

# The-Devils-of-the-Ocean

By P'ou Song-lin

In the twenty-second year of the period Eternal-happiness, the population of Chao-cheou's harbour, awaking on a bright summer's morning, were extremely surprised and frightened to see, swaying on the blue water of the bay, a strange and abnormally huge ship. The three high masts were heavily loaded with transversal pieces of wood, from some of which sails were still hanging; another mast projected horizontally from the prow, and three sails were tightened from this to the foremast.

A small boat was lowered from the ship's side and rowed to the quay. Several hundreds of people were watching the proceedings, asking one another if it was a human invention or a ship coming from the depths of hell.

The small boat stopped at a short distance from the bank; one could see that, beside the rowers, there were three men seated in the stern; their heads were covered with extraordinarily long and fluffy grey hair; they wore big hats with feathers of many colours. A Chinaman was in the boat and hailed the people:

"Ha! Please tell the local authorities that high mandarins from the ocean want to speak to them. We are peaceful. But if you do any harm to our men or ships, our wrath will be such that we will destroy in one day the whole town and kill everybody within ten miles' distance."

Three or four men belonging to the Yamen had heard these words; they ran to the prefect's palace and came back with an answer they delivered to the new-comers:

"His Excellency the prefect consents to receive your visit. If you are peaceful, no harm will be done to you. But if you steal anything, or wound or kill anybody, the laws of our country will be enforced upon you without mercy."

Then the boat slowly accosted the quay; two of the men with feathered hats disembarked with the Chinaman, while six of the rowers, leaving their oars in the boat, shouldered heavy muskets, and cleared the way, three walking in front of the feathered hats and three behind. The rowers wore small caps and had long blue trousers and very short blue coats.

The prefect, in his embroidered dress, awaited them on the threshold of his reception-room. He bade the new-comers be seated and asked their names and their business; the Chinaman translated the questions and the answers.

"We come from the other side of the earth."

"Well," thought the prefect. "I was sure of it, the earth being square and flat, the other side of it is certainly hell. What am I to do?"

"We only want to trade with your countrymen. We will sell you what goods we have brought; we will buy your country's productions, and if no harm is done we will sail away in a few days."

"Our humble country is very poor," answered the prefect. "The people are not rich enough to buy any of the splendid goods you may have brought. Besides, this country's products are not worth your giving any money for them. If I can give you good advice, you had better sail away today and get to the first harbour of the northern province; there they are very rich."

"We have just come from it; they told us the very reverse. Here, according to them, we should be able to find everything we want. Besides, our mind is settled; we will remain here long enough to buy what we want and to sell what we can. We are very peaceful people as long as one

deals justly with us. But if you try to beguile us, we will employ all our strength in the defence of our rights. All we want is a place on shore where we can store and show our goods.”

“Well, well; I never intended to do anything of the sort,” said the prefect. “But the Emperor is the only possessor of the soil. How could I give you a place even on the shore?”

“We don’t want very much, and the Emperor won’t know anything. Give us only the surface of ground covered by a carpet, and we will be satisfied.”

Chinese carpets are not more than two or three feet broad and five or six feet wide. The prefect thought he could not be blamed to authorise the foreigners to settle on such a small piece of ground; on the other hand, if he refused, there would ensue trouble and he would certainly be cashiered.

“It is only as a special arrangement and by greatly compromising with the law that I can give you this authorisation.”

And the prefect wrote a few words on one of his big red visiting-cards. The interpreter carefully perused the document. Then the foreigners went back to their ship. The same day a proclamation was issued and pasted on the walls of the public edifices, explaining to the people that The-Devils-of-the-ocean had been authorised to settle on a piece of ground not bigger than a carpet and that no harm should be done to them.

In compliance with these orders, nobody dared oppose the foreigners when they began unrolling on the shore a carpet ten yards broad and thirty yards long. When the carpet was unrolled, The-Devils-of-the-ocean put themselves in ranks with muskets and swords on the carpet; nearly five hundred men stood there close to one another.

The prefect, who had personally watched the proceeding, was so angry against the foreigners for their cunningness that he immediately ordered troops to drive them out into the water. But the foreigners had a devilish energy nobody could resist; they killed a great many of our people, burned the greater part of the city, and occupied for several years all the northern part of the bay, where they erected a sort of bazaar and a fortress, which still exist to this day.