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A Marriage Tragedy.

FOUNDED ON FACT.

By C. Bone.

"STRANGE, isn't it?" The speaker was an ordinary Chinese coolie, whose dress was scanty in quantity and pungent in smell. The thermometer stood at 95° in the shade. He moved his battered palmleaf fan slowly, and evidently enjoyed the undulations of the air over his bare shoulders. Tó A-kan was so like his companion whom he addressed that further description is unnecessary. Confucius has remarked that "men's hearts differ but their faces are all alike."

The second coolie was popularly known as "Single Eye" because he possessed but one of those useful organs.

"He-he-he," laughed the speaker, "it is strange that the idols arrange matters so that things turn out just the opposite of what the faithful pray for." But Tó A-kan had lost faith in idols.

Single Eye's puzzled face indicated that he was not familiar with the thoughts that by turns amused and perplexed the stoical mind of his companion, and after another look at the wedding procession, that was rapidly disappearing around the bend of the country road, said, "What tickles you so that you are so full of boisterous fun, and what prompts such satirical remarks?"

"Didn't you know," said A-kan, "that the bride shut in that sedan chair was the last of six who pledged themselves never to be married? It is so. All the others have been compelled to marry at the command of their parents, notwithstanding their vow never to do so, a pledge by the way as solemn as that made by the six dukes who, before the days of Confucius, swore a great oath, and ratified it by signatures written with their own blood. It is easy to vow; it is sometimes difficult to perform one's vows. It is a fact that there goes the last of them, and in two hours' time she will be a wife."

Single Eye smiled, blew a few whiffs from his huge bamboo pipe, passed it to his companion, and said. "Well, they were only girls. I wish, however, that the friends of the bridegroom had invited us to the feast."

"You, at any rate," retorted A-kan, "would have added dignity to the feast with your handsome face."

Single Eye did not resent the banter.

BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.

The speakers, though we called them coolies, each rented a small patch of land, by means of which, after paying an exorbitant rent and heavy taxes, they managed to supply two meals per diem for themselves and families. There being no more excitement, for the procession, with the musicians, the carriers, and the sedan chair, had finally disappeared, and even the shrill notes of the primitive music could no longer be heard, they returned to their respective plots, and resumed their interrupted work. They were planting rice shoots—the second crop—in mire and slush which reached above their knees. The sun shone on their bronzed backs like a white fire on a Christmas goose, but so inured had they become to the sun, that they seemed to heed it just as little as the goose the Christmas fire.

The two farmers were not the only interested observers of the hurry, confusion, and topsy-turvydom which always accompany—rather form an essential part of—a Chinese wedding; that is, the sending of the young bride to the home of her future husband. There were battered and withered dames looking on who, here in the East as in the West, are interested in such scenes, which recalled doubtless the time when they wore red robes, and rode in the bridal chair, the first and only time, till they are carried out

on the shoulders of others to their last rest. But a couple of young women attracted most attention. They stood in a group under the shadow of a banyan tree, for they yet possessed good looks of which they were careful. Neither was more than twenty years of age, yet both were married, as their coiffure indicated. In China the hair tells whether the wearer is married or not. The maid wears hers in a long plait down her back, into the end of which there are often plaited red silk cords, which hang down almost to the ankles. The headdress which distinguishes the married woman from her

"SINGLE-EYE" AT HOME.

single sister is very peculiar and difficult to describe. Were the spout knocked off the ancient brown teapots, in which our grandmothers took so much pride, and, in addition, the larger half of the bottom part broken off, and the remainder placed upon the head, with the handle reaching out over the neck, it would resemble somewhat the coiffure of the married woman. It is fearfully and wonderfully made, and when the hair has been pasted, smoothed, and ironed so to speak, it appears to have the consistency of beetles' wings, and shines with the same glossy hue.

One, named Peach Blossom, remarked to her companion, "There goes Gentle Love, and this is the end of our solemn compact. We vowed not to marry when we heard the terrible stories of cruel mothers-in-law and provoking men. Those were happy days when we used to meet at the village well, and threw rice to the pike in the village pond. But they couldn't continue, whatever happened. Perhaps it is as well that the idols did not hear vows and so arrange things that we could keep to what we vowed."

The speaker was possessed of a comely brown face and dark eyes, and teeth as white as the purest ivory. They laughed.

These women had all been married to husbands in the neighbouring villages during the last year. A peculiar custom obtained in the district of Wanglam, in which all these villages were situated. Generally, in China, a bride returns to visit her parents after a short stay with her husband, but does not remain away more than a few days. If there is a desire to remain longer—and not infrequently there is such a desire—the husband has the power to compel her to return to him. The peculiarity which obtained in this district was that when the bride visited her parents she could if she wished prolong the visit for more than a year, and the husband had no power to coerce her. It was "olo custom" and however fiercely the lovelorn husband chafed against it, it booted him nothing. So it came to pass that Peach Blossom and Peach Bloom were at home, and had been for some months, and had with the others come out to witness the departure of the last of the six to her destination.

When Peach Blossom had spoken, her companion, Peach Bloom said "Are you happy in your new life?"

Peach Blossom looked at her for a moment, and then replied "As happy as I expected. Why do you ask?"

Peach Bloom, a pale and fragile woman, burst forth, "I wish that I were dead. My life is harder than the buffalo which ploughs the paddy marsh. My husband's mother is more cruel than Yen Lo Wang, the King of Hades. Though I try to please her, she rounds upon me as a boatwoman thrashes her son with a piece of firewood. My husband protects me as much as the idol protects those who are smitten with the black plague. I wish that I were dead."

There blazed forth, for the moment, a fierce passion through the black eyes of Peach Bloom, and the fragile, listless woman seemed suddenly transformed into a tigress. Fierce fires, however, quickly burn themselves out, unless they are replenished with fresh fuel; almost as suddenly as this volcanic emotion blazed forth, it died away, and the old tired, indifferent look returned. Her spirit was again listless and her body jaded.

The life of a Chinese bride, as all intelligent dwellers in the East know, is not necessarily a perennial spring-tide afternoon, when nothing blooms but fragrant flowers, and everything met with gives exuberant joy. It is difficult to serve two masters. It is more difficult still to render satisfactory service to a master and a mistress. It is most difficult of all to satisfy the demands of each member of the family, who may be older than the bride herself.

The number of suicides and would-be suicides which come under the observation of Western doctors, at work in China, confirm beyond doubt the suspicion, that the path of the young bride is not always a smooth one, wherein no brambles are.

The two women sat long together, and conversed in a low tone. The topic of conversation seemed to be an engrossing one. Presently they were joined by a third, whom the other two greeted with great enthusiasm. The new-comer was evidently known to them. They addressed her as "elder sister." Her name was Golden Flower. A simple question elicited the fact that, having left the home of her husband to visit her parents, she had reached the village late the previous evening. She had intended to witness the departure of Gentle Love, the bride, to her new home, but on account of excessive fatigue had overslept herself, and thus missed the opportunity and the excitement.

The three now sat in the grateful shade of tho old banyan tree, that had hung its branches over the roof of the houses for centuries, and used their fans of eagle feathers to move the atmosphere and so increase the refreshing coolness. After some desultory conversation Golden Flower suddenly asked, "What were you discussing so eagerly when I came up?"

Peach Blossom and Peach Bloom both looked at the questioner and the former replied "We were talking of the terrible end of Mrs. Fish, who died a few days ago. Haven't you heard about it? It was a shocking end. The devils came to carry her away, but the foreign missionary woman, without any fuss, kept them off and Mrs Fish passed away in peace. It is very strange."

As Golden Flower had only arrived in the neighbourhood the previous evening this news, which was common property in the village, had not yet reached her ears.

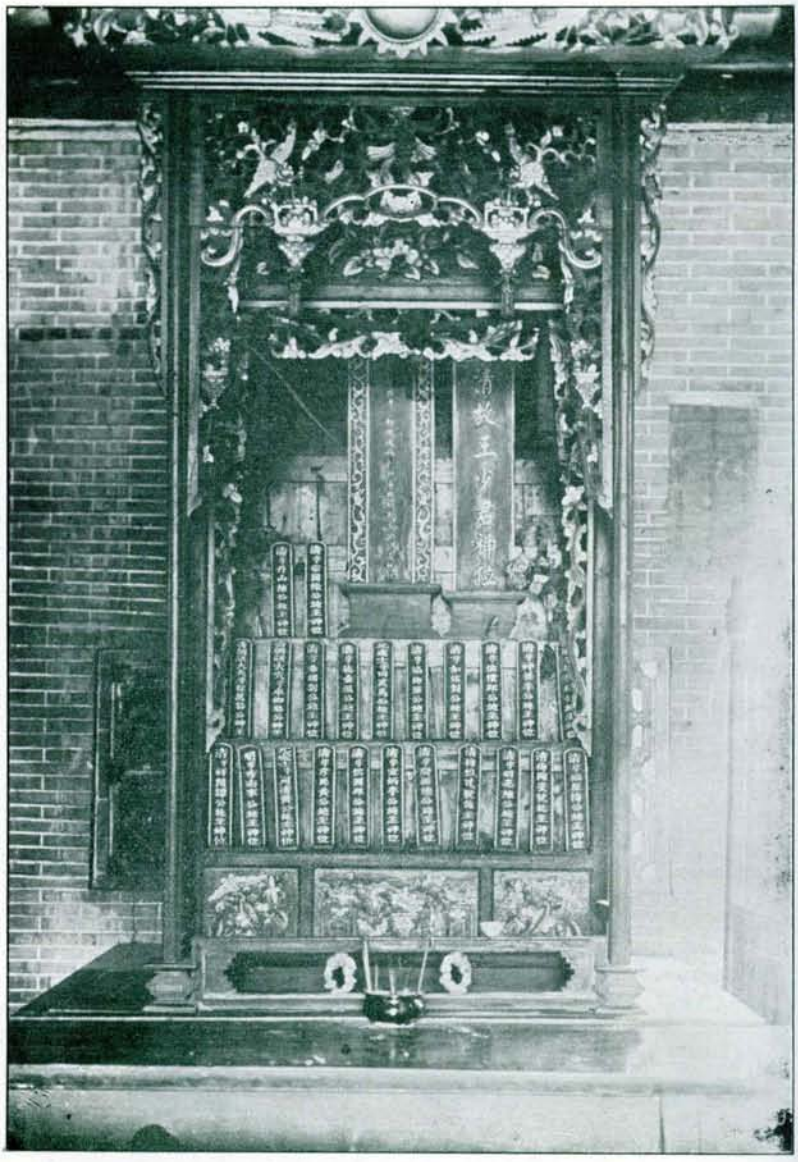
Peach Blossom, therefore, after the manner of matrons in China, once more related the story, which even now had lost nothing by "rolling."

"Mrs Fish had been married a little more than a year. She never was a member of our pledged six. I never knew her, for she came here from a distant village. Her husband, however, ill-treated her from the very first. He

cared more for opium and dice than he cared for his business; he preferred the company of singing girls to that of his young bride. She pined in secret and became a victim of melancholia, and was soon seriously ill. The last hours were hours of terrible horror. As the wife lay upon her couch, suddenly her languid eyes flashed, as she fixed them upon some invisible object with an immoveable stare. Then she suddenly cried out, 'They are coming for me! The demons and ghouls! They crowd thicker and closer. Frighten them away; drive them off!'

THE BRIDE AT HOME.

"The husband, who was sitting idly by, calmly awaiting the end, looked up bewildered and frightened, though he had been taught English in some foreign school. The woman screamed once more 'Take the sword! Quick! Drive them back! There are thousands; they will seize me bodily; they are horrible; quick! strike!' The man rose hastily and took down an old sword which was used to drive off robbers, and un-



THE ANCESTRAL HALL.

sheathed it. He then rushed frantically round the bed, waving the old sword, making all kinds of thrusts and cuts at demons whose presence he couldn't detect, but feared almost as much as his dying wife feared them. He shouted too with all his might in order to frighten off the devils, just as boatwomen shout when they think that thieves are creeping up by night to purloin some of their clothes.

"Just as this commotion was at its height, and the screams of the dying woman were only less loud than the shouts of her husband, the wife of the foreign-devil doctor entered the door. She is a wonderful woman is the foreign-devil wife. She does all sorts of kind things for the poor around here. Everybody loves her, and nobody is afraid of her now. They will worship her, though they will not worship her God, which makes her very sad.

"Well, she stood a moment, as if frightened at the confusion, the shouting man and the screaming woman. She then asked softly 'What is the matter? What are you doing?'

"The husband quickly put up the sword into the sheath, for he was ashamed lest the foreign-devil woman should see it, inasmuch as he knew that she didn't believe in devils coming into the house just like rats come into the rice bin.

"Then the foreign-devil woman began in her gentle way to talk to Mrs. Fish about Jesus. In a few moments the poor woman became quite quiet. She never saw any more demons. It seems very marvellous. I wonder if it is true! Strange reports reach us of these foreign-devil women. They do not believe in demons, and snap their fingers when asked if they offer them rice and vegetables."

No one spoke again and presently each wended her way to her own home.

Meanwhile, the bridal procession hastened on through the country lanes, along the narrow, zigzag, granite-paved pathways, which skirted, or divided the different paddy plots from each other. The musicians ceased to blow and bang their noise-producing instruments and, by way of change, expectorated vigorously into the adjoining fields. The many coolies, with the burdens of furniture, bridal trousseau, and luxuries for the wedding feast, trotted on. The two geese, emblems of connubial felicity, without which no bridal procession would be perfect, which are always provocative of European wit, seemed to feel the discord of their surroundings, as with tied feet and bent necks they dangled in excruciating pain from the end of a long bamboo pole. The four bearers trotted on with the heavy bridal chair, whose gaudy ornaments nodded like the ostrich feathers at an English funeral. The old dame, whose duty it was to accompany the bride, ran panting behind the chair, alternately fanning herself and grumbling at the heat.

Meanwhile, the bride, shut up within the bridal chair, withdrawn from the gaze of curious and vulgar eyes, wearing her red robes, which had done duty many times before, and heavy metal head-dress, with its almost innumerable strings of coloured beads, which represented pearls, was almost suffocated, and would have welcomed any contretemps, which would have ensured her a breath of fresh air.

Two hours thus passed and everybody was weary. Conversation and banter had flagged for some time, as in a long railway journey people relapse into silence from sheer weariness. Suddenly a bend in the road revealed the village whither they were going. A roar of fireworks announced that the procession was expected; a crash of music announced that it was approaching.

Presently, with a final clash of cymbals and screech of clarionets, the tired procession halts before an open door, each side of which is decorated with crimson bunting, and made resplendent by charming aphorisms written on crimson paper. The hour of victory for the dame, who had hitherto trotted on behind the chair, has now come. Covering herself with a red robe, she stands at the door of the sedan, waiting to pounce upon the maiden inside, like a cat upon a mouse, as soon as the door shall be unlocked. This function is soon performed. The bride was found listless, haggard, and nearly dead. A breath of fresh air soon reanimates her. She then climbs upon the back of the dame, like the Old Man from the Sea sat astride the back of Sinbad, and is thus borne across the threshold of her new home, and deposited, like a piece of furniture, on the floor of the reception apartment. Meanwhile the bridegroom stood by with a face as worried as if he were about to have his first decayed tooth out, and was uncertain of the depths of misery and pain through which he would have to wade.

The routine at Chinese weddings, like the queue on the head of Chinese men, never varies in its essential characteristics. Heaven and Earth are worshipped. The parents of the bridegroom are worshipped. The ancestral tablets are worshipped. In the south of China the geese, which have suffered so much and will suffer yet more, are worshipped.

Next, the groom timidly lifts the cataract of beads, which fall in streams in front of the bride's face and hide it, and, for the first time, with a beating heart, catches a glimpse of the countenance of her, whose matchless charms have been described to his parents by the go-between as equal to the incomparable beauty of Nui Wo, the inventor of music. Thereupon the three days and nights of revelry begin, and as these somewhat noisy revels have little attraction for the sensitive ears of the unappreciative foreigner, we will draw a curtain over them, and leave the bride, bridegroom, and guests to enjoy the passing hours.

Tó A-kan was standing on the river's bank munching a big, brown, hard pear; Single Eye, with his one abnormally keen organ of vision, was squatting on his haunches watching him. In the river at their feet, the big, dusky buffaloes rolling and snorting in the warm water. Presently Single Eye remarked, "Gentle Love returned home a few days ago and rumour has it that she is determined not to return to her husband till the year, which she can claim, has expired."

THE VILLAGE.

"I have heard so," replied Tó A-kan, "and what is more, all six, who swore the oath never to be married, are now returned to their parental homes. Remarkable isn't it that they should all meet together again?"

Single Eye continued, "I understand that Gentle Love's husband is a downright long-haired rebel, and as fierce and cruel as the lictors of the Buddhist hell."

Both relapsed into silence, and when the fortunate possessor of the pear had finished his meal, with a word of mutual politeness, so usual with the Chinese, they separated.

Meanwhile, frequent meetings, as was natural, were arranged by the six women who had been so closely brought together in earlier days. These meetings were planned so that no suspicion was aroused. In groups of twos and threes they were seen now and then in serious conversation, as if some subject of more than passing interest was engrossing their attention.

A CENTRE OF ACTIVITY.

One day, Peach Bloom, conversing with Golden Flower, said "I hate my life. My husband has sent a message that if I did not return to him by the twentieth of the moon, regardless of our local customs, he will send some roughs, and carry me off by force. The monkey will do it too."

"What was your answer?" asked Golden Flower.

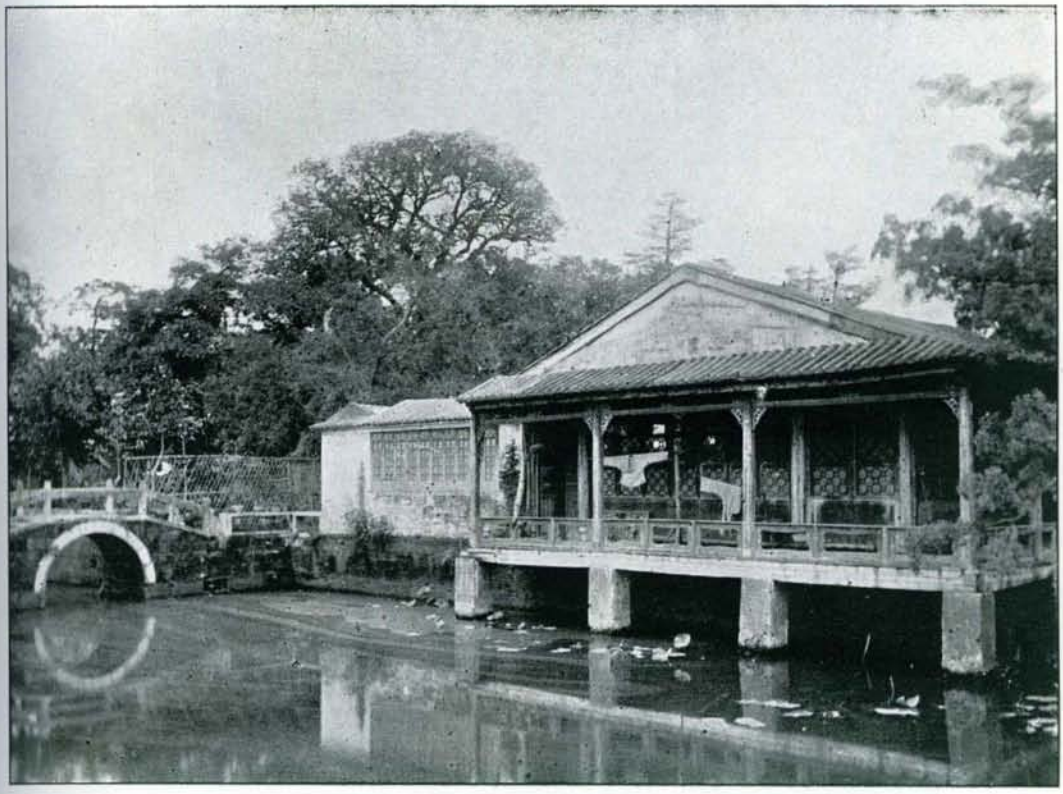
"I would drown myself."

Golden Flower looked at her for a space and then added "Can't we arrange a meeting at which all six shall be present? I will see each in turn. Let us meet to-morrow evening under the clump of bamboos on the edge of the river, just before dark, so that no suspicion may be roused by our leaving our homes. It is very quiet there."

"Why?" asked Peach Bloom.

"You shall know when we meet," was the reply.

Silently, at the appointed hour, on the following evening, the perjured six, from different homes, wended their way to the trysting place. Evidently anxious expectations filled their hearts and they seemed to know that they stood on the brink of something unusual.



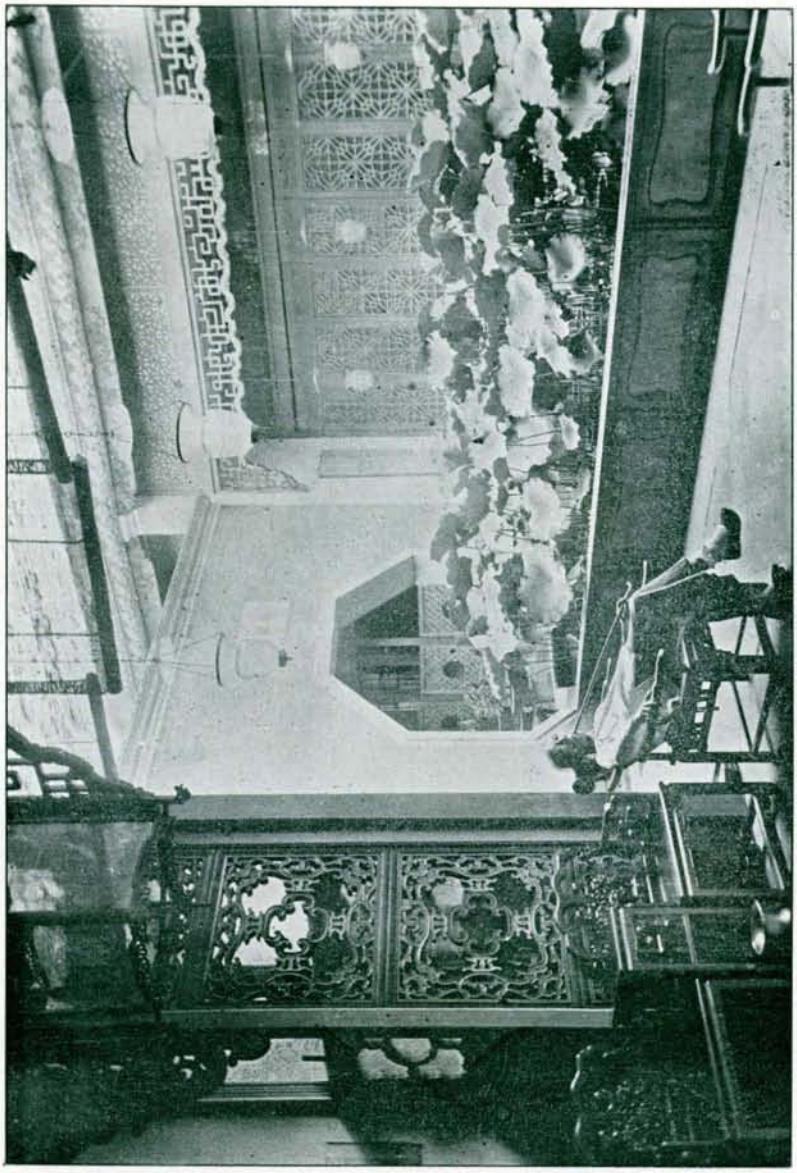
THE RETREAT.

None spake for a little space. Presently Golden Flower whispered, "The life of Peach Bloom is one of intolerable misery. She has been roughly ordered to return to her husband's home at once. She says that she will drown herself."

A further silence intervened which was oppressive.

Gentle Love presently exclaimed, "My husband too is a brute; I will join her. It will be a relief."

It was a cloudy, gloomy evening. Darkness was deepening, for the sun had set. The wind soughed and moaned through the branches of the bamboos.



THE BRIDEGROOM AT HOME.

Golden Flower then said, "Let us all six go together under the waters of the dark river. I am not really unhappy but I will join you. We shall avenge ourselves on our parents who made us break our oath, and on our husbands and mothers-in-law who have treated us so cruelly."

A further silence followed, as deep as the silence in the vault of death.

"Shall we?" added Golden Flower with a deep passion.

"We will," they all replied.

In less time than it takes to write the words, the six brides unfastened their scarves and girdles, and with them bound themselves into three pairs. They then ran to the brink of the swiftly-flowing river. There was a plunge, which sounded as if some one had flung big blocks into the waters, though no one was near to hear, to heed, to save. The turbulent, eddying waters enwrapped them in their cold embrace, and when the brief struggle was ended and life extinct, bore them away to the vast, deep ocean.

Consternation filled many homes at the disappearance of the six brides. It was suspected what had been done, and some days afterwards a gruesome discovery changed the suspicion into a certainty.

About a fortnight after the terrible tragedy Tó A-kan, and his companion were once more sitting on the bank of the river in the morning sun. Single Eye remarked, "After all, the idols have avenged themselves and punished those who made the maidens break their oaths." Tó A-kan looked at his companion, but made no answer.