

The Censor in Purgatory

By P'u Sung-ling

Just beyond Fêng-tu¹ there is a fathomless cave which is reputed to be the entrance to Purgatory. All the implements of torture employed therein are of human manufacture; old, worn-out gyves and fetters being occasionally found at the mouth of the cave, and as regularly replaced by new ones, which disappear the same night, and for which the magistrate of the district makes a formal charge in his accounts.

Under the Ming dynasty, there was a certain Censor, named Hua, whose duties brought him to this place; and hearing the story of the cave, he said he did not believe it, but would penetrate into it and see for himself. People tried to dissuade him from such an enterprise; however, he paid no heed to their remonstrances, and entered the cave with a lighted candle in his hand, followed by two attendants. They had proceeded about half a mile, when suddenly the candle was violently extinguished, and Mr. Hua saw before him a broad flight of steps leading up to the Ten Courts, or Judgment-halls, in each of which a judge was sitting with his robes and tablets all complete. On the eastern side there was one vacant place; and when the judges saw Mr. Hua, they hastened down the steps to meet him, and each one cried out, "So you have come at last, have you? I hope you have been quite well since last we met." Mr. Hua asked what the place was; to which they replied that it was the Court of Purgatory, and then Mr. Hua in a great fright was about to take his leave, when the judges stopped him, saying, "No, no, Sir! that is your seat there; how can you imagine you are to go back again?" Thereupon Mr. Hua was overwhelmed with fear, and begged and implored the judges to forgive him; but the latter declared they could not interfere with the decrees of fate, and taking down the register of Life and Death they showed him that it had been ordained that on such a day of such a month his living body would pass into the realms of darkness. When Mr. Hua read these words he shivered and shook as if iced water was being poured down his back, and thinking of his old mother and his young children, his tears began to flow. At that juncture an angel in golden armour appeared, holding in his hand a document written on yellow silk,² before which the judges all performed a respectful obeisance. They then unfolded and read the document, which was nothing more or less than a general pardon from the Almighty for the suffering sinners in Purgatory, by virtue of which Mr. Hua's fate would be set aside, and he would be enabled to return once more to the light of day. Thereupon the judges congratulated him upon his release, and started him on his way home; but he had not got more than a few steps of the way before he found himself plunged in total darkness. He was just beginning to despair, when forth from the gloom came a God with a red face and a long beard, rays of light shooting out from his body and illuminating the darkness around. Mr. Hua made up to him at once, and begged to know how he could get out of the cave; to which the God curtly replied, "Repeat the *sûtras* of Buddha!" and vanished instantly from his sight. Now Mr. Hua had forgotten almost all the *sûtras* he had ever known; however, he remembered a little of the diamond *sûtra*, and, clasping his hands in an attitude of prayer, he

¹ Fêng-tu is a district city in the province of Szechuen, and near it are said to be fire-wells, otherwise known as the entrance to Purgatory, the capital city of which is also called Fêng-tu.

² An Imperial mandate is always written on yellow silk, and the ceremony of opening and perusing it is accompanied by prostrations and other acts of reverential submission.

began to repeat it aloud. No sooner had he done this than a faint streak of light glimmered through the darkness, and revealed to him the direction of the path; but the next moment he was at a loss how to go on, and the light forthwith disappeared. He then set himself to think hard what the next verse was, and as fast as he recollected and could go on repeating, so fast did the light reappear to guide him on his way, until at length he emerged once more from the mouth of the cave. As to the fate of the two servants who accompanied him it is needless to inquire.