

Theft of the Peach

By P'u Sung-ling

When I was a little boy I went one day to the prefectural city.¹ It was the time of the Spring festival,² and the custom was that on the day before, all the merchants of the place should proceed with banners and drums to the judge's yamên: this was called "bringing in the Spring." I went with a friend to see the fun; the crowd was immense, and there sat the officials in crimson robes arranged right and left in the hall; but I was small and didn't know who they were, my attention being attracted chiefly by the hum of voices and the noise of the drums. In the middle of it all, a man leading a boy with his hair unplaited and hanging down his back, walked up to the dais. He carried a pole on his shoulder, and appeared to be saying something which I couldn't hear for the noise; I only saw the officials smile, and immediately afterwards an attendant came down, and in a loud voice ordered the man to give a performance. "What shall it be?" asked the man in reply; whereupon, after some consultation between the officials on the dais, the attendant inquired what he could do best. The man said he could invert the order of nature; and then, after another pause, he was instructed to produce some peaches; to this he assented; and taking off his coat, laid it on his box, at the same time observing that they had set him a hard task, the winter frost not having broken up, and adding that he was afraid the gentlemen would be angry with him, &c., &c. His son here reminded him that he had agreed to the task and couldn't well get out of it; so, after fretting and grumbling awhile, he cried out, "I have it! with snow on the ground we shall never get peaches here; but I guess there are some up in heaven in the Royal Mother's garden,³ and there we must try." "How are we to get up, father?" asked the boy; whereupon the man said, "I have the means," and immediately proceeded to take from his box a cord some tens of feet in length. This he carefully arranged, and then threw one end of it high up into the air, where it remained as if caught 'by something. He now paid out the rope, which kept going up higher and higher until the end he had thrown up disappeared in the clouds and only a short piece was left in his hands. Calling his son, he then explained that he himself was too heavy, and, handing him the end of the rope, bade him go up at once. The boy, however, made some difficulty, objecting that the rope was too thin to bear his weight up to such a height, and that he would surely fall down and be killed; upon which his father said that his promise had been given and that repentance was now too late, adding that if the peaches were obtained they would surely be rewarded with a hundred ounces of silver, which should be set aside to get the boy a pretty wife. So his son seized the rope and swarmed up, like a spider running up a thread of its web; and in a few moments he was out of sight in the clouds. By-and-by down fell a peach as large as a basin, which the delighted father handed up to his patrons on the dais, who were some time coming to a conclusion whether it was real or imitation. But just then down came the rope with a run, and the affrighted father shrieked out, "Alas! alas! some one has cut the rope: what will my boy do now?" and in another minute down fell something else, which was found on examination to be his son's head. "Ah me!" said he, weeping bitterly and showing the head; "the gardener has

¹ It is worth noting that the author professes actually to have witnessed the following extraordinary scene.

² The vernal equinox, which would fall on or about the 20th of March.

³ A fabulous lady said to reside at the summit of the K'un-lun mountain, where, on the border of the Gem Lake, grows the peach-tree of the Gods, the fruit of which confers immortality on him who eats it. For her identification with Juno; see *Adversaria Sinica*, No. 1, 1905.

caught him, and my boy is no more.” After that, his arms, and legs, and body, all came down in like manner; and the father, gathering them up, put them in the box and said, “This was my only son, who accompanied me everywhere; and now what a cruel fate is his. I must away and bury him.” He then approached the dais and said, “Your peach, gentlemen, was obtained at the cost of my boy’s life; help me now to pay his funeral expenses, and I will be ever grateful to you.” The officials, who had been watching the scene in horror and amazement, forthwith collected a good purse for him; and when he had received the money, he rapped on his box and said, “Pa-pa’rh! why don’t you come out and thank the gentlemen?” Thereupon, there was a thump on the box from the inside, and up came the boy himself, who jumped out and bowed to the assembled company. I have never forgotten this strange trick, which I subsequently heard could be done by the White Lily sect,⁴ who probably got it from this source.⁵

⁴ One of the most celebrated of the numerous secret societies of China, the origin of which dates back to about AD. 1350. Its members have always been credited with a knowledge of the black art.

⁵ Of Chinese jugglers, Ibn Batuta writes as follows:—“They produced a chain fifty cubits in length, and in my presence threw one end of it toward the sky, where it remained, as if fastened to something in the air. A dog was then brought forward, and, being placed at the lower end of the chain, immediately ran up, mind reaching the other end immediately disappeared in the air. In the same manner a hog, a panther, a lion, and a tiger were alternately sent up the chain, and all equally disappeared at the upper end of it. At last they took down the chain, and put it into a bag, no one ever discerning in what way the different animals were made to vanish into the air in the mysterious manner above described. This, I may venture to affirm, was beyond measure strange and surprising.

A propos of which passage, Mr. Maskelyne, the prince of all black-artists, ancient or modern, says:—These apparent effects were, doubtless, due to the aid of concave mirrors, the use of which was known to the ancients, especially in the East, but they could not have been produced in the open air.