

The Three Pools and the Painted Moon

BY FRANK OWEN



Heading by Boris Dolgov

His four souls had been willing to set out on their preordained destinations.

THE porcelains of Tang Ling were famous throughout all China. It has been written that he was a porcelain magician, and with good reason. Even

the Emperor had honored him and called him Elder Brother. Usually artists executed one phase only in the making of porcelain. One shaped a vase, another fired it. Some were specialists in glazes; others painted butterflies. The painter of moons was not nearly as famous as the painters of clouds or mountains. But Tang Ling did all these things with equal facility.

At times Tang Ling took weeks to perfect a single vase and during that time he conversed with no one, except for an occasional word with the old servant who brought him his rice. Though his possessions were considerable, while absorbed in creating he lived as frugally as a peasant. Tea was his one luxury, rare tea that had been grown high on a mountain where the Green Lady occasionally touched the growing leaves ever so gently with her long cold fingers.

Tang Ling assigned names to the vases he created. The title of the case that held an enduring place in his heart was "The Three Pools and the Painted Moon." He kept it on a teakwood table near the open window in his sleeping room. The vase was of sunflower yellow with the glow of the sun upon it even when there was no sun. Beside one of the clear cool pools of water stood a man and a girl. The man was richly attired in garments of green silk, embroidered with the Imperial Gold Dragon. The girl was like a lovely flower swaying in the breeze. Her fingers and lips were colored with the juice of balsam flowers. Her cheeks had been brushed with rice powder. Her hair, simply arranged, was black with tints of blue as the sun shone upon it. Her eyes were like unto black opals, with all their abundant mystery. But it was her smile that caught and held the attention, gentle, all-knowing and wonderfully sweet.

For hours each day, Tang Ling gazed on her enraptured; and when he slept, she invaded his dreams. For him she possessed a warmth of affection. How he longed to take her into his arms. No thought had he that she was but the figment of his own imagination, a fragile, exquisite porcelain lady. So enraptured was he, he seldom left the room that was glorified by the sparkle

of her eyes, the slender grace of her body. He longed to be ever at her side, to be her devoted companion for days without end. And as he sipped the tea which his servant set down before him, he gazed into her eyes, and she gazed back at him. Her expression was enigmatic. Was it only his imagination or did she desire him also? Then suddenly a solution came to him, a solution so simple he marveled that he had not thought of it before. He would paint himself into the vase, standing beside her. And happiness would indeed be theirs.

He spent days mixing and grinding new colors for this supreme effort of his career. Using antimony as a base he manufactured common black, mirror black and also a wide variety of shades of purest yellow like unto the yolk of an egg, eel skin yellow, straw-color, canary, citron or lemon yellow, mustard, orange and sulphur. Then he mixed luxurious greens—snakeskin, cucumber, emerald, celadon or sea green. His blues were famed wherever artists congregated—powder-blue, sapphire, turquoise, peacock, kingfisher and blue like the sky at morning after rain. From copper he evolved crimson, peachbloom, crushed strawberries. From iron, vermilion, coral, tomato. From gold, rose, pink and ruby. He slashed his finger with a small knife and mixed his blood with the cupric oxide that is copper red.

The actual painting of himself into the beloved vase began on a morning at sunrise when the dew was heavy on the cool grass and the last vestige of moonlight still lingered in the tall bamboo. The perfume of flowers was attuned to the songs of gay plumaged birds, drunk with joy as they sang salutations to the dawn.

Tang Ling had bathed and dressed with extreme care as though this were the day of his wedding. He had purchased an Imperial Coronation robe that had once adorned a Ming Emperor. In the center was the Yang and the Yin, the male and the female principles, representing divine origin, embroidered in gold *couché* stitch on a plum-colored satin background. All the constellations from one to nine, representing the great social bows and mutual

duties were grouped around the *Tai-chi*. On the right shoulder was the imperial dragon enveloping the sacred disc; the moon, symbolizing the Yin. On the left shoulder was the Imperial dragon enveloping the sacred disc; the sun, symbolizing the Yang, the five lotus-purity; the eight phoenixes, the six *shou* characters—denoting long life. Wearing such a robe Tang Ling was indeed Emperor of Porcelain, the Son of Heaven. In such raiment would he paint his own portrait on the vase.

AND so he set to work. If he could achieve his desire, the slender graceful girl would be his. That the object he had set for himself could only be accomplished by alchemy and a large measure of magic was of little purport. Had not the great Wu Tao-tzu in the golden age of Tang painted with such skill that scores of legends have grown up about him. His dragons were enveloped in mist. It has been written that he painted horses with such realism that they ran away and were never seen again. His flowers were so lifelike their essence sweetened the room in which the pictures of them were hung. He painted on silk, on bamboo slips and on the walls of the Imperial Palace of the Emperor Ming Huang. The paintings of Wu Tao-tzu were three dimensional.

Tang Ling, on porcelain, had solved this three dimensional quality of Wu. His figures lived and breathed and appeared about to speak. No doubt had he that the slim, flowerlike girl he had painted with his own magic brush was a living pulsating being. Her exquisite tender smile was for him only. Her eyes followed him about the room.

He could hardly wait for that glorious moment when he could join her on the vase. As he painted himself into the vase fingers fairly flew with inspiration. Glad was he that he had a strong wrist. Not for a moment did he pause to rest, nor did he partake of food or drink. He finished his own portrait by moonlight. Then he carried the precious vase down to the baking ovens at the foot of the garden. Gently he consigned the beloved vase to a second

firing so that his figure might be imprisoned there forever.

That night was the strangest of his amazing career. Never had he endured such intense suffering and terror. His room was like a bake-oven, his bed the grate of a furnace. Perspiration fell from his body in scalding beads. Was it only his imagination or did it rise above him like live steam? While still alive he was being cremated. No Parsee placed on a burial tower while still living and being slowly devoured by ravenous vultures was subjected to more pain. He clutched at the silk coverlets of the kong and bit his teeth until the blood flowed. He endeavored with all his will power not to cry out but occasionally an anguished sob escaped him. Perhaps she was enduring torment equal to his! The thought stabbed him with such acute pain it even eclipsed, if that were possible, the fury of the intense oven-heat, for oven-heat it was. His bed had become as hot as the ovens at the foot of the garden. But all this intense suffering had to be. And somehow he survived it even as his countrymen for ages have endured every disaster—flood, starvation, pestilence and invasion, and through it all remained courteous, philosophic, serene as though they knew that inevitably all would be well once more.

AS THE first gaunt fingers of dawn reached through the open window of his sleeping room, Tang Ling rose wearily to his feet. Within a few hours he had become a dried up old man. He felt as if his flesh had been burned away and only bleached bones remained. Moaning slightly, he crept through the garden. He longed to hurry so that he might be free of this dreadful ordeal but speed was impossible. Though he fell twice, somehow he reached the baking-oven. With great effort he drew the beloved vase from it and placed it gently on the ground. Then he collapsed on the green earth and lay scarcely conscious while his body gradually cooled and some measure of relief came to him. How cool the dew felt on his fiery flesh.

Gradually the intense heat of his body lessened, and at last he slept. Every fibre

of his body knew complete exhaustion. He had stood at the threshold of the dwelling place of his ancestors, but it would have been precious relief had he stepped through and joined them. His four souls had been quite willing to set out on their preordained destinations. But now gentle sleep had come to him at last, sleep without dreams. Nearby in the small artificial lake, a white-plumed heron stood watching. It was late evening when he awakened. A thin sickle of moon lifted slantwise into the sky. A cool breeze stirred the treetops as it swept through the garden. The air was sweet with the breath of many flowers.

Tang Ling rose to his feet. His body felt light, empty with little more texture than a ghost. He was surprised that he could keep his feet on the ground. The breeze, cool and sweet, had intensified. He lifted his treasured vase in his arms. This was creation indeed for even by moonlight he could see that the girl was smiling and in her eyes, all-seeing, there was warm love and tenderness. He could discern her breathing, the rise and fall of her soft breast. And he knew that every beat of her heart was for him. Here was love beyond the reach of poets. With hushed footsteps, he walked back to his sleeping room. The feeling of fatigue remained with him. Merely to walk was a great effort as though old age enshrouded him. He clutched the vase to him for it was the most precious thing he possessed. Though that was wrong, too, for it seemed as if the vase possessed him more truly than he possessed the vase. It was a glowing creation of yellow madness.

BACK in his sleeping room, he placed the vase on a table near the open window where the sunlight could fall upon it. This was like painting a living rose, for it needed no sunlight, it glowed with an enchanting radiance of its own, a radiance that echoed the smile of his beloved. Now slender and fragile she looked; this little porcelain lady who from the tip of his brush out of a riot of color, had come to dwell in his heart. He was so intensely happy it was like physical pain. Still the feeling of languor remained. He lay back on

the silken pillow of the kong. It was odd to gaze upon his own figure burnished on the vase, seeming far more alive than his living body. Perhaps this was his life's end. If so, what matter? His portrait on the vase would be immortal, nor would age wither the roundness and youth of his face. Gradually sleep assuaged his weariness, sleep deep and merciful.

Hours later, he awakened into a world of golden yellow splendor. He felt abundantly refreshed. Yet he had come unto a rich, new world. Was he now an immortal? Was this the spiritual realms of his ancestors? If so, it was a beautiful awakening. He felt his thighs, his arms; his body was solid enough. Slowly he rose to his feet and gazed in awe about him. Nearby he noticed, as his eyes became attuned to the glowing yellow atmosphere, three pools of cool, clear water while above glowed a painted moon. Then he knew, for beside him stood the fragile girl. He dared not move, lest by doing so he might break the magic thread. And yet, in spite of himself, his arms encircled her and time stood still. Perhaps it had ceased to be when he painted his own figure on the vase. Now he dwelt in a yellow porcelain land, without age, where it was forever spring. But, though he did not realize it at that moment, there was grave danger also, a personal danger of his own contriving.

AS HE held the girl to him, whose delicate beauty eclipsed the rarest cameo, he felt as though he were master of the universe. The stars were his and the moon also. He could hold morning in his hands. Alas, however, the extreme joy that engulfed him was but momentary, like a fragment of a poem by Li Po. The next instant he was fighting for his life, fighting a foe that existed only through his inspired brush strokes. But real or imagined his opponent fought with demoniac fury. It was all that Tang Ling could do to protect himself, nor had he any thought of being the aggressor. Even as he struggled, he regretted that he had painted this evil attacker with such an abundance of virility. His strength was amazing. Tang Ling was

losing the unequal battle. Fingers like talons were upon his throat, and he felt himself falling. Tighter the steel fingers closed on his throat as he was dragged into one of the three pools. Dimly through the water he could see the painted moon. So this was the end. Consciousness was slipping from him as there came an earth shattering crash!

When at last he opened his eyes, it was morning. The fragrance of the room was ethereal. The sunlight was liquid gold. He glanced toward the table on which stood the beloved vase. It was there no longer, but lay shattered on the floor. He bent

down and examined the pieces. With enormous relish he discovered that his enemy's head had been severed from his body. A delectable manner in which to find him. But that was only a dream, a vivid dream, but a dream nonetheless. It was only then that he was aware that his head and shoulders were dripping wet. In astonishment he rose to his feet. And then she came to him through the curtained doorway, as slim and delicate as a flower. She nestled into his arms as though they had been made for that very purpose. It was a moment such as even gods might envy. Then together they walked out into an enchanted garden.

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