# Kwang-Jui And The God Of The River

China is a land where the great masses of the people have to toil and struggle incessantly in order to obtain even the bare necessities of daily existence. Unnumbered multitudes never enjoy a sufficiency of food, but have to be contented with whatever Heaven may send them; and profoundly thankful they are when they can be sure of two meals a day to stave off the pangs of hunger from themselves and their children.How many there are who cannot by the severest toil obtain even these two meals is evident from the organized beggar communities, which are to be found in connection with every great city in the Empire, and from the vast numbers of tramps, who wander over the country on the highways and byways with pale and sodden faces and with garments nearly falling to pieces, picking up a scanty livelihood from the benevolent as they pass from village to village.Whatever may be their inmost thoughts, the Chinese bear their terrible hardships and privations with a splendid heroism, with little complaining, with no widespread outbreaks of robbery, and with no pillaging of rice-shops and public granaries by organized mobs driven mad by hunger.There is one beautiful feature about the Chinese that has been an important factor in steadying the nation. They are imbued with at least one great ideal, which touches their common life in every direction. Every man in the Empire, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, has a profound respect for what he calls Tien-Li, or Divine Righteousness. By this the Chinese judge all actions. It is the standard by which Kings and Princes and common people direct their conduct, whether in the highest affairs of state, or in the ordinary engagements of common every-day life.In addition to this, the minds of the Chinese are filled with romance and poetry, so that to them the invisible world is peopled with fairies and all kinds of spirits, both good and bad, the former relieving in mysterious ways the dull greyness that sorrow and disaster often shed upon the lives of men.The story of Kwang-Jui is a remarkable evidence of the unbounded faith which the Chinese have in the intervention of these mysterious beings to deliver men from calamities which would otherwise prove fatal to them.When we first meet with Kwang-Jui, he is living with his widowed mother in a retired part of the country. His father had been dead for some time, and Kwang-Jui was now the only one upon whom the fortunes of the home could be built. He was a very studious lad, and was possessed of remarkable abilities, the result being that he successfully passed the various Imperial Examinations, even the final one in the capital, where the Sovereign himself presided as examiner.After this last examination, as the men were waiting outside the Hall for the names of those who had satisfied the Emperor to be read out a considerable crowd had collected. Most of these people had come from mere curiosity to see the Imperial Edict, and to discover who the scholar was that stood first on the list. The excitement was intense, and speculation ran rife as to which of the candidates, who had come from almost every province in the Empire, was going to obtain the place of honour which was the dream and the ambition of every scholar in the land.At last every breath was hushed, and every voice stilled in silence, as one of the high officials of the Palace, attended by an imposing retinue, came out of the great central doors, which had been flung wide open at his approach. In a clear voice he began to read the list. It was headed by the name of Kwang-Jui.At this precise moment occurred an incident which was destined to change the whole current of Kwang-Jui's career. As he was standing overcome with emotion in consequence of the supreme honour which had been conferred upon him by the Emperor's Edict, a small round ball, beautifully embroidered, was thrown from an upper window of a house across the way, and struck him on the shoulder.It may here be explained that it was a custom in the early days of the history of China to allow any young maiden who was reluctant to have her husband chosen for her by her parents, to make use of what was called "The throwing of the embroidered ball" in order to discover the man whom the gods intended her to marry. This ball was made of some soft material, wrapped round with a piece of red silk which was covered with variegated figures, worked by the damsel's own hands and emblematic of the love by which the hearts of husband and wife are bound indissolubly to each other. It was firmly believed by every maiden of this romantic type that the man who was struck by the ball from her fair hands was the one whom Heaven had selected as her husband; and no parent would ever dream of refusing to accept a choice made in this way.Whilst Kwang-Jui was gazing in amused wonder at the symbol which he understood so well, a messenger from the house from which it had been thrown requested him in respectful tones to accompany him to his master, who desired to discuss with him a most important subject.As Kwang-Jui entered the house, he discovered to his astonishment that it belonged to the Prime Minister, who received him with the utmost cordiality, and after a long conversation declared that he was prepared to submit to the will of the gods, and to accept him as his son-in-law. Kwang-Jui was of course in raptures at the brilliant prospects which were suddenly opening up before him. The day, indeed, was a red-letter one—an omen, he hoped, that fate was preparing to pour down upon him good fortune in the future. In one brief day he had been hailed as the most distinguished scholar in the Empire, and he had also been acknowledged as the son-in-law of the Empire's greatest official, who had the power of placing him in high positions where he could secure not only honours but also wealth sufficient to drive poverty away for ever from his home.As there was no reason for delay, the hand of the beautiful daughter who had thrown the embroidered ball, and who was delighted that Heaven had chosen for her such a brilliant husband, was bestowed upon him by her parents. Times of great rejoicing succeeded, and when Kwang-Jui thought of the quiet and uninteresting days when he was still unknown to fame, and contrasted them with his present life, it seemed to him as though he were living in fairy-land. His wildest dreams in the past had never conjured up anything so grand as the life he was now leading. In one bound he had leaped from comparative poverty to fame and riches.After a time, through the influence of his father-in-law, and with the hearty consent of the Emperor, who remembered what a brilliant student he had been, Kwang-Jui was appointed to be Prefect of an important district in the centre of China.Taking his bride with him, he first of all proceeded to his old home, where his mother was waiting with great anxiety to welcome her now famous son. The old lady felt rather nervous at meeting her new daughter-in-law, seeing that the latter came from a family which was far higher in rank and far more distinguished than any in her own clan. As it was very necessary that Kwang-Jui should take up his office as Prefect without any undue delay, he and his mother and his bride set out in the course of a few days on the long journey to the distant Prefecture, where their lives were destined to be marred by sorrow and disaster.They had travelled the greater part of the way, and had reached a country market-town that lay on their route, when Kwang-Jui's mother, worn out with the toilsome journey, fell suddenly ill. The doctor who was called in shook his head and pronounced that she was suffering from a very serious complaint, which, whilst not necessarily fatal, would necessitate a complete rest for at least two or three months. Any further travelling must therefore be abandoned for the present, as it might be attended with the most serious consequences to the old lady.Both husband and wife were greatly distressed at the unlucky accident which placed them in such an awkward position at this wayside inn. They were truly grieved at the serious sickness of their mother, but they were still more puzzled as to what course they should pursue in these most trying circumstances. The Imperial Rescript appointing Kwang-Jui to his office as Prefect commanded him to take up his post on a certain definite date. To delay until his mother would again be able to endure the fatigues of travel was out of the question, as disobedience to the Emperor's orders would be attended by his grave displeasure. Eventually his mother suggested that he and his wife should go on ahead, and that after taking up the duties of his office he should then delegate them for a time to his subordinates and return to take her home.This advice Kwang-Jui decided to carry out; though with great reluctance, as he was most unwilling to abandon his mother to the care of strangers. He accordingly made all the arrangements he possibly could for her comfort whilst they were parted from each other; he had servants engaged to attend upon her, and he left sufficient money with her to meet all her expenses during his absence.With a mind full of consideration for his mother, and wishing to show how anxious he was to give her pleasure, he went out into the market of the town to see if he could buy a certain kind of fish of which she was passionately fond. He had hardly got outside the courtyard of the inn, when he met a fisherman with a very fine specimen of the very fish that he wished to purchase.As he was discussing the price with the man, a certain something about the fish arrested his attention. There was a peculiar look in its eyes that seemed full of pathos and entreaty. Its gaze was concentrated upon him, so human-like and with such intensity, that he instinctively felt it was pleading with him to do something to deliver it from a great disaster. This made him look at it more carefully, and to his astonishment the liquid eyes of the fish were still fixed upon him with a passionate regard that made him quiver with excitement."Fisherman," he said, "I want to buy this fish, and here is the price that you ask for it. I have but one stipulation to make, and that is that you take it to the river from which you caught it, and set it free to swim away wherever it pleases. Remember that if you fail to carry out this part of the bargain, great sorrow will come upon you and your home."Little did either of them dream that the fish was the presiding God of the River, who for purposes of his own had transformed himself into this form, and who, while swimming up and down the stream had been caught in the net of the fisherman.After travelling for some hours Kwang-Jui and his wife came to the bank of a considerable river, where they hired a large boat to convey them to their destination.The boatman they engaged was a man of very low character. He had originally been a scholar and of good family, but, utterly depraved and immoral, he had gradually sunk lower and lower in society, until at last he had been compelled to fly from his home to a distant province, and there to engage in his present occupation in order to earn his living. The large amount of property which Kwang-Jui had with him seemed to arouse the worst passions in this man, and while the boat was being carried along by a fair wind and a flowing tide, he planned in his mind how he was to become the possessor of it. By the time that they reached the place where they were to anchor for the night, he had already decided what measures he should adopt.A little after midnight, accordingly, he crept stealthily towards the place where Kwang-Jui was sleeping, stabbed him to the heart and threw his body into the fast-flowing river. He next threatened the wife that if she dared to utter a sound, he would murder her also and send her to join her husband in the Land of Shadows. Paralyzed with terror, she remained speechless, only a stifled sob and groan now and again breaking from her agonized heart. Her first serious idea was to commit suicide, and she was preparing to fling herself into the water that gurgled along the sides of the boat, when she was restrained by the thought that if she destroyed herself, she would never be able to avenge her husband's death or bring punishment upon the villain who had just murdered him.It was not mere robbery, however, that was in the mind of the man who had committed this great crime. He had bigger ideas than that. He had noticed that in personal appearance he very much resembled his victim, so he determined to carry out the daring project of passing himself off as Kwang-Jui, the mandarin whom the Emperor had despatched to take up the appointment of Prefect.Having threatened the widow that instant death would be her portion if she breathed a word to anyone about the true state of the case, and having arrayed himself in the official robes of the man whom he had stabbed to death, the boatman appeared at the yamen, where he presented the Imperial credentials and was duly installed in his office. It never entered his mind that it was not cowardice which kept the widow silent, but the stern resolve of a brave and high-minded woman that she would do her part to see that vengeance should in time fall upon the man who had robbed her of a husband whom she looked upon as the direct gift of Heaven.Now, immediately after the body of Kwang-Jui had been cast into the water, the customary patrol sent by the God of the River to see that order was kept within his dominions, came upon it, and conveyed it with all speed into the presence of the god himself.The latter looked at it intently for a moment, and then exclaimed in great excitement, "Why, this is the very person who only yesterday saved my life, when I was in danger of being delivered over to a cruel death! I shall now be able to show my gratitude by using all the power I possess to serve his interests. Bring him to the Crystal Grotto," he continued, "where only those who have distinguished themselves in the service of the State have ever been allowed to lie. This man has a claim upon me such as no one before him ever possessed. He is the saviour of my life, and I will tenderly care for him until the web of fate has been spun, and, the vengeance of Heaven having been wreaked upon his murderer, he shall once more rejoin the wife from whom he has been so ruthlessly torn."With the passing of the months, the widow of Kwang-Jui gave birth to a son, the very image of his father. It was night-time when he was born, and not long after his birth, a mysterious voice, which could not be traced, was heard distinctly saying, "Let the child be removed without delay from the yamen, before the return of the Prefect, as otherwise its life will not be safe."Accordingly, on the morrow, the babe, about whose destiny even Heaven itself seemed concerned, was carefully wrapped round with many coverings to protect it against the weather. Inside the inmost dress, there was enclosed a small document, telling the child's tragic story and describing the danger from a powerful foe which threatened its life. In order to be able to identify her son, it might be after the lapse of many years, the mother cut off the last joint of the little finger of his left hand; and then, with tears and sighs, and with her heart full of unspoken agony, she took a last, lingering look upon the face of the little one.A confidential slave woman carried him out of her room, and by devious ways and secret paths finally laid him on the river's bank. Casting a final glance at the precious bundle to see that no danger threatened it, she hurried back in the direction of the city, with the faint cries of the abandoned infant still sounding in her ears.And now the child was in the hands of Heaven. That this was so was evident from the fact that in a few minutes the abbot of the monastery, which could be seen crowning the top of a neighbouring hill, passed along the narrow pathway by the side of the river. Hearing a baby's cry, he hastened towards the place from which the sounds came, and picking up the little bundle, and realizing that the infant had been deserted, he carried it up to the monastery and made every arrangement for its care and comfort. Fortunately he was a man of a deeply benevolent nature, and no more suitable person could have been found to take charge of the child.We must now allow eighteen years to pass by. The child that had been left on the margin of the river had grown up to be a fine, handsome lad. The abbot had been his friend ever since the day when his heart had been touched by his cries, and his love for the little foundling had grown with the years. The boy had become a kind of son to him, and in order not to be parted from him he had taught him the temple duties, so that he was now a qualified priest in the service of the gods.One morning the young man, whose name was Sam-Choang, came to the abbot with a restless, dissatisfied look on his face, and begged to be told who his father was, and who his mother. The old priest, who had long been aware of the tragic story of Kwang-Jui's murder, felt that the time had come when the lad ought to know what he had hitherto concealed from him. Taking out the document which he had found upon him as a baby, he read it to him, and then the great secret was out. After this a long and serious discussion took place between the two as to the wisest methods to be adopted for bringing the Prefect to justice and delivering the lad's mother from the humiliating position which she had so heroically borne for all these eighteen years.The next day a young priest, with shaven head and dressed in the usual slate-coloured gown, appeared at the yamen of the Prefect to solicit subscriptions for the neighbouring monastery. As the Prefect was absent on some public business, he was ushered into the reception-room, where he was received by his mother, who had always been a generous supporter of the Goddess of Mercy.At the first sight of this striking-looking young bonze, she found her heart agitated in a strange and powerful way, such as she had not experienced for many a long year; and when she noticed that the little finger on his left hand was without the last joint, she trembled with the utmost excitement.After a few words about the object for which he had come, the young priest slipped into her hand the very paper which she had written eighteen years ago; and as she looked at her own handwriting and then gazed into his face and saw the striking likeness to the man at whom she had thrown the embroidered ball, the mother-instinct within her flashed suddenly out, and she recognized that this handsome lad was her own son. The joy of the mother as she looked upon the face of Sam-Choang was reflected in the sparkling eyes and glowing look of pleasure that lit up his whole countenance.Retiring for a short time his mother returned with a letter which she handed to him. In a low voice she told him that it was to her father, who still lived in the capital, and to whom he was to take it without any delay. In order to prevent suspicion on the part of the Prefect, he was to travel as a priest, who was endeavouring to obtain subscriptions for his monastery. He was to be sure, also, to visit the place where his grandmother had been left, and to try and find out what had become of her. In order to defray his expenses she gave him a few bars of gold, which he could exchange for the current money at the banks on the way.When Sam-Choang arrived at the inn where his father had parted with his grandmother, he could find no trace of her. A new landlord was in possession, who had never even heard her name; but on enquiring amongst the shopkeepers in the neighbourhood, he found to his horror that she was now a member of the beggars' camp, and that her name was enrolled amongst that degraded fraternity.On reaching the wretched hovel where she was living, he discovered that when her money was exhausted and no remittance came to her from her son, she had been driven out on to the street by the innkeeper, and from that time had tramped the country, living on the scraps and bits which were bestowed upon her by the benevolent. Great was her joy when her grandson led her away to the best inn in the place, and on his departure gave her an ample supply of money for all her needs until they should meet again.When Sam-Choang reached the capital and handed his mother's letter to his grandfather, the most profound excitement ensued. As soon as the Emperor was officially informed of the case, he determined that the severest punishment should be inflicted upon the man who had not only committed a cruel murder, but through it had dared to usurp a position which could only be held at the Sovereign's command. An Imperial Edict was accordingly issued ordering the Prime Minister to take a considerable body of troops and proceed with all possible speed to the district where such an unheard-of crime had been committed, and there to hand over the offender to immediate execution.By forced marches, so as to outstrip any private intelligence that might have been sent from the capital, the avenging force reached the city a little before the break of day. Here they waited in silence outside the city gates, anxiously listening for the boom of the early gun which announces the dawn, and at the same time causes the gates to be flung wide open for the traffic of the day to commence.As soon as the warders had admitted the waiting crowd outside, the soldiers, advancing at a run, quickly reached the yamen, and arrested the Prefect. Without form of trial but simply with a curt announcement from the Prime Minister that he was acting upon instructions from the Emperor, the mandarin was dragged unceremoniously through the gaping crowds that rushed from their doors to see the amazing spectacle.The feet of Fate had marched slowly but with unerring certainty, and had at last reached the wretched criminal.But where was he being taken? This road did not lead to the execution ground, where malefactors were doomed to end their careers in shame. Street after street was passed, and still the stern-faced soldiers forced the mandarin down the main thoroughfares, whose sides had often been lined with respectful crowds as he swept by with his haughty retinue. At last they reached the city gate, through which they marched, and then on towards the river, which could be seen gleaming like a silver thread in the distance.Arrived at its bank, the troops formed into a square with the prisoner in the centre. Addressing him, the Prime Minister said, "I have selected this spot rather than the public execution ground where criminals are put to death. Your crime has been no common one; and so to-day, in the face of high Heaven whose righteousness you have dared to violate, and within sound of the flowing waters of the stream that witnessed the murder, you shall die."Half a dozen soldiers then threw him violently to the ground, and in a few minutes the executioner had torn his bleeding heart from his bosom. Then, standing with it still in his hand, he waited by the side of the Prime Minister, who read out to the great multitude the indictment which had been drawn up against the Prefect. In this he described his crimes, and at the same time appealed to Heaven and to the God of the River to take measures to satisfy and appease the spirit of him who had been cut off in the prime of life by the man who had just been executed.As soon as the reading of the document had been concluded, it was set fire to and allowed to burn until only the blackened ashes remained. These, together with the criminal's heart, were then cast into the river. They were thus formally handed over to the god, who would see that in the Land of Shadows there should come a further retribution on the murderer for the crimes he had committed on earth.The water patrol happened to pass by soon after the ashes and heart had been flung into the river, and picking them up most carefully, they carried them to the official residence of the god. The indictment was at once formally entered amongst the archives of the office, to be used as evidence when the case was in due time brought before the notice of Yam-lo: and after looking at the heart with the intensest scrutiny for some little time, the god exclaimed, "And so the murderer has at last received some part of the punishment he so richly deserved. It is now time for me to awake the sleeping husband, so that he may be restored to the wife from whom he has been separated for eighteen years."Passing into the Crystal Grotto, where the unconscious form of Kwang-Jui had reposed for so many years, the god touched the body gently with his hand, and said:—"Friend, arise! Your wife awaits you, and loving ones who have long mourned you. Many years of happiness are still before you, and the honours that your Sovereign will bestow upon you shall place you amongst the famous men of the State. Arise, and take your place once more amongst the living!"The Prime Minister was sitting with his daughter, listening to the sad story of the years of suffering through which she had passed, when the door was silently opened, and the figure of her long-lost husband glided in. Both started up in fear and amazement, for they believed that what they saw was only a restless spirit which had wandered from the Land of Shadows and would speedily vanish again from their sight. In this, however, they were delightfully disappointed. Kwang-Jui and his wife were once more reunited, and for many a long year their hearts were so full of gladness and contentment, that the sorrows which they had endured gradually became effaced from their memories. They always thought with the deepest gratitude of the God of the River, who for eighteen years had kept the unconscious husband alive and had finally restored him to his heart-broken wife.

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