

The Tragedy of the Yin Family

Chinese Folk-Lore Tales

Chinese

Advanced
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In a certain district in one of the central provinces of China, there lived a man of the name of Yin. He was possessed of considerable property, with a great ambition to become distinguished in life. The one desire of his heart, which seemed to master every other, was that his family should become an aristocratic one.

So far as he knew, none of his immediate predecessors had ever been a conspicuous scholar, or had gained any honour in the great triennial examinations. The result was that his family was a plebeian one, from which no mandarin had ever sprung. In what way, then, could he secure that the fame and dignities, which had come to some of the clans in the region in which he lived, should descend upon his home and upon his grandsons?

He was a rich man, it is true, but he was entirely illiterate, and all his money had been made in trade. As a lad his education had been neglected, for his early life had been spent in the mere struggle for existence. He had been more than successful, but the honours of the student never could be his, and never could he act as one of the officials of the Empire. It occurred to him, however, that though it was impossible that he himself should ever be classed amongst the great scholars of China, his sons and grandsons might be so honoured. In that case the glory of their success would be reflected upon him, and men would talk of him as the head of a family which had become distinguished for scholarship and high dignities in the State.

He finally came to the conclusion that the most effectual way of accomplishing this was to secure a lucky

burying-ground in which he could lay the bodies of his father and his grandfather, who had departed this life some years before. The universal belief that in some mysterious way the dead have the power of showering down wealth and honours and prosperity upon the surviving members of their families, was held most tenaciously by Mr. Yin. This belief pointed out to him how he could emerge from the common and dreary road along which his ancestors had travelled, into the one where royal favours and official distinction would mark out his posterity in the future.

As he had retired from business, he was able to spend nearly the whole of his time in searching the country for the spots where certain unseen forces are supposed to collect with such dominant and overmastering power that the body of any person laid to rest amongst them will be found to dispense untold riches and dignities upon his nearest relatives. Accordingly, attended by a professor of the art, whose study of this intricate science enable him to detect at a glance the places which fulfilled the required conditions, Yin made frequent excursions in the regions around his home.

The valleys through which the streams ran, and where the sound of the running waters could be heard day and night as they sang their way to the sea, were all explored. Wherever water and hills were to be found in a happy conjunction, there these two men were to be seen peering over the ground, and with the aid of a compass which the professor carried with him in a cloth bag, marking whether the lines upon which they ran indicated that the mysterious Dragon had his residence beneath.

Innumerable places were carefully examined, and whilst some of them would have been admirably suited for a person of ordinary ambition, they did not satisfy the large expectations for the future which were cherished by Mr. Yin. The rising knolls and winding streams and far-off views of hills lying in the mist-like distance, showed perhaps that moderate prosperity would be the lot of those whose kindred might be buried there; but there were no signs of preëminence in scholarship, or of mandarins riding on horseback or in sedan-chairs, with great retinues attending them, as they proceeded in haughty dignity through the streets of the city in which they lived as rulers. Such places were therefore rejected as unsuitable.

Days and months went by in this search for a spot with which the fortunes of the Yin family were to be linked for many generations yet to come; but every place failed in some one or two particulars which would have marred the splendid prospect that ambition had pictured before the vision of this wealthy man.

At last, as they were sauntering along one day with eyes keen and alert, they stayed for a moment to rest on the top of a low hill which they had just ascended. Hardly had they cast a rapid glance over the beautiful scenery that lay stretched out before them, before the professor, with flashing eyes and unusual enthusiasm, exclaimed with excitement in his voice, "See! this is the very place we have been looking for all these days!

"No more suitable spot could have been found in the whole of China than this. We stand, as it were, in the centre of a great amphitheatre in which have been gathered the finest forces of Fung-Shuy. Behind us the hill rises in a graceful semi-circular form to shield the spot, where the dead shall lie buried, from the northern blasts, and from the fierce and malignant spirits that come flying on the wings of the great gales which blow with the touch of the ice and snow in them.

"On the plain in front of us, scattered over its surface, are gentle risings showing where the Dragon lies reposing, waiting to dispense its favours to all who come within its magic influence. And then, behold how the river winds in and out, seemingly unwilling to leave a place where unseen influences are at work to enrich the homes and gladden the hearts of the men and women of this region. See how it flows out with a hasty rush towards the sea beyond, and how it threads its way round yonder cape and is lost to view. Then mark again how it would seem as though some force it could not control had swung it round in its course, for it winds back upon the plain with gleaming eyes and joyous looks as if it were glad to return once more towards the distant mountains from whence it took its rise.

"The meaning of all this is," he continued, "that the prosperity, which the Dragon will bestow upon the living through the ministry of the dead lying within its domain, shall not soon pass away, but like the river that we see meandering before us, shall stay and comfort for many a long year those to whom it has been granted.

"That riches will come is certain, and official rank, and honours as well; for cast your eyes upon yonder ridge gleaming in the morning sun, and note the figure which rises up distinct and well-defined from its summit. It is simply a rock, it is true, but mark well its contour and you will note how the outline grows upon your vision

until it assumes the form of a mandarin in full official robes standing with his face towards us.

“I would strongly advise you,” concluded the professor, “to secure this plot of land on which we stand, whatever it may cost you, for every ambition that has ever filled your soul shall in time be satisfied by the wealth and honours which not only the Dragon but all his attendant spirits shall combine to pour into your home.”

Yin was entranced with the prospect which was pictured before him in such glowing language by the man at his side, and he heartily agreed with the proposal that he should stay his search and purchase the ground on which they were standing as a cemetery for his family.

Just at this moment a man came sauntering along to see what these two strangers were doing in this out-of-the-way place, to which no road ran and from which no by-paths led to the villages beyond.

“Can you tell me, my man,” asked Yin, “to whom this piece of land belongs?”

“Yes, I can easily do that,” he replied. “Do you see that dilapidated-looking cottage down by the riverside? Well, it is occupied by a man named Lin, together with his wife and a daughter about nineteen years of age. They are exceedingly poor, as you can see by their house. The only property Lin possesses is this plot of ground, which has come down to him from his forefathers, and which he hopes one day to dispose of to some well-to-do person as a burying-ground that may bring him good luck.”

“I am very willing to buy the land, if I can only get it at a reasonable price,” replied Yin, “and I shall be glad if you will consent to act as middleman and negotiate the matter for me. You might go at once and see Lin, and find out what are the terms upon which he is willing to transfer the property to me.”

On the morrow the middle-man returned and reported to Yin that Lin would on no consideration consent to let him have the ground. “The fact is,” he continued, “that Lin has a settled purpose in his mind with which this particular plot of land has a good deal to do. He and his wife are getting on in years, and when the daughter is married off he is afraid that his branch of the family will become extinct; so he plans to get a husband for her who will come into the home and act the part of a son as well as that of son-in-law.”

So determined, however, was Yin to gain possession of this particular piece of land that after considerable negotiations during which it seemed as though the old father would never be moved from his settled purpose,

it was finally agreed that his daughter should be married to Yin's eldest son, Shung, and that her father and mother should remove to rooms in Yin's family mansion, where they should be maintained by him in ease and comfort as long as they lived. Had Yin been a large-hearted and generous person, this plan would have been an ideal one, but seeing that he was by nature a stingy, money-grubbing individual, it was attended with the most tragic results.

No sooner had the deeds of the coveted plot of ground been passed over to him than Yin had the body of his father, who had been buried in a place far removed from the influence of the Dragon, transferred to this new location, where he would be in touch with the higher spirits of the Underworld. Here, also, he could catch the eye of the mandarin, who day and night would have his face turned towards him, and who from the very fact of the sympathy that would grow up between them, must in time give him the mysterious power of turning his grandsons, and their sons after them, into scholars, who would obtain high positions in the service of the State.

In the meanwhile preparations were being made for the marriage of the young maiden of low degree to a man in a much higher social position than she could ever have aspired to in the ordinary course of events. Pearl was a sweet, comely-looking damsel, who would have made a model wife to one of her own station in life, but who was utterly unsuited for the new dignity which would be thrust upon her as soon as she crossed the threshold of the wealthy family of Yin. She was simply a peasant girl, without education and without refinement. Her days had been passed amidst scenes of poverty, and though she was a thoroughly good girl, with the high ideals that the commonest people in China everywhere have, her proper position was after all amongst the kind of people with whom she had lived all her life.

Her father and mother had indeed all along been doubtful about the propriety of marrying their daughter into a family so much above them as the Yins, and for a long time they had stood out against all the arguments in favour of it. Finally, overborne by the impetuosity of Yin, and dazzled with the prospects which such an alliance offered not only to the girl herself but also to themselves by the agreement to keep them in comfort for the rest of their lives, they had given an unwilling consent.

In order that Pearl should suffer as little disgrace as possible when she appeared amongst her new relations, her father sold all his available belongings in order to procure suitable wedding-garments for her. His idea, however, of the fitness of things had been gathered from the humble surroundings in which he had lived all his

days, and the silks and satins and expensive jewellery that adorn the brides of the wealthy had never come within the vision of his dreams. Still Pearl was a pretty girl, and with her piercing black eyes which always seemed to be suffused with laughter, and with a smile which looked like a flash from a summer sky, she needed but little adornment, and would have won the heart of any man who had the soul to appreciate a true woman when he saw one.

At last the day came, hurried on by the eager desire of Yin to have the whole thing settled, when the humble home was to be given up and its inmates transferred to the rich house that lay just over a neighbouring hill.

A magnificent bridal chair, whose brilliant crimson colour made it a conspicuous object on the grey landscape, wound its way towards the cottage where the bride was attired all ready to step into it the moment it appeared at the door.

In front of it there marched a band, making the country-side resound with weird notes which seemed to fly on the air with defiance in their tones, and to send their echoes mounting to the tops of the hills and piercing down into the silent valleys. There were also crowds of retainers and dependants of the wealthy man. These were dressed in semi-official robes, and flocked along with smiling faces and joyous shouts. The occasion was a festal one, and visions of rare dishes and of generous feasting, kept up for several days, filled the minds of the happy procession as it went to meet the bride.

The return of the party was still more boisterous in its merriment. The members of the band seemed inspired by the occasion and sent forth lusty strains, whilst the instruments, as if aware how much depended upon them, responded to the efforts of the performers and filled the air with joyful notes.

A distinguished company had assembled to receive the bride, as she was led by her husband from the crimson chair and advanced with timid steps and faltering heart into the room that had been prepared for her reception. As she entered the house something in the air struck a chill into her heart and caused the hopes of happiness, which she had been cherishing, to die an almost instant death.

Shung, her husband, was a man of ignoble mind, and had always objected to marrying a woman so far beneath him. The sight of his bride, with her rustic air, and the ill-made commonplace-looking clothes in which she was dressed, made his face burn with shame, for he knew that a sneer was lurking on the face of everyone who

had gathered to have a look at her.

A profound feeling of hatred entered his narrow soul, and as the days went by the one purpose of his life was to humiliate this sweet-tempered woman, who had been sacrificed simply to further the ambitious schemes of her designing father-in-law, Mr. Yin. For a few weeks he simply ignored her, but by degrees he treated her so cruelly that many a time she had serious thoughts of putting an end to her life. It soon turned out that a systematic attempt was being made by both father and son to get rid of the whole family.

The old father and mother, whom Yin had agreed to provide for during the rest of their lives, found things so intolerable that they voluntarily left the miserable quarters assigned to them and returned to their empty cottage. Every stick of furniture had been sold in order to buy their daughter's wedding garments, so that when they reached their old home they found absolutely nothing in it. With a few bundles of straw they made up a bed on the floor, but there was no food to eat, and not a single thing to comfort them in this their hour of darkest misery.

Sorrow for their daughter, and disappointment and anguish of heart at the thought of how they had been tricked and cheated by Mr. Yin in order that he might gain possession of their bit of land, so told upon their spirits that they both fell ill of a low fever, which laid them prostrate on their bed of straw. As they lived remote from other people, for some time no one knew that they were sick. Days went by without anyone visiting them, and when at last one kindly-hearted farmer came to make enquiries, he found to his horror that both husband and wife lay dead, side by side, in their miserable cabin.

The news of their death produced the greatest pleasure in the mind of the wretched man who was really the cause of it. He was now freed from the compact compelling him to provide for them during their life, and so there would be an actual saving of the money which he would have had to spend in providing them with food and clothing. A cruel, wintry smile lingered on his hard face for several days after the poor old couple had been lain to rest on the hillside near their cottage, and this was the only look of mourning his features ever assumed.

From this time Pearl's life became more and more of a burden to her. Love, the one element which would have filled her heart with happiness, was the one thing that was never offered her. Instead of affection there were cruel, cutting words and scornful looks and heavy blows—all these were plentifully bestowed upon her by the soulless man who was called her husband.

At length, to show his utter contempt and abhorrence of her, he arranged with the connivance of his father to bring a concubine into his home. This lady came from a comparatively good family, and was induced to take this secondary position because of the large sum of money that was paid to her father for her. The misery of Pearl was only intensified by her appearance on the scene. Following the lead of her husband, and jealous of the higher position in the family that the law gave her rival, she took every means that a spiteful woman could devise to make her life still more miserable.

The death of her parents had filled Pearl's heart with such intense grief and sorrow that life had lost all its charm for her. She saw, moreover, from the sordid rejoicing that was openly made at their tragic end, that the Yins would never be satisfied until she too had followed them into the Land of Shadows. She would therefore anticipate the cruel purposes of her husband and his father, and so deliver herself from a persecution that would only cease with her death. So one midnight, when all the rest of the family were asleep, and nothing was heard outside but the moaning of the wind which seemed as though it was preparing to sing a requiem over her, she put an end to all her earthly troubles by hanging herself in her own room.

When the body was found next day, suspended from a hook in one of the beams, a great cry of delight was uttered by Yin and his son. Without any violence on their part they had been set free from their alliance with this low-class family, and at a very small cost they had obtained firm possession of the land which was to enrich and ennoble their descendants.

And so whilst the poor girl lay dead, driven to an untimely end by spirits more fierce and malignant than any that were supposed to be flying with hatred in their hearts in the air around, smiles and laughter and noisy congratulations were indulged in by the living ghouls whose persecution had made this sweet-tempered woman's life unbearable.

But retribution was at hand. Heaven moves slowly in the punishment of the wicked, but its footsteps are sure

and they travel irresistibly along the road that leads to vengeance on the wrongdoer.

One dark night, when the sky was overcast and neither moon nor stars were to be seen, and a storm of unusual violence was filling the air with a tumult of fierce and angry meanings, a weird and gruesome scene was enacted at the grave where the father of Yin had been buried. Hideous sounds of wailing and shrieking could be heard, as though all the demons of the infernal regions had assembled there to hold a night of carnival. Louder than the storm, the cries penetrated through the shrillest blasts, and people in their homes far away were wakened out of their sleep by the unearthly yells which froze their blood with terror. At last a thunderbolt rolled from the darkened heavens, louder than ever mortal man had heard. The lightnings flashed, and concentrating all their force upon the grave just where the coffin lay, they tore up a huge chasm in the earth, and gripping the coffin within their fiery fingers, they tossed it with disdain upon a hillside a mile away.

After a long search, Yin discovered it next day in the lonely spot where it had been cast, and was returning to make arrangements for its interment, when in a lonely part of the road two unearthly figures suddenly rose up before him. These, to his horror, he recognized as the spirits of Pearl's father and mother who had practically been done to death by him, and whom Yam-lo had allowed to revisit the earth in order to plague the man who was the author of their destruction. So terrified was Yin at their wild and threatening aspect, that he fell to the ground in a swoon, and thus he was found, hours afterwards, by his son, who had come out in search of him.

For several days he was tended with the greatest care, and the most famous physicians were called in to prescribe for him. He never rallied, however, and there was always a vague and haunted look in his eyes, as though he saw some terrible vision which frightened away his reasoning powers and prevented him from regaining consciousness. In this condition he died, without a look of recognition for those he loved, and without a word of explanation as to the cause of this tragic conclusion of a life that was still in its prime.

The eldest son was now master of his father's wealth; but instead of learning a lesson from the terrible judgment which had fallen on his home because of the injustice and wrong that had been committed on an innocent family, he only became more hard-hearted in his treatment of those who were within his power. He never dreamed of making any reparation for the acts of cruelty by which he had driven his wife to hang herself in order to escape his tyranny. But the steps of Fate were still moving on towards him. Leaden-footed they might be and slow, but with unerring certainty they were travelling steadily on to carry out the vengeance of

the gods.

By-and-by the room in which Pearl had died became haunted. Her spectral figure could be seen in the gloaming, flitting about and peering out of the door with a look of agony on her face. Sometimes she would be seen in the early dawn, restless and agitated, as though she had been wandering up and down the whole night; and again she would flit about in the moonlight and creep into the shadow of the houses, but always with a ghost of the old look that had made her face so winning and so charming when she was alive.

When it was realized that it was her spirit which was haunting the house, the greatest alarm and terror were evinced by every one in it. There is nothing more terrible than the appearance of the spirits of those who have been wronged, for they always come with some vengeful purpose. No matter how loving the persons themselves may have been in life, with death their whole nature changes and they are filled with the most passionate desire to inflict injury and especially death upon the object of their hatred.

The course of ill-usage which her husband Shung had cruelly adopted in order to drive Pearl to commit suicide was known to every one, and that she should now appear to wreak vengeance on him was not considered at all wonderful; but still every one was mortally afraid lest they should become involved in the punishment that was sure to be meted out.

As the ghost continued to linger about and showed no signs of disappearing, Shung was at last seized with apprehension lest some calamity was about to fall upon his house. In order to protect himself from any unexpected attack from the spirit that wandered and fluttered about in the darkest and most retired rooms in his home, he provided himself with a sword which he had ground down to a very sharp edge and which he carried in his hand ready uplifted to lunge at Pearl should she dare to attack him.

One evening, unaware that his concubine was sitting in a certain room on which the shadows had thickly fallen, he was entering it for some purpose, when the spirit of his late wife gripped his hand with an overmastering force which he felt himself unable to resist, and forced him to strike repeated blows against the poor defenceless woman. Not more than a dozen of these had been given before she was lying senseless on the ground, breathing out her life from the gaping wounds through which her life-blood was flowing in streams.

When the grip of the ghost had relaxed its hold upon him and he felt himself free to look at what he had done,

Shung was horrified beyond measure as he gazed with staring eyes upon the dreadful sight before him, and realized the judgment that had come upon him for the wrongs he had done to Pearl and her family.

As soon as the news of the murder of the woman was carried to her father, he entered a complaint before the nearest mandarin, who issued a warrant for Shung's apprehension. At his trial he attempted to defend himself by declaring that it was not he who had killed his concubine, but an evil spirit which had caught hold of his arm and had directed the blows that had caused her death.

The magistrate smiled at this extraordinary defence, and said that Shung must consider him a great fool if he thought for a moment that he would be willing to accept such a ridiculous excuse for the dreadful crime he had committed.

As Shung was a wealthy man and had the means of bribing the under-officials in the yamen, his case was remanded in order to see how much money could be squeezed out of him before the final sentence was given. The murder—apparently without reason or provocation—of a woman who had been a member of a prominent family in society, produced a widespread feeling of indignation, and public opinion was strong in condemnation of Shung. Every one felt that there ought to be exemplary punishment in his case; otherwise any man who had only money enough might be able to defy all the great principles established by Heaven for the government of society and for the prevention of crime.

In order to make it easy for Shung whilst he was in prison, his mother had to spend large sums in bribing every one connected with the yamen. Never before had such an opportunity for reaping a golden harvest been presented to the avaricious minions entrusted by the Emperor with the administration of justice amongst his subjects. In her anxiety for her son the poor woman sold field after field to find funds wherewith to meet the demands of these greedy officials. Dark hints had simply to be thrown out by some of these that Shung was in danger of his life, and fresh sales would be made to bribe the mandarin to be lenient in his judgment of him.

At length the property had all been disposed of, and when it was known that no further money could be obtained, sentence was given that Shung should be imprisoned for life. This was a cruel blow to his mother, who had all along hoped that he might be released. Full of sorrow and absolutely penniless in a few weeks she died of a broken heart, whilst the son, seeing nothing but a hopeless imprisonment before him, committed suicide and thus ended his worthless life.

This tragic extinction of a family, which only a short year before was in the highest state of prosperity, was accepted by every one who heard the story as a just and righteous punishment from Heaven. For Heaven is so careful of human life that any one who destroys it comes under the inevitable law that he too shall in his turn be crushed under the wheels of avenging justice.

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