

The Tiger Guest

By P'u Sung-ling

A young man named Kung, a native of Min-chou, on his way to the examination at His-ngan, rested awhile in an inn, and ordered some wine to drink. Just then a very tall and noble-looking stranger walked in, and, seating himself by the side of Kung, entered into conversation with him. Kung offered him a cup of wine, which the stranger did not refuse; saying, at the same time, that his name was Miao. But he was a rough, coarse fellow; and Kung, therefore, when the wine was finished, did not call for any more. Miao then rose, and observing that Kung did not appreciate a man of his capacity, went out into the market to buy some, returning shortly with a huge bowl full. Kung declined the proffered wine: but Miao, seizing his arm to persuade him, gripped it so painfully that Kung was forced to drink a few more cups. Miao himself swilling away as hard as he could go out of a soup-plate. "I am not good at entertaining people," cried Miao, at length; "pray go on or stop just as you please." Kung accordingly put together his things and went off; but he had not gone more than a few miles when his horse was taken ill, and lay down in the road. While he was waiting there with all his heavy baggage, revolving in his mind what he should do, Up came Mr. Miao; who, when he heard what was the matter, took off his coat and handed it to the servant, and lifting up the horse, carried it off on his back to the nearest inn, which was about six or seven miles distant. Arriving there he put the animal in the stable, and before long Kung and his servants arrived too. Kung was much astonished at Mr. Miao's feat; and, believing him to be superhuman began to treat him with the utmost deference, ordering both wine and food to be procured for their refreshment. "My appetite," remarked Miao, "is one that you could not easily satisfy. Let us stick to wine." So they finished another stoup together, and then Miao got up and took his leave, saying, "It will be some time before your horse is well; I cannot wait for you." He then went away.

After the examination several friends of Kung's invited him to join them in a picnic to the Flowery Hill; and just as they were all feasting and laughing together, lo! Mr. Miao walked up. In one hand he held a large flagon, and in the other a ham, both of which he laid down on the ground before them. "Hearing," said he, "that you gentlemen were coming here, I have tacked myself on to you, like a fly to a horse's tail." Kung and his friends then rose and received him with the usual ceremonies, after which they all sat down promiscuously.¹ By-and-by, when the wine had gone round pretty freely, some one proposed capping verses; whereupon Miao cried out, "Oh, we're very jolly drinking like this; what's the use of making oneself uncomfortable? ~" The others, however, would not listen to him, and agreed that as a forfeit a huge goblet of wine should be drunk by any defaulter. "Let us rather make death the penalty," said Miao; to which they replied, laughing, that such a punishment was a trifle too severe; and then Miao retorted that if it was not to be death, even a rough fellow like himself might be able to join. A Mr. Chin, who was sitting at the top of the line, then began

¹ Without any regard to precedence, which plays quite as important a part at a Chinese as at a Western dinner-party. In China, however, the most honoured guest sits at (what may be called) the head of the table, the host at the foot. I say "what may be called," as Chinese dining tables are almost invariably square, and position alone determines which is the head and which the foot. They are usually made to accommodate eight persons; hence the fancy name "eight-angel table," in allusion to the eight famous angels, or Immortals, of the Taoist religion. Occasionally, round tables are used; especially in cases where the party consists of some such number as ten.

From the hill-top high, wide extends the gaze—

upon which Miao immediately carried on with

Redly gleams the sword o'er the shattered vase.

The next gentleman thought for a long time, during which Miao was helping himself to wine; and by-and-by they had all capped the verse, but so wretchedly that Miao called out, "Oh, come! if we aren't to be fined for these, we had better abstain from making any more." As none of them would agree to this, Miao could stand it no longer, and roared like a dragon till the hills and valleys echoed again. He then went down on his hands and knees, and jumped about like a lion, which utterly confused the poets, and put an end to their lucubrations. The wine had now been round a good many times, and being half tipsy each began to repeat to the other the verses he had handed in at the recent examination, all at the same time indulging in any amount of mutual flattery. This so disgusted Miao that he drew Kung aside to have a game at "guess-fingers"² but as they went on droning away all the same, he at length cried out, "Do stop your rubbish, fit only for your own wives, and not for general company." The others were much abashed at this, and so angry were they at Miao's rudeness that they went on repeating all the louder. Miao then threw himself on the ground in a passion, and with a roar changed into a tiger, immediately springing upon the company, and killing them all except Kung and Mr. Chin. He then ran off roaring loudly. Now this Mr. Chin succeeded in taking his master's degree; and three years afterwards, happening to revisit the Flowery Hill, he beheld a Mr. Chi, one of those very gentlemen who had previously been killed by the tiger. In great alarm he was making off, when Chi seized his bridle and would not let him proceed. So he got down from his horse, and inquired what was the matter; to which Chi replied, "I am now the slave of Miao, and have to endure bitter toil for him. He must kill some one else before I can be set free."³ Three days hence a man, arrayed in the robes and cap of a scholar, should be eaten by the tiger at the foot of the Ts'ang-lung Hill. Do you on that day take some gentleman thither, and thus help your old friend." Chin was too frightened to say much, but promising that he would do so, rode away home. He then began to consider the matter over with himself, and, regarding it as a plot, he determined to break his engagement, and let his friend remain the tiger's devil. He chanced, however, to repeat the story to a Mr. Chiang who was a relative of his, and one of the local scholars; and as this gentleman had a grudge against another scholar, named Yu, who had come out equal with him at the examination, he made up his mind to destroy him. So he invited Yu to accompany him on that day to the place in question, mentioning that he himself should appear in undress only. Yu could not make out the reason for this; but when he reached the spot there he found all kinds of wine and food ready for his entertainment. Now that very day the Prefect had come to the hill; and being a friend of the Chiang family, and hearing that Chiang was below, sent for him to come up.

² Accurately described in Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Vol. I., p. 75:— Each player throws out a hand, and the sum of all the fingers shown has to be called, the successful caller scoring a point; practically each calls the total before he sees his adversary's hand." The insertion of the word "simultaneously" after "called" would improve this description. -This game is so noisy that the Hong-Kong authorities have forbidden it, except within certain authorised limits, between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 am—Ordinance No. 2 of 1872.

³ The "substitution" theory, by which disembodied spirits are enabled to find their way back to the world of mortals. A very interesting and important example of this belief occurs in a later story for which place I reserve further comments.

Chiang did not dare to appear before him in undress, and borrowed Yu's clothes and hat; but he had no sooner got them on than out rushed the tiger and carried him away in its mouth.