

Cruelty Avenged

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain magistrate caused a petty oil-vendor, who was brought before him for some trifling misdemeanour, and whose statements were very confused, to be bamboosed to death. The former subsequently rose to high rank; and having massed considerable wealth, set about building himself a fine house. On the day when the great beam was to be fixed in its place,¹ among the friends and relatives who arrived to offer their congratulations, he was horrified to see the oilman walk in. At the same instant one of the servants came rushing up to announce to him the birth of a son; whereupon, he mournfully remarked, "The house not yet finished, and its destroyer already here." The bystanders thought he was joking, for they had not seen what he had seen.² However, when that boy grew up, by his frivolity and extravagance he quite ruined his father. He was finally obliged himself to go into service; and spent all his earnings in oil, which he swallowed in large quantities.

¹ This corresponds to our ceremony of laying the foundation stone, except that one commemorates the beginning, the other the completion, of a new building.

² That is, the disembodied spirit of the oilman.