the seal and saw its contents, his face turned deadly pale. He gave orders for the magistrate to be unbound, remarking that the loss of the treasure was of no importance, and that the magistrate was free to go. Instructions were next issued that the amount was to be made up in some way or other and forwarded to the capital; and meanwhile the Governor fell sick and died.

Now this Governor had had a wife of whom he was dotingly fond; and one morning when they waked up, lo! all her hair was gone. The whole establishment was in dismay, no one knowing what to make of such an occurrence. But the letter above-mentioned contained that hair, accompanied by the following words:—"Ever since you first entered into public life your career has been one of peculation and avarice. The six hundred thousand ounces of silver are safely stored in my treasury. Make good this sum from your own accumulated extortions. The officer you charged with the treasure is innocent; he must not be wrongly punished. On a former occasion I took your wife's hair as a gentle warning. If now you disobey my injunctions, it will not be long before I have your head. Herewith I return the hair as an evidence of what I say." When the Governor was dead, his family divulged the contents of the letter; and some of his subordinates sent men to search for the city, but they only found range upon range of inaccessible mountains, with nothing like a road or path.