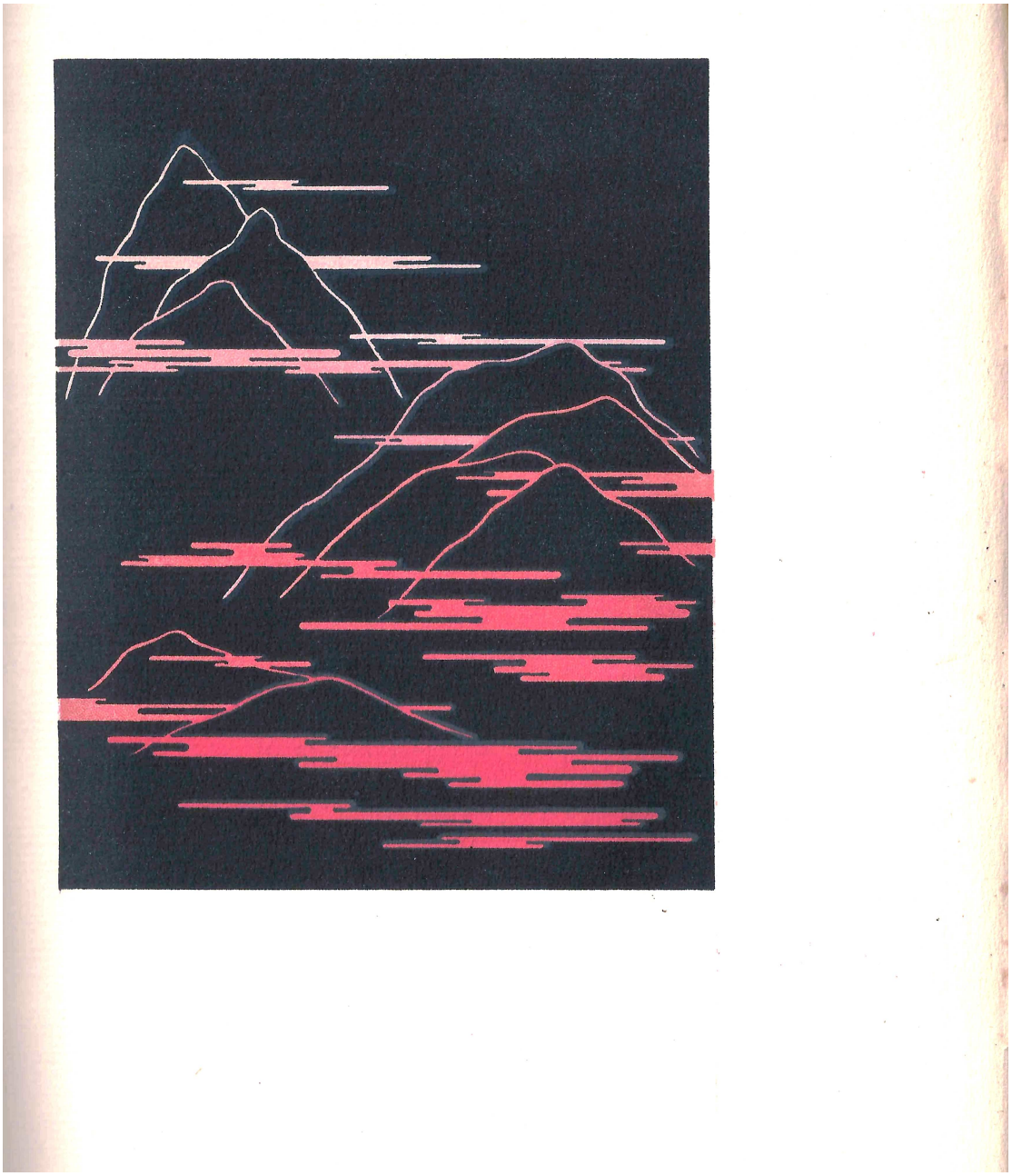
RED-PEACH-BLOSSOM INLET



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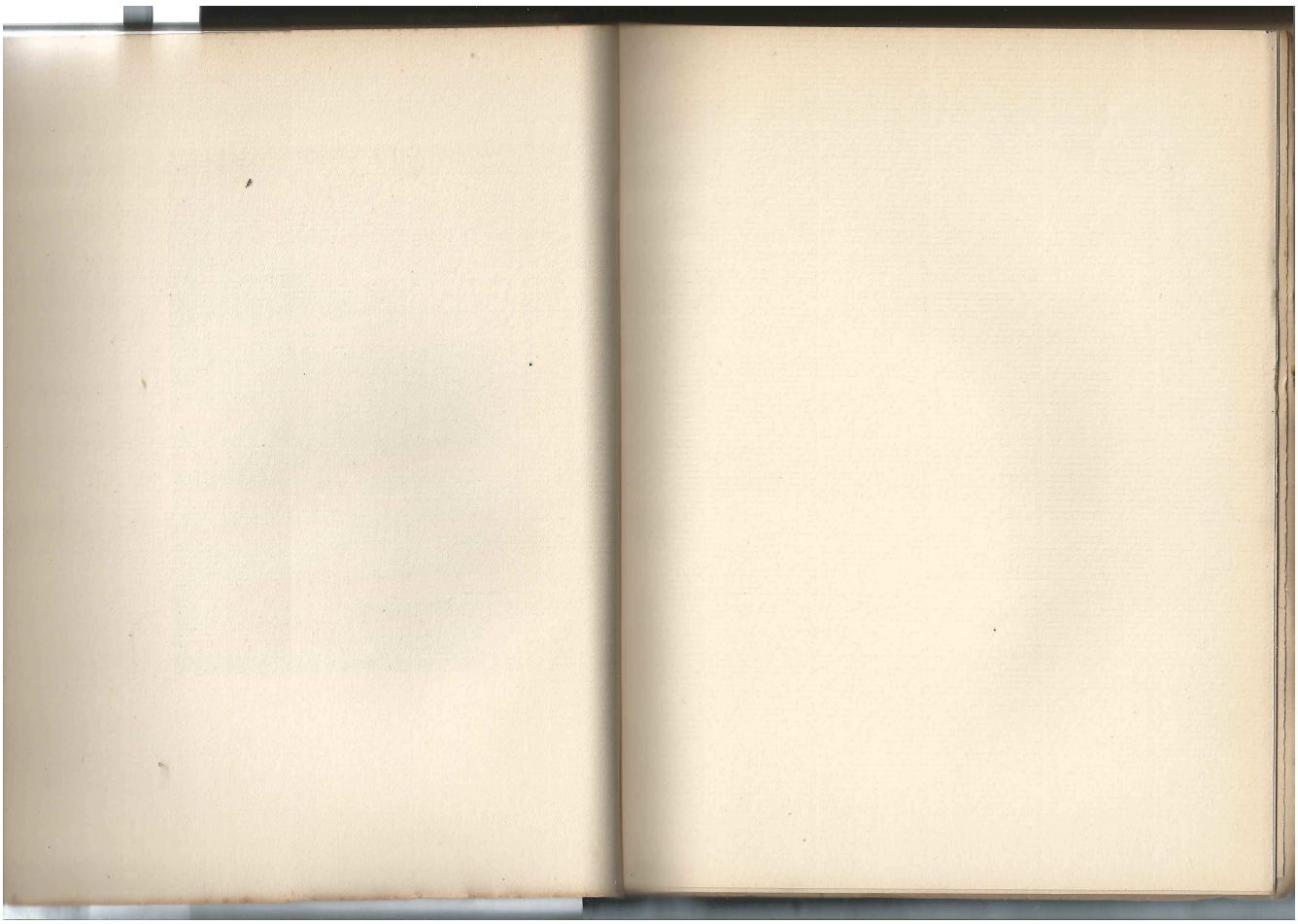

RED-PEACH-BLOSSOM INLET

WANG TAO-CHEN loved the ancients: that was why he was a fisherman. Modernity you might call irremediable: it was best left alone. But far out in the middle lake, when the distances were all a blue haze and the world a sapphirean vacuity, one might breathe the atmosphere of ancient peace and give oneself to the pursuit of immortality. By study of the Classics, by rest of the senses, and by cultivating a mood of universal benevolence, Wang Tao-chen proposed to become superior to time and change: a Sennin—an adept, immortal.

He had long since put away the desire for an official career. If, thought he, one could see a way, by taking office, to reform the administration, the case would be different. One would pass one's examinations, accept a prefecture, climb the ladder of promotion, and put one's learning and character to use. One would establish peace, of course; and presently, perhaps, achieve rewelding into one the many kingdoms into which the empire of Han had split. But unfortunately there were but two roads to success: force and fraud. And, paradoxically, they both always led to failure. As soon as you had cheated or thumped your way into office, you were marked as the prey of all other cheaters and thumpers; and had but to wait a year or two for the most expert of them to have you out, handed over to the Board of Punishments, and perchance shortened of stature by a head. The disadvantages

of such a career outweighed its temptations; and Wang Tao-chen had decided it was not for him.

So he refrained from politics altogether, and transplanted his ambitions into more secret fields. Inactive, he would do well by his age; unstriving, he would attain possession of Tao. He would be peaceful in a world disposed to violence; honest where all were cheats; serene and unambitious in an age of fussy ambition. Let the spoils of office go to inferior men; for him the blue calmness of the lake, the blue emptiness above: the place that his soul should reflect and rival, and the untroubled noiseless place that reflected and rivalled heaven.—Where, too, one might go through the day unreminded that that unintelligent Li Kuang-ming, one's neighbour, had already obtained his prefecture, and was making a good thing of it; or that Fan Kao-sheng, the flashy and ostentatious, had won his *chin shih* degree, and was spoken well of by the undiscerning on all sides. Let *him* examine either of them in the Classics ! . . .

Certainly there was no better occupation for the meditative than fishing. One suffered no interruption—except when the fish bit. He tolerated this vile habit of theirs for a year or two; and brought home a good catch to his wife of an evening, until such time as he had shaken off —as it seemed to him—earthly ambitions and desires. Then, when he could hear of Li's and Fan's successes with equanimity, and his own mind had grown one-pointed towards wisdom, he turned from books to pure contem-

plation, and became impatient even of the attentions of the fish. He would emulate the sages of old: in this respect a very simple matter. One had but to bend one's hook straight before casting it, and everything with fins and scales in Lake Tao-ting might wait its turn to nibble, yet shake down none of the fruits of serenity from the branches of his mind. It was an ingenious plan, and worked excellently.

You may ask, What would his wife say? —he, fortunately, had little need to consider that. He was lucky, he reflected, in the possession of such a spouse as Pu-his; who, though she might not tread with him his elected path, stood sentry at the hither end of it, so to say, without complaint or fuss. A meek little woman, lazily minded yet withal capable domestically, she gave him no trouble in the world; and received in return unthinking confidence and complete dependence in all material things—as you might say, a magnanimous marital affection. His home in the fishing village was a thing not to be dispensed with, certainly; nor yet much to be dwelt upon in the mind by one who sought immortality. No doubt Pu-hsi felt for him the great love and reverence which were a husband's due, and would not presume to question his actions.

True, she had once, soon after their marriage, mildly urged him to follow the course of nature and take his examinations; but a little eloquence had silenced her. In this matter of the fish, he would let it dawn on her in her own time that there would be no more, either to cook

or to sell. Having realized the fact she would, of course, dutifully exert herself the more to make things go as they should. There would be neither inconvenience nor disturbance, at home.

Which things happened. One night, however, she examined his tackle and discovered the unbent hook; and meditated over it for months. Then a great desire for fish came over her; and she rose up while he slept and bent the hook back to its proper shape with care, and baited it; and went to sleep again, hoping for the best.

Wang Tao-chen never noticed it; perhaps because, as he was gathering up his tackle to set out, a neighbour came to the door and borrowed a net from him, promising to return it that same evening. It was an interruption which Wang resented inwardly; and the resentment made him careless, I suppose. He was far out on the lake, and had thrown his line, before composure quite came back to him; and it had hardly come when there was a bite to frighten it away again,—and such a bite as might not be ignored. Away went the fish, and Wang Tao-chen after it: speeding over the water so swiftly that he had no thought even to drop the rod. Away and away, breathless, until noon; then suddenly the boat stopped and the line hung loose. He drew it in, and found the baited hook untouched; and fell to pondering on the meaning of it all. . . .

He had come into a region unknown to him, lovelier than any he had visited before. He had left the middle

lake far behind, and was in the shadow of lofty hills. The water, all rippleless, mirrored the beauty of the mountains; and inshore, here reeds greener than jade, there hibiscus splendid with bloom. High up among the pines a little blue-tiled temple glowed in the magical air. Above the bluff yonder, over whose steep sheer face little pinetrees hung jutting half-way between earth and heaven, delicate feathers of cloud, bright as polished silver, floated in a sky bluer than glazed porcelain. From the woods on the hill-sides came birdsong strangely and magically sweet. Wang Tao-chen, listening, felt a quickening of the life within him : the rising of a calm sacred quality of life, as if he had breathed airs laden with immortality from the Garden of Siwangmu in the western world. Shore and water seemed bathed in a light at once more vivid and more tranquil than any that shone in familiar regions.

Quickening influences in the place stirred him to curiosity, to action; and he took his oar and began to row. He passed round the bluff and into the bay beyond; and as he went, felt himself drawing nearer to the heart of beauty and holiness. A high pine-clad island stood in the mouth of the bay; so that, unless close in shore, you might easily pass the latter undiscovered. Within—between the island and the hills, the whole being of him rose up into poetry and peace. The air he breathed was keenness of delight, keenness of perception. The pines on the high hills on either side blushed into deep and exquisite green. Blue long-tailed birds like fiery jewels flitted among the trees

and out from the boscage over the bay; the water, clear as a diamond, glassed the wizardry of the hills and pines and the sweet sky with its drifting delicacy of cloudlets; glassed, too, the wonder of the lower slopes where, and in the valley-bottom, glowed an innumerable multitude of peach-trees, red-blossomed, and now all lovely like soft clouds of sunset with bloom.

He rowed shoreward, and on under the shadow of the faery peach-trees, and came into a narrow inlet, deep-watered, that seemed the path for him into bliss and the secret places of wonder. The petals fell about him in a slow roseate rain; even in midstream, looking upward, one could see but inches and glimpses of interstitial blueness. He went on until a winding of the inlet brought him into the open valley: to a thinning of the trees,—a house beside the water,—and then another and another: into the midst of a scattered village and among a mild, august and kindly people, unlike, in fashion of garb and speech, any whom he had seen—any, he would have said, that had lived among the Hills of Han[1] these many hundred years.

They had an air of radiant placidity, passionless joy and benevolence, lofty and calm thought. They appeared to have expected his coming: greeted him majestically, but with affability; showed him, presently, a house in which, they said, he might live as long as he chose. They had no news, he found, of the doings in any of the contemporary

[1] i.e. in China.

kingdoms, and were not interested; they were without politics entirely; wars nor rumours of wars disturbed them. Here, thought Wang, he would abide for ever; such things were not to be found elsewhere. In this lofty peace he would grow wise: would blossom, naturally as a flower, but into immortality. They let fall, while talking to him, sentences strangely illuminating—yet strangely tantalizing too, as it seemed to him: one felt stupendous wisdom concealed—saw a gleam of it, or as it were a corner trailing away; and missed the satisfaction of its wholeness. This in itself was supreme incitement; in time one would learn and penetrate all. Of course he would remain with them forever; he would supply them with fish in gratitude for their hospitality. Falling asleep that night, he knew that none of his days had been flawless until that day—until the latter part of it, at least. . . .

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The bloom fell from the trees; the young fruit formed, and slowly ripened in a sunlight more caressing than any in the world of men. With their ripening, the air of the valley became more wonderful, more quickening and inspiring daily. When the first dark blush appeared on the yellow-green of the peaches, Wang Tao-chen walked weightless, breathed joy, was as one who has heard tidings glorious and never expected. Transcendent thoughts had been rising in him continually since first he came into the valley ; now, his mind became like clear night-skies among the stars of which luminous dragons sail always, liquid,

gleaming, light-shedding, beautiful. By his door grew a tree whose writhing branches overhung a pool of golden carp; as he came out one morning, he saw the first of the ripe peaches drop shining from its bough, and fall into the water; diffusing the sweetness of its scent on the diamond light of the young day. Silently worshipping heaven, he picked up the floating peach, and raised it to his mouth. As he did so he heard the leisurely tread of oxhoofs on the road above: it would be his neighbour So-and-so, who rode his ox down to drink at the inlet at that time each morning. (Strange that he should have learnt none of the names of the villagers; that he should never, until now, have thought of them as bearing names.) As the taste of the peach fell on his palate, he looked up, and saw the Ox-rider . . . and fell down and made obeisance; for it was Laotse the Master, who had ridden his ox out of the world, and into the Western Heaven, some seven or eight hundred years before.

Forthwith and thenceforward the place was all new to him, and a thousand times more wonderful. What had seemed to him cottages were lovely pagodas of jade and porcelain, the sunlight reflected from their glaze of transparent azure or orange or vermilion, of luminous yellow or purple or green. Through the shining skies of noon or evening you might often see lordly dragons floating: golden and gleaming dragons; or that shed a violet luminance from their wings; or whose hue was the essence from which blue heaven drew its blueness; or white dragons whose

passing was like the shooting of a star. As for his neighbours, he knew them now for the Mighty of old time: the men made one with Tao, who soared upon the Lonely Crane; the men who had eaten the Peaches of Immortality. There dwelt the founders of dynasties vanished millennia since: Men-Dragons and Divine Rulers: the Heaven-Kings and the Earth-Kings and the Man-Kings: all the figures who emerge in dim radiance out of the golden haze on the horizon of Chinese prehistory, and shine there quaintly wonderful. Their bodies emitted a heavenly light; the tones of their voices were an exquisite music; for their amusement they would harden snow into silver, or change the nature of the cinnabar until it became yellow gold. And sometimes they would bridle the flying dragon, and visit the Fortunate Isles of the Morning; and sometimes they would mount upon the hoary crane, and soaring through the empyrean, come into the Enchanted Gardens of the West: where Siwangmu is Queen of the Evening, and whence her birds of azure plumage fly and sing unseen over the world, and their singing is the love, the peace, and the immortal thoughts of mankind. Visibly those wonder-birds flew through Red-Peach-Blossom Inlet Valley; and lighted down there; and were fed with celestial food by the villagers, that their beneficent power might be increased when they went forth among men.

Seven years Wang Tao-chen dwelt there: enjoying the divine companionship of the sages, hearing the divine

philosophy from their lips: until his mind became clarified to the clear brightness of the diamond; and his perceptions serenely overspread the past, the present and the future; and his thoughts, even the most commonplace of them, were more luminously lovely than the inspirations of the supreme poets. Then one morning while he was fishing his boat drifted out into the bay, and beyond the island into the open lake.

And he fell to comparing his life in the valley with his life as it might be in the outer world. Among mortals, he considered, with the knowledge he had won, he would be as a herdsman with his herd. He might reach any pinnacle of power; he might reunite the world, and inaugurate an age more glorious than that of Han. . . . But here among these Mighty and Wise Ones, he would always be.— Well; was it not true that they must look down on him? He remembered Pu-hsi, the forgotten during all these years; and thought how astounded she would be,—how she would worship him more than ever, returning, so changed, after so long an absence. It would be nothing to row across the lake and see; and return the next day—or when the world of men bored him. He landed at the familiar quay in the evening, and went up with his catch to his house.

But Pu-hsi showed no surprise at seeing him, nor any rapturous satisfaction until she saw the fish. It was a cold shock to him; but he hid his feelings. To his question as to how she had employed her time during his absence, she

answered that the day had been as other days. There was embarrassment, even guilt, in her voice, if he had noticed it. 'The day?' said he; 'the seven years!'—and her embarrassment was covered away with surprise and uncomprehension. But here the neighbour came to the door, 'to return the net' he said 'that he had borrowed in the morning;'—the net Wang Tao-chen had lent him before he went away. And to impart a piece of gossip, it seemed: 'I hear' said he 'that Ping Yang-hsi and Po Lo-hsien are setting forth for the provincial capital to-morrow, to take their examination.' Wang Tao-chen gasped. 'They should have passed,' he began; and bit off the sentence there, leaving 'seven years ago' unsaid. Here were mysteries indeed.

He made cautious inquiries as to the events of this year and last; and the answers still further set his head spinning. He had only been away a day: everything confirmed that. Had he dreamed the whole seven years then? By all the glory of which they were compact; by the immortal energy he felt in his spirit and veins; *no*! He would prove their truth to himself; and he would prove himself to the world! He announced that he too would take the examination.

He did; and left all competitors to marvel: passed so brilliantly that all Tsin was talking about it; and returned to find that his wife had fled with a lover. That was not likely to trouble him much: he had lived forgetting her for seven years. But she, at least, should repent: she should

learn what a Great One she had deserted. Without delay he took examination after examination; and before the year was out was hailed as the most brilliant of rising stars. Promotion followed promotion, till the Son of Heaven called him to be prime minister. At every success he laughed to himself: he was proving to himself that he had lived with the Immortals. His fame spread through all the kingdoms of China; he was courted by the emissaries of many powerful kings. Yet nothing would content him: he must prove his grand memory still further; so he went feeding his ambition with greater and greater triumphs. Heading the army, he inflicted disaster upon the Huns, and imposed his will on the west and north. The time was almost at hand, people said, when the Black-haired People should be one again, under the founder of a new and most mighty dynasty.

And still he was dissatisfied: he found no companionship in his greatness: no one whom he loved or trusted, none to give him trust or love. His emperor was but a puppet in his hands, down to whose level he must painfully diminish his inward stature; his wife—the emperor's daughter—flattered and feared, and withal despised him. The world sang his praises and plotted his downfall busily; he discovered the plots, punished the plotters, and filled the world with his splendid activities. And all the while a voice was crying in his heart: *In Red-Peach-Blossom-Inlet Valley you had peace, companionship, joy!*

Twenty years passed, and his star still rose: it was

whispered that he was certainly no common mortal, but a genie, or a *sennin*, possessor of Tao. For he grew no older as the years went by, but still had the semblance of young manhood, as on the day he returned from the Valley. And now the Son of Heaven was dying, and there was no heir to the throne but a sickly and vicious boy; and it was thought everywhere that the great Wang Tao-chen would assume the Yellow. The dynasty had exhausted the mandate of heaven.

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It was night; and he sat alone; and home sickness weighed upon his soul. He had just dismissed the great court functionaries, the ministers and ambassadors, who had come to offer him the throne. The people were everywhere crying out for reunion, an end of dissensions, and the revival of the ancient glories of Han: and who but Wang Tao-chen could bring these things to pass? He had dismissed the courtiers, promising an answer in the morning. He knew that not one of them had spoken from his heart sincerely, nor voiced his own desire; but had come deeming it politic to anticipate the inevitable. For alas! in all the world there was none who was his equal. . . . Of these that had pressed upon him sovereignty especially, there was none to whom he could speak his mind —none with the greatness to understand. He saw polite enmity and fear under their bland expressions, and heard it beneath their courtly phrases of flattery. To be Son of Heaven—among such courtiers as these!

But in Red-Peach-Blossom-Inlet Valley one might talk daily with the Old Philosopher[1] and with Such-a-One; with the Duke of Chow and with Muh Wang and Tang the Completer; with the Royal Lady of the West; with Yao, Shun and Ta Yü themselves, those stainless Sovereigns of the Golden Age;—ah! with Fu-hsi the Man-Dragon Emperor and his seven Dragon Ministers; with the August Monarchs of the three August Periods of the world-dawn: the Heaven-Kings and the Earth-Kings and the Man-Kings. . . .

He did off his robes of state, and donned an old fisherman's costume which he had never had the heart to part with; and slipped away from his palace and from the capital; and set his face westward towards the shores of Lake Tao-ting. He would get a boat, and put off on the lake, and come to Red-Peach-Blossom-Inlet Valley again; and consult with Fu-hsi and the Yellow Emperor as to this of wearing the Yellow Robe,—as to whether it was Their will that he, the incompetent Wang Tao-chen, should dare to mount Their throne. But when he had come to his native village, and bought a boat and fishing-tackle, and put forth on the lake in the early morning, his purpose had changed: never, never, never would he leave the company of the Immortals again. Let kinghood go where it would; he would dwell with the Mighty and Wise of old time, humbly glad to be the least of their servants. He had won a name for himself in history; *They* would

[1] Laotse and Confucius.

not wholly look down on him now. And he knew that his life in that bliss would be forever: he had eaten of the Peaches of Immortality, and could not die. He wept at the blue lonely beauty of the middle lake when he came to it; he was so near now to all that he desired. . . .

In due time he came to the far shore; and to one bluff after another that he thought he recognized; but rounding it, found no island, no bay, no glazed-tile roofed temples, no grove of red-bloomed peaches. The place must be farther on . . . and farther on. . . . Sometimes there would be an island, but not *the* island; sometimes a bay, but not *the* bay; sometimes an island and a bay that would pass, and even peach-trees; but there was no inlet running in beneath the trees, with quiet waters lovely with a rain of petals—least of all that old divine red rain. Then he remembered the great fish that had drawn him into that sacred vicinity; and threw his line, fixing his hopes on that . . . fixing his desperate hopes on that.

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All of which happened some sixteen hundred years ago. Yet still sometimes, they say, the fishermen on Lake Tao-ting, in the shadowy hours of evening, or when night has overtaken them far out on the waters, will hear a whisper near at hand: a whisper out of vacuity, from no boat visible: a breathless despairing whisper: *It was here . . . surely it must have been here! . . . No, no; it was yonder!* And sometimes it is given to some few of them to see an old, crazy boat, mouldering away—one would say the merest

skeleton or ghost of a boat dead ages since, but still by some magic kept floating; and in it a man dressed in the rags of an ancient costume, on whose still young face is to be seen unearthly longing and immortal sadness, and an unutterable despair that persists in hoping. His line is thrown; he goes by swiftly, straining terrible eyes on the water, and whispering always: *It was here; surely it was here. . . . No, no; it was yonder . . . it must have been yonder. . . .*