

The Salt Smuggler

By P'u Sung-ling

Wang Shih, of Kao-wan, a petty salt huckster, was inordinately fond of gambling. One night he was arrested by two men, whom he took for lictors of the Salt Gabelle; and, flinging down what salt he had with him, he tried to make his escape.¹ He found, however, that his legs would not move with him, and he was forthwith seized and bound. "We are not sent by the Salt Commissioner," cried his captors, in reply to an entreaty to set him free; "we are the devil-constables of Purgatory." Wang was horribly frightened at this, and begged the devils to let him bid farewell to his wife and children; but this they refused to do, saying, "You aren't going to die; you are only wanted for a little job there is down below." Wang asked what the job was; to which the devils replied, "A new Judge has come into office, and, finding the river² and the eighteen hells choked up with the bodies of sinners, he has determined to employ three classes of mortals to clean them out. These are thieves, unlicensed founders,³ and unlicensed dealers in salt, and, for the dirtiest work of all, he is going to take musicians."⁴

Wang accompanied the devils until at length they reached a city, where he was brought before the Judge, who was sitting in his Judgment-hall. On turning up his record in the books, one of the devils explained that the prisoner had been arrested for unlicensed trading; whereupon the Judge became very angry, and said, "Those who drive an illicit trade in salt, not only defraud the State of its proper revenue, but also prey upon the livelihood of the people. Those, however, whom the greedy officials and corrupt traders of to-day denounce as unlicensed traders, are among the most virtuous of mankind—needy unfortunates who struggle to save a few cash in the purchase of their pint of salt.⁵ Are they your unlicensed traders?" The Judge then bade the lictors buy four

¹ Salt is a Government monopoly in China, and its sale is only permitted to licensed dealers. it is a, contraband article of commerce, whether for import or export, to foreign nations trading with China. In an account of a journey from Swatow to Canton in March—April, 1877, I wrote:—"A *propo* of salt, we came across a good-sized bunker of it when stowing away our things in the space below the deck. The boatmen could not resist the temptation of doing a little smuggling on the way up. . . . At a secluded point in a bamboo-shaded bend of the river, they ran the boat alongside the bank, and were instantly met by a number of suspicious-looking gentlemen with baskets, who soon relieved them of the smuggled salt and separated in different directions." Thus do the people of China seek to lighten the grievous pressure of this tax. A curious custom exists in Canton. Certain blind old men and women are allowed to hawk salt about the streets, and earn a scanty living from the profits they are able to make.

² The Styx.

³ These words require some explanation. Ordinarily they would be taken in the sense of casting *cash* of a base description; but they might equally well signify the casting of iron articles of any kind, and thereby hang some curious details. Iron foundries in China may only be opened under license from the local officials, and the articles there made, consisting chiefly of cooking utensils, may only be sold within a given area, each district having its own particular foundries, from which alone the supplies of the neighbourhood may be derived. Free trade in iron is much feared by the authorities, as thereby pirates and rebels would be enabled to supply themselves with arms. At the framing of the Treaty of Tientsin, with its accompanying tariff and rules, iron was not specified among other prohibited articles of commerce. Consequently, British merchants would appear to have a full right to purchase iron in the interior and convey it to any of the open ports under Transit-pass. But the Chinese officials steadily refuse to acknowledge, or permit the exercise of, this right, putting forward their own time-honoured custom, with regard to iron, and enumerating the disadvantages to China were such an innovation to be brought about.

⁴ The allusion is to women, of a not very respectable class.

⁵ No Chinese magistrate would pass sentence upon a man who stole food under stress of hunger, even if such a criminal were ever brought before him.

pecks of salt, and send it to Wang's house for him, together with that which had been found upon him; and, at the same time, he gave Wang an iron scourge, and told him to superintend the works at the river. So Wang followed the devils, and found the river swarming with people like ants in an ant-hill. The water was turbid and red, the stench from it being almost unbearable, while those who were employed in cleaning it out were working there naked. Sometimes they would sink down in the horrid mass of decaying bodies: sometimes they would get lazy, and then the iron scourge was applied to their backs. The assistant-superintendents had small scented balls, which they held in their mouths. Wang himself approached the bank, and saw the licensed salt-merchant of Kao-wan⁶ in the midst of it all, and thrashed him well with his scourge, until he was afraid he would never come up again. This went on for three days and three nights, by which time half the workmen were dead, and the work completed; whereupon the same two devils escorted him home again, and then he waked up.

As a matter of fact, Wang had gone out to sell some salt, and had not come back. Next morning, when his wife opened the house door, she found two bags of salt in the court-yard; and, as her husband did not return, she sent off some people to search for him, and they discovered him lying senseless by the wayside. He was immediately conveyed home, where, after a little time, he recovered consciousness, and related what had taken place. Strange to say, the licensed salt-merchant had fallen down in a fit on the previous evening, and had only just recovered; and Wang, hearing that his body was covered with sores—the result of the beating with the iron scourge—went off to his house to see him; however, directly the wretched man set eyes on Wang, he hastily covered himself up with the bed-clothes, forgetting that they were no longer at the infernal river. He did not recover from his injuries for a year, after which he retired from trade.

⁶ His own village.