

THE VILLAGE BY THE SEA



QUAINT little Chinese village it was, reaching down to the sea-waves as they rolled gently over the sand up to the foreshore. A strange little village, too, with a certain air of drowsy mystery and Oriental languor. Perhaps it was the sunshine through the misty violet light on the circling hills, or the changing, wondrous blue of the sea, or the wind, laden with that delicate, subtle fragrance of mimosas, which rustled the slender, swaying bamboos and graceful willows. Perhaps all these had some share in it; yet there was something else, too, a dreamy sense of quiet and peace, of utter difference from the other places I had visited.

Into the blue of the sky merged the violet peaks of the Li-ang Mountains. Most beautiful of all was one peak white with snow, and to this the villagers pointed with superstitious awe, for underneath it lay chained a great dragon which Whang-lu, the sea-god, had caught out of the sea, and imprisoned beneath the White Mountain. No one might ascend the mountain, for upon the cloud, where no mortal had set foot, one might look down a deep crater, and there see the dragon's head all flaming with fire, and sometimes smoke would pour forth from the dragon's mouth, and then dire misfortune would befall the little village. All this the children told me with wide eyes and bated breath as they gathered about me.

The village itself was built entirely of old boats, turned over bottom side up, with a tiny opening for a door. It was a picturesque enough idea, but the villagers had done it for the simple reason that for the last hundred generations all

their fore-fathers had done the same thing, and for a son to have had any other kind of house than the shell of his father's old boat would have been an unheard-of act of insubordination and of dissatisfaction with the village customs.

The years had passed lightly over the little Village by the Sea, and had brought little sorrow beyond that which must come in some manner to all. The old men looked at me, in my foreign dress, from as curiously simple and child-like eyes, as they sat on the doorstep of their little boat houses, as did the round-eyed, fat and solemn little boys playing about in the sand.

The simplicity of the villagers appealed to me greatly. Their slow movements, placid expressions, and low, musical language seemed born of the quietness of the hills, the calmness of the wide sky, and the unchanging sound of the sea. Had I seen the little village a thousand years before, probably there had been the same languor, and stillness, and dreamy peace, and the villagers would have stared at me with the same frank look of childish curiosity that they bestowed upon me now as I passed.

The cobbled road was not easy to walk upon, especially when one was so foot-weary as I was that summer's day, and so when an old woman, placidly smoking a five-foot pipe and gazing reflectively into space, let her eyes wander to me, and a wide smile wrinkle her face, I accepted her tacit invitation and dropped on the narrow wooden bench beside her.

"Good day to you, my daughter," she greeted me politely. "Have you had sufficient to eat this morning?"

"I have had the greatest sufficiency, I thank you, honorable mother," I replied, as politely.

Nevertheless, she rose saying, "You will drink tea, though, doubtless," and went inside to prepare it. I waited patiently enough, and enjoyed to the full the scene about me. At my feet rolled two dusty babies, utterly guiltless of clothing, and

heartily enjoying the sunshine and dirt, and the gymnastics of a little mongrel puppy with which they were playing. Near by, a most exciting fight was taking place between two youths of tender years, and about this duel was gathered an intensely interested crowd, their pigtails fairly quivering with excitement and anxiety as to the outcome of the fight.

Just then the old woman returned with two tiny bowls of tea, and I sipped mine loudly, as the fashion is over the sea, to express my enjoyment of it. Then, having declined a smoke of the five-foot pipe, I sat watching the quaint, wrinkled face of my old hostess, and she in turn looked at me, and then asked politely:

"Your honorable age, what is it, my daughter?"

I replied, and returned the courtesy, whereupon she said in her slow, old way:

"I, my daughter, am ninety and nine. This——" sweeping her hand through the air, "is my native village."

Then I saw my opportunity and asked, "Most revered and ancient of women, tell me, whence came this village, and what was its beginning? I see that it is old, and you, who are so much richer in years than I, can doubtless tell me of its origin."

She puffed meditatively at the long pipe, gazing over to White Mountain, and then answered slowly:

"Yes, child, I am very old. I can tell you what my grandfather told me, and his fathers told before him, but listen, child. You must believe all that I tell, lest these waves that roll so near us hear and see your unbelief of a sacred tale, and tell of it to Whang-lu, the great sea god, whose palace is in the bottom of the sea, and he will bear wrath against you, and, when next you cross the sea, he will raise mighty storms against you. So listen, child, and I will tell you the Sacred Tale of the Village by the Sea."

Then she assumed the high, chanting voice of the professional Chinese story-teller, and began thus:

"Long years ago, when there was no Village by the Sea, and at night the roar of the waves against the rocks would echo from the lonely hills, and the trees grew thick and dark even to the beach, when no human creation of the great Whang-lu lived in the shelter of the White Mountain, Whang-lu, the Mighty One, would rise from the waves, and shaking his wave-drenched locks, would walk upon the sands at even-tide to enjoy the World of Air.

"One day, as he paced the beach with mighty strides, a roaring come over the sea, and he stopped to listen. Slowly the waves grew larger, and fell more heavily at his feet, the sky darkened, and the North Wind lashed the water to white foam. Then was Whang-lu exceedingly angry, for he had commanded no storm, and who was there who might interfere with his domain—he, the Mighty One of the Ocean? So thinking, he was about to hurl himself to the depths of the sea, when suddenly he saw a strange sight. Over the waves came a mighty beast, like to a dragon, a terrible dragon, and with one foot uplifted, it glided over the sea, its silvery scales shrinking and widening as its great body coiled on the face of the waters. The foam was white for leagues about it, and behind it was a shining wake three hundred miles long. Most dreadful of all, was a man held between the monstrous teeth of the beast, and the man was writhing in the pangs of death.

"When Whang-lu saw this sight, his heart went out in fierce wrath against the dragon, yet he feared, for the dragon's uplifted foot bore but four claws instead of five, and by this he knew that the beast was sacred and mighty in strength, passing the strength of human comprehension. Then was Whang-lu afraid, but when he saw the man in the dragon's mouth, his strength returned, for, my child, this man was wondrous to look upon, of divine beauty. His hair and eyes were of onyx darkness, his skin like gold, and the nails upon his fingers were full six inches long!

Nearer the beast come, foaming, and lashing with its mighty tail, but Whang-lu was strong again in heart, and in a loud voice he cried:

“‘I, who am Lord of the Sea, do bid you to cease your way upon my waters, and to give me that man whom you have seized!’

“Then the dragon cast forth fire and smoke from between its scales, and answered:

“‘I am the Lord of Fire and Smoke—dare you stop me? I obey none!’

“When it answered thus, Whang-lu was glad, for is not water stronger than fire and smoke? So he cried louder than before:

“‘I, Whang-lu, Lord of the Waters of the Earth, of rains and rivers, lakes and mighty oceans, I bid all the waters of my possessions to come hither and overcome the flame and smoke in this beast!’

“No sooner had he spoken than a mighty rushing was heard, and rain fell from the sky in streams, and rivers and lakes and seas rushed together, and there was quenched the fire and smoke within the dragon, and it lay as dead upon the sands at Whang-lu’s feet.

“But the man leaped up, strong and beautiful, and worshipped the great sea-god for his power and mercy. Then Whang-lu bade the waters cease, and lifting the White Mountain by the strength of his hands, he placed the dragon beneath it, and there it lies to this day.

“The man, when Whang-lu asked him from whence he came, said that from the Emperor of Heaven’s home in the Land of the Morning Calm he had come, and that as he was bathing in the Sea of Sunlight near by, the dragon had approached him and seized him, and whither it would have taken him, none knew.

"When the man spoke thus, Whang-lu was pleased with him yet more, and bade him stay on the seashore there forever, and raise up to him a race of golden-skinned, black-eyed mortals. So saying, Whang-lu gave him a great shell to live in; a shell such as one does not see in these days, round and high, and all rosy within, like the sky at evening. More than that, Whang-lu gave to the man his own beautiful daughter as wife. Thus they founded the village, and we, who are their descendants, are eternally thankful to Whang-lu, the Supreme Ruler of the Sea, who preserved our ancestor from death. Moreover we are a divine race, for we spring from the Emperor of the Land of the Morning Calm. Look!——" Here the old woman broke off and pointed to the water at our feet, "See how close the waves have crept to listen! Beware how you speak now, for they hear."

We were silent for a little while after the story. The grimy babies sat bolt upright, with solemn eyes and awe-struck faces; the boys had stopped fighting and were listening, and even the rollicking puppy was quiet.

Finally, I saw that night was not far away, and already the sun had gone behind the hills, and so I rose, and bidding my old friend farewell, thanked her and started on my way. Scarcely had I passed a few paces, when the old woman hobbled after me, and whispered these words in my ear:

"One word more, my child. You are young and strong, and ambitious for many things, but never climb to where the white snows lie on yonder mountain, for the spell that lies on the dragon, the spell of the lakes and seas, will be broken when mortal footprint is left on the whiteness of the snow. It is the seal of the Sea-God."

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