

Collecting Subscriptions

By P'u Sung-ling

The Frog-God frequently employs a magician to deliver its oracles to those who have faith. Should the magician declare that the God is pleased, happiness is sure to follow; but if he says the God is angry, women and children¹ sit sorrowfully about, and neglect even their meals. Such is the customary belief, and it is probably not altogether devoid of foundation.

There was a certain wealthy merchant, named Chou, who was a very stingy man. Once, when some repairs were necessary to the temple of the God of War, and rich and poor were subscribing as much as each could afford, he alone gave nothing.² By-and-by the works were stopped for want of funds, and the committee of management were at a loss what to do next. It happened that just then there was a festival in honour of the Frog-God, at which the magician suddenly cried out, "General Chou³ has given orders for a further subscription. Bring forth the books." The people all shouting assent to this, the magician went on to say, "Those who have already subscribed will not be compelled to do so again; those who have not subscribed must give according to their means." Thereupon various persons began to put down their names, and when this was finished, the magician examined the books. He then asked if Mr. Chou was present; and the latter, who was skulking behind, in dread lest he should be detected by the God, had no alternative but to come to the front. "Put yourself down for one hundred taels," said the magician to him; and when Chou hesitated, he cried out to him in anger, "You, could give two hundred for your own bad purposes: how much more should you do so in a good cause?" alluding to a scandalous intrigue of Chou's, the consequences of which he had averted by payment of the sum mentioned. This put our friend to the blush, and he was obliged to enter his name for one hundred taels, at which his wife was very angry, and said the magician was a rogue, and whenever he came to collect the money he was put off with some excuse.

Shortly afterwards, Chou was one day going to sleep, when he heard a noise outside his house, like the blowing of an ox, and beheld a huge frog walking leisurely through the front door, which was just big enough to let it pass. Once inside, the creature laid itself down to sleep, with its head

¹ The chief supporters of superstition in China.

² Such is one of the most common causes of hostile demonstration against Chinese Christians. The latter, acting under the orders of the missionaries, frequently refuse to subscribe to the various local celebrations and processions, the great annual festivities and ceremonies of all kinds, on the grounds that these are idolatrous and forbidden by the Christian faith. Hence bad feeling, high words, blows, and sometimes bloodshed. I say "frequently" because many cases have come to light in which converts have quietly subscribed like other people rather than risk an *émeute*.

An amusing incident came under my own special notice not very long ago. A missionary appeared before me one day to complain that a certain convert of his had been posted in his own village, and cut off from his civic rights for two years, merely because he had agreed to let a room of his house to be used as a missionary *dépôt*. I took a copy of the placard which was handed to me in proof of this statement, and found it to run thus:—"In consequence of — having entered into an agreement with a barbarian pastor, to lease to the said barbarian pastor a room in his house to be used as a missionary chapel, we, the elders of this village, do hereby debar — from the privilege of worshipping in our ancestral hall for the space of two years." It is needless, of course, to mention that Ancestral Worship is (or was) prohibited by all sects of missionaries in China alike; or that, when I pointed this out to the individual in question, who could not have understood the import of the Chinese placard, the charge was promptly withdrawn.

³ An historical character who was formerly among the ranks of the Yellow Turban rebels, but subsequently entered the service of Kuan Yü, and was canonised by an Emperor of the last dynasty.

on the threshold, to the great horror of all the inmates; upon which Chou observed that it had probably come to collect his subscription, and, burning some incense, he vowed that he would pay down thirty taels on the spot, and send the balance later on. The frog, however, did not move, so Chou promised fifty, and then there was a slight decrease in the frog's size. Another twenty brought it down to the size of a peck measure; and when Chou said the full amount should be paid on the spot, the frog became suddenly no larger than one's fist, and disappeared through a hole in the wall. Chou immediately sent off fifty taels, at which all the other subscribers were much astonished, not knowing what had taken place. A few days afterwards the magician said Chou still owed fifty taels, and that he had better send it in soon; so Chou forwarded ten more, hoping now to have done with the matter. However, as he and his wife were one day sitting down to dinner, the frog reappeared, and, glaring with anger, took up a position on the bed, which creaked under it, as though unable to bear the weight. Putting its head on the pillow, the frog went off to sleep, its body gradually swelling up until it was as big as a buffalo, and nearly filled the room, causing Chou to send off the balance of his subscription without a moment's delay. There was now no diminution in the size of the frog's body; and by-and-by crowds of small frogs came hopping in, boring through the walls, jumping on the bed, catching flies on the cooking-stove, and dying in the saucepans, until the place was quite unbearable. Three days passed thus, and then Chou sought out the magician, and asked him what was to be done. The latter said he could manage it, and began by vowing on behalf of Chou twenty more taels' subscription. At this the frog raised its head, and a further increase caused it to move one foot; and by the time a hundred taels was reached, the frog was walking out of the door. At the door, however, it stopped, and lay down once more, which the magician explained by saying, that immediate payment was required; so Chou handed over the amount at once, and the frog, shrinking down to its usual size, mingled with its companions, and departed with them.

The repairs to the temple were accordingly completed, but for "lighting the eyes,"⁴ and the attendant festivities, some further subscriptions were wanted. Suddenly, the magician, pointing at the managers, cried out, "There is money short; of fifteen men, two of you are defaulters." At this, all declared they had given what they could afford; but the magician went on to say, "It is not a question of what you can afford; you have misappropriated the funds⁵ that should not have been touched, and misfortune would come upon you, but that; in return for your exertions, I shall endeavour to avert it from you. The magician himself is not without taint.⁶ Let him set you a good example." Thereupon, the magician rushed into his house, and brought out all the money he

⁴ This curious ceremony is the final touch to a newly-built or newly-restored temple, and consists in giving expression to the eyes of the freshly-painted idols, which have been purposely left blank by the painter. Up to that time these blocks of clay or wood are not supposed to have been animated by the spiritual presence of the deity in question; but no sooner are the eyes lighted than the gratified God smiles down upon the handsome decorations thus provided by devout and trusting suppliants.

There is a cognate custom belonging to the ceremonies of ancestral worship, of great importance in the eyes of the Chinese on a certain day after the death of a parent, the surviving head of the family proceeds with much solemnity to dab a spot of ink upon the memorial tablet of the deceased. This is believed to give to the departed spirit the power of remaining near to and watching over the fortunes of, those left behind.

⁵ Such indeed is the fate of a percentage of all public subscriptions raised and handled by Chinese of no matter what class. An application was once made to me for a donation to a native foundling hospital at Swatow, on the ground that I was known as a "read (Chinese) book man," and that consequently other persons, both Chinese and foreigners, might be induced to follow my example. On my declining to subscribe, the manager of the concern informed me that if I would only, put down my name for fifty dollars, say £10, no call should be made upon me for the money! What a blessing it is to live in Christian England, where speculation and corruption are unknown!

⁶ The reader must recollect that these are the words of the God, speaking from the magician's body.

had, saying, "I stole eight taels myself, which I will now refund," He then weighed what silver he had, and finding that it only amounted to a little over six taels, he made one of the bystanders take a note of the difference. Then the others came forward and paid up, each what he had misappropriated from the public fund. All this time the magician had been in a divine ecstasy, not knowing what he was saying; and when he came round, and was told what had happened, his shame knew no bounds, so he pawned some of his clothes, and paid in the balance of his own debt. As to the two defaulters who did not pay, one of them was ill for a month and more; while the other had a bad attack of boils.