

Deceiving Shadows

By P'ou Song-lin

Night was falling when the horseshoes of the mules of my caravan resounded on the slippery flagstones of the village.

Tired by a long day of walking, I directed my steps towards the large hall of the inn, with the intention of resting a moment while my repast was being prepared.

In the darkened room the glimmer of a small opium-lamp lit up the pale and hollow face of an old man, occupied in holding over the flame a small ball of the black drug, which would soon be transformed into smoke, source of forgetfulness and dreams.

The old man returned my greeting, and invited me to lie down on the couch opposite to him. He handed me a pipe already prepared and we began talking together. As ordered by the laws of politeness, I remarked to my neighbour that he seemed robust for his age.

“My age? Do you, then, think I am so old?”

“But, as you are so wise, you must have seen sixty harvests?”

“Sixty! I am not yet thirty years old! But you must have come from a long way off, not to know who I am.”

And while rolling the balls with dexterity in the palm of his hand, and making them puff out to the heat of the lamp, he told me his story.

His name was Liu Favour-of-heaven. Born and brought up in the capital, he had been promoted six years before to the post of sub-prefect in the town on which our refuge was dependent.

When coming to take his post, he stopped at the inn, the same one where we were. The house was full; but he had remarked, on entering, a long pavilion which seemed uninhabited. The landlord, being asked, looked perplexed; he ended by saying that the pavilion had been shut for the last two years; all the travellers had complained of noises and strange visions; probably mischievous spirits lived there.

Favour-of-heaven, having lived in the capital, but little believed in phantoms. He found the occasion excellent to establish his reputation in braving imaginary dangers.

His wife and his children implored him in vain; he persisted in his intention of remaining the night alone in the haunted house.

He had lights brought; installed himself in a big armchair, and placed across his knees a long and heavy sword.

Hours passed by; the sonorous noise of the gong struck by the watchman announced successively the hours, first of the Pig, then of the Rat. He grew drowsy. Suddenly, he was awakened by the gnashing of teeth. All the lights were out; the darkness, however, was not deep enough to prevent his being able to distinguish everything confusedly. Anguish seized him; his heart beat with violence; his staring eyes were fixed on the door.

By the half-opened door he perceived a round white mass, the deformed head of a monster, who, appearing little by little, stretched long hands with twisted fingers and claws.

Favour-of-heaven mechanically raised his weapon; his blood frozen in his veins, he tried to strike the head, whose indistinct features were certainly dreadful. Without doubt the blow had struck, for a frightful cry was heard; all the demons of the inferior regions seemed let loose with

this yell; calls were heard from all sides. The trellised frames of the windows were shaken with violence. The monster gained the door. Favour-of-heaven pursued him and threw him down.

His terror was such that he felt he must strike and kill. Hardly had he finished than there entered, rolling from side to side, a little being, quite round, brandishing unknown weapons at the end of innumerable small hands. The prefect, with one blow, cut him in two like a water-melon.

However, the windows were shaken with growing rage; unknown beings entered by the door without interruption; the prefect threw them down one after another: a black shadow first, then a head balancing itself at the end of a huge neck, then the jaw of a crocodile, then a big bird with the chest and feet of a donkey.

Trembling all over, the man struck right and left, exhausted and panting; a cold perspiration overwhelmed him; he felt his strength gradually giving way, when the cock crowed at last the coming of the day.

Little by little, grey dawn designed the trellis of the windows, then the sun suddenly appeared above the horizon and darted its rays across the rents in the paper.

Favour-of-heaven felt his heart stand still; on the floor inundated with blood, the bodies lying there had human forms, forms that he knew: this one looked like his second wife, and this one, this little head that had rolled against the foot of the table, he would have sworn that it was his last son.

With a mad cry he threw away his weapon and ran to open the door, through which the sun poured in.

An armed crowd was moving in the yard:

“My family! my family! where is my family?”

“They are all with you in the pavilion!” But as they were speaking they saw with stupor the hair of the young man becoming white, and the wrinkles of age cover his face, while he remained motionless as well as insensible.

They drew near; he rolled fainting on the ground. “And thus,” ended the sub-prefect in the silence of the dark hall, where only the little light of the opium-lamp was shining, “I remained several days without knowledge of anything. When I came to myself, I had to bear the sorrow of having killed my whole family in these atrocious circumstances. I resigned my post: I had magnificent tombs built for all those who were killed this fatal night, and, since then, I smoke without ceasing the agreeable drug, in order to fly away from the remembrance, which will haunt me until my last day.”