

The Pious Surgeon

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain veterinary surgeon, named Hou, was carrying food to his field labourers, when suddenly a whirlwind arose in his path. Hou seized a spoon and poured out a libation of gruel, whereupon the wind immediately dropped. On another occasion, he was wandering about the municipal temple when he noticed an image of Liu Ch'uan presenting the melon, in whose eye was a great splotch of dirt'. "Dear me, Sir Liu!" cried Hou, "who has been ill-using you like this?" He then scraped away the dirt with his finger-nail, and passed on. Some years afterwards, as he was lying down very ill, two lictors walked in and carried him off to a yamên, where they insisted on his bribing them heavily. Hou was at his wits' end what to do; but just at that moment a personage dressed in green robes came forth, who was greatly astonished at seeing him there, and asked what it all meant. Our hero at once explained; whereupon the man in green turned upon the lictors and abused them for not showing proper respect to Mr. Hou. Meanwhile a drum sounded like the roll of thunder, and the man in green told Hou that it was for the morning session, and that he would have to attend. Leading Hou within, he put him in his proper place, and, promising to inquire into the charge against him, went forward and whispered a few words to one of the clerks. "Oh," said the latter, advancing and making a bow to the veterinary surgeon, "yours is a trifling matter. We shall merely have to confront you with a horse, and then you can go home again." Shortly afterwards, Hou's case was called; upon which he went forward and knelt down, as did also a horse which was prosecuting him. The judge now informed Hou that he was accused by the horse of having caused its death by medicines, and asked him if he pleaded guilty or not guilty. "My lord," replied Hou, "the prosecutor was attacked by the cattle-plague, for which I treated him accordingly; and he actually recovered from the disease, though he died on the following day. Am I to be held responsible for that?" The horse now proceeded to tell his story; and after the usual cross-examination and cries for justice, the judge gave orders to look up the horse's term of life in the Book of Fate. Therein it appeared that the animal's destiny had doomed it to death on the very day on which it had died; whereupon the judge cried out, "Your term of years had already expired; why bring this false charge? Away with you!" and turning to Hou, the judge added, "You are a worthy man, and may be permitted to live." The lictors were accordingly instructed to escort him back, and with them went out both the clerk and the man in green clothes, who bade the lictors take every possible care of Hou by the way. "You gentlemen are very kind," said Hou, "but I haven't the honour of your acquaintance, and should be glad to know to whom I am so much indebted." "Three years ago," replied the man in green, "I was travelling in your neighbourhood, and was suffering very much from thirst, which you relieved for me by a few spoonfuls at gruel. I have not forgotten that act." "And my name," observed the other, "is Liu Ch'uan. You once took a splotch of dirt out of my eye that was troubling me very much. I am only sorry that the wine and food we have down here is unsuitable to offer you. Farewell." Hou now understood all that had happened, and went off home with the two lictors, where he would have regaled them with some refreshment, but they refused to take every a cup of tea. He then waked up and found that he had been dead for two days. From this time forth he led a more virtuous life than ever, always pouring out libations to Liu-Ch'uan at all the festivals of the year. Thus he reached the age of eighty, a hale and hearty man, still able to sit in the saddle; until one day he met Liu Ch'uan riding on horseback, as if about to make a long journey.

After a little friendly conversation, the latter said to him, "Your time is up, and the warrant for your arrest is already issued; but I have ordered the constables to delay awhile, and you can now spend three days in preparing for death, at the expiration of which I will come and fetch you. I have purchased a small appointment for you in the realms below,¹ by which you will be more comfortable." So Hou went home and told his wife and children; and after collecting his friends and relatives, and making all necessary preparations, on the evening of the fourth day he cried out, "Liu Ch'uan has come!" and getting into his coffin,² lay down and died.

¹ As the Chinese believe that their disembodied spirits proceed to a world organised on much the same model as the one they know, so do they think that there will be social distinctions of rank and emolument proportioned to the merits of each.

² A dying man is almost always moved into his coffin to die and aged persons frequently take to sleeping regularly in the coffins provided against the inevitable hour by the pious thoughtfulness of a loving son. Even in middle life Chinese like to see their coffins ready for them, and store them sometimes on their own premises sometimes in the outhouses of a neighbouring temple.