

Pu Song-ling (1640–1715), 清

Liao-zhai's Record of Wonders

Stories of marvels and encounters with supernatural beings had been popular in China at least since the Han Dynasty, but the favorite compendium of all such stories was *Liao-zhai's Record of Wonders* (*Liao-zhai zhi-yi*), by Pu Song-ling. By the Qing, the number of educated men who sought public office far exceeded the number of available positions. Pu Song-ling failed the provincial examinations and spent his life in the employ of officials and local gentry in his native Shan-dong. A preliminary version of *Liao-zhai's Record of Wonders* was completed in 1679, though he continued to add to it in the decades that followed. Numerous versions of the collection circulated in manuscript, but the work was not published until 1766. Held up as a model of classical prose style and exposition, *Liao-zhai's Record of Wonders* transformed the venerable genre of the supernatural tale into high art.

The supernatural tale seems to have answered some hunger for the strange that is a component of societies that are relatively stable and ordinary. In the Chinese version, strangeness often took the form of an abrupt intrusion of a sexual relationship into ordinary life. In *Liao-zhai's Record of Wonders*, the strange and the ordinary are often in competition; ghosts, were-beasts, and immortal beings may be domesticated, but their powers eventually reveal themselves in the common world. This constant play on appearance and a truth that lies behind appearance is worked out through the social roles and obligations that shape human relationships, especially between men and women.

One striking difference between many of Pu Song-ling's literary ghost stories and their Western counterparts is the frequent undercurrent of whimsy and humor, found precisely in the conjunction of the ordinary and the supernatural, the domestic and demonic. In "Lian-xiang," the protagonist, young Sang, lies on his deathbed listening to his two rival girlfriends debate the relative destructive powers of ghosts and foxes, suddenly realizing the each was, in fact, the supernatural creature that the other had claimed. The narrator's comment: "Fortunately he was so used to them that he wasn't alarmed by them at all." At the very moment that the supernatural reveals itself in the ordinary world, he finds that the strange has become ordinary.

One further aspect of the domestication of the strange is the intrusion of the narrator at the end of each story, offering a judgment as the "Chronicler of Wonders," in the manner of a Chinese official historian.

Lian-xiang

A native of Yi-zhou, one Sang Xiao, also known as Sang Zi-ming, had been orphaned in his youth and taken up lodging in Red Blossom Port. Sang was the sort of person who enjoyed the quiet, sedate life. Every day he would go

out to take his meals with a neighbor to his east, but he would spend the rest of his time just sitting at home. His neighbor once jokingly asked him, "Aren't you afraid of ghosts and foxes, living all by yourself?" Sang laughed and replied, "Why should a grown man be afraid of ghosts and foxes? Should a male of either type come, I have a sharp sword. If it's a female, I should open the gate and welcome her in."

Sang's neighbor then went home and hatched a scheme with some friends. They used a ladder to boost a courtesan over the way, and in no time she was there knocking at his gate. When Sang peeked out and asked who she was, the courtesan said she was a ghost. Sang was utterly terrified, and she could hear the sound of his teeth chattering. The courtesan then backed away and left. Early the next day, Sang's neighbor came to see Sang in his study; Sang related what he had seen and announced that he was going back to his native district. At this the neighbor clapped his hands together and asked, "Why didn't you open the door and welcome her in?" Immediately Sang realized he had been hoodwinked and went back to the quiet life he had led before.

A half a year went by, and then one night a young woman came knocking at his study. Sang thought that this was another joke being played on him by his friend, so he opened the door and asked her in. She turned out to be a beauty worth dying for. Sang was surprised and asked her where she had come from. She replied, "My name is Lian-xiang, and I am a courtesan who lives west of here." Since there were many establishments in the red light district of the port, Sang believed her. When he put out the candle and got in bed with her, their lovemaking was perfect. From that time on, she would suddenly show up every fifteenth night.

One evening as he was sitting alone, lost in thought, a young woman came flitting in. Thinking it was Xiang-lian, Sang greeted her and was talking to her; but when he caught sight of her face, it was someone else altogether. She was just fifteen or sixteen, with billowing sleeves and her hair in bangs, a winsome and charming creature, who seemed uncertain whether to come any closer or to withdraw. Sang was aghast, suspecting she was a fox. The young woman said, "My name is Li, and I come from a good family. I am an admirer of your noble disposition and cultivation, and now I have the good fortune to be able to come and make your acquaintance."

Sang was delighted; but when he took her hand, it was cold as ice. And he asked her, "Why are you so chilly?" She replied, "How could it be otherwise, being so young and tender, yet left alone in the cold each night, in the frost and dew?" And when he had untied the folds of her dress, she was indeed a true virgin. She said to him, "Because of the love I feel for you, I have now, in a short span, failed to preserve my innocence. If you do not look on me as unworthy, I would like to share your bed always. But do you, perhaps, have another woman for your bedroom?" Sang told her that there was no one else but a nearby prostitute and that she didn't come to visit him often. At this the young woman said, "I'll be careful to avoid her. I don't belong to the same class as those women of the entertainment quarters, so

you have to keep this completely secret. When she comes, I'll leave; and then when she leaves, I'll come back."

As the roosters were crowing and she was about to go, she gave him an embroidered slipper and said, "By fondling this thing I have worn on my body, you can let me know that you are longing for me. But take care not to fondle it when anyone else is around." When Sang took it and examined it, he saw that it was as sharply pointed as a knitting needle. And his heart was filled with love and desire. There was no one with him the following evening, so he took it out and examined it. In a flash the young woman was suddenly there, and they then shared tender intimacies. From then on whenever he took out the slipper, the young woman would respond to his thoughts and come to him. He thought this unusual and questioned her about it, but she only laughed and said, "It's just coincidence."

One night when Lian-xiang came, she said with alarm, "How is it that you look so pallid and drained of vitality?" Sang said, "I hadn't been aware of it." Lian-xiang later took her leave and promised to come again in ten days. After Lian-xiang left, Miss Li came regularly, leaving no evening free. She asked him, "Why hasn't your lover come in such a long time?" Sang then told her about the interval she had stipulated. Li laughed and asked, "In your eyes, how do I compare to Lian-xiang in beauty?" Sang replied, "Both of you are extraordinary, but Lian-xiang's skin is pleasantly warm." At this, Li colored and said, "If you are telling me to my face that she and I are matched in beauty, then she must be a veritable goddess of the moon-palace, and I am obviously not her equal." After that she grew sulky. Then, as she reckoned it, the ten days were already up; and forbidding Sang to say a word, she intended to get a glimpse of Lian-xiang.

On the following night Lian-xiang finally came, and they laughed and talked quite cheerfully. But when they went to bed, she was shocked and said, "This is terrible! It's been only ten days since I saw you last—how could you have deteriorated so badly? Can you assure me that you haven't been meeting with someone else?" Sang asked her to explain, and Lian-xiang said, "I can see the evidence in your vital signs. Your pulse is fluctuating wildly, like tangled threads. This is the symptom of the presence of a ghost."

The next night Li came, and Sang asked, "Did you get a glimpse of Lian-xiang?" Li answered, "She is beautiful. As a matter of fact, I would even say that in the whole *human* world there's no woman so lovely. That's because she's a fox. When she left, I tailed her—her lair is in the hill to the south."

Sang suspected Li was simply jealous and gave her a flippant reply. But the next evening, he teased Lian-xiang: "I really don't believe it, but someone claimed you were a fox." Lian-xiang pressed him to tell her who had said this, but Sang laughed and answered, "I was just teasing you." Then Lian-xiang asked, "Just how are foxes different from human beings?" Sang replied, "Those who are bewitched by them grow sick, and in the worst cases they die. This is the reason people are terrified of them." Lian-xiang said, "It's not so. When someone your age sleeps with a fox, their vitality is restored after only three days. So even if one were a fox, what harm would it

do? But suppose there were a creature that sapped a person's energy every day—there are people far worse than foxes. With all the corpses and ghosts of people who died of consumption and other diseases, it's hardly just foxes that cause people to die. In any case, someone has obviously been talking about me." Sang did his best to persuade her that this wasn't so, but Lian-xiang questioned him ever more vigorously. At last Sang had no choice but to tell her the whole story. Then Lian-xiang said, "I was really astounded at how sickly you had grown. But how else could you have reached this condition so suddenly? The creature must not be human. Don't say anything about this, but tomorrow night, I have to spy on her as she did on me."

That night, Li came. She hadn't exchanged more than a few words with Sang when she heard a cough outside the window and disappeared immediately. Then Lian-xiang came in and said, "You're in serious danger. She really is a ghost. If you keep on being intimate with her and don't break it off quickly, the dark path is close at hand!" Sang thought she was jealous and said nothing. Lian-xiang then said, "I realize that you can't just put aside your love for her, but still I can't bear to watch you die. Tomorrow, I'm going to bring you some medicine to get rid of this malady brought on by an excess of the feminine principle. Fortunately the disease hasn't taken deep root in you, and it should be gone in ten days. I ask you to share a bed with me so that I can keep an eye on the cure."

The next night she brought out some finely chopped herbs and made Sang take them. In a little while he had a few bouts of diarrhea, after which he felt that his entrails had been purged clear and his energy invigorated. Although he felt grateful to Lian-xiang, he still didn't believe that his sickness had been due to a ghost. Every night Lian-xiang pressed close to him under the covers; but when Sang wanted to make love, she stopped him immediately. After several days, his flesh was back to its former fullness. When she was about to leave, Lian-xiang urged him with all her might to break off with Li, and Sang pretended to agree. But as soon as he closed the door and trimmed the lamp wick, he immediately took hold of the slipper and turned his thoughts to Li. Suddenly there she was. Having been kept away from him for several days, she looked rather resentful; but Sang explained, "These past few nights I've been having shamanistic therapy. Please don't be annoyed with me. I still care about you." At this Li grew somewhat more cheerful. But later in bed Sang whispered to her, "I love you very much, but there are those that claim you're really a ghost." Li was tongue-tied for a long time, then rebuked him, "That wanton fox must have bewitched you into believing her. If you don't break off with her, I won't come here any more!" Then she burst into tears. Sang said all sorts of things to make her feel better, then gave up.

The following night when Lian-xiang appeared, she knew that Li had come again, and she said angrily, "You must want to die." Sang laughed, saying, "Why are you so jealous of her?" At this Lian-xiang grew even angrier: "The seeds of death had been planted in you, and I got rid of them for you. What would have happened if I hadn't been jealous?" Then Sang at-

tributed words to Li to tease Lian-xiang: "She says that my sickness the other day was the evil eye brought on by a fox." At this, Lian-xiang said with a sigh, "It really does happen as you say, but you have been duped and don't know it. The whole thing is bound to turn out badly; and then even if I spoke with a hundred tongues, how could I explain myself. I'll leave you now. When I see you again in a hundred days, you will be bedridden." Sang couldn't get her to stay, and she departed at once in indignation.

From then on, Li was always with him morning and night. After a little more than two months, he began to feel very weak. At first he still tried to shake it off by himself, but he grew steadily more gaunt and emaciated until all he could eat was a bowl of thick porridge. He was ready to go back to where his family lived, but he still was too attached to Li to bear to leave her so abruptly. After a few more days, the sickness became debilitating, and he couldn't get up any more. When Sang's neighbor saw how feeble he had become, he sent his servant every day to see to Sang's meals. It was only at this point that Sang began to suspect Li and said to her, "I regret not having listened to Lian-xiang's advice. It has brought me to this." After saying that, he lost consciousness. A while later he came to; and when he opened his eyes and looked around, Li was gone, obviously having decided to have nothing more to do with him. Sang lay there emaciated, alone in his study, longing for Lian-xiang as one might hope for a great bounty.

One day as he was lost in reverie, someone suddenly lifted the curtain and came in. It was Lian-xiang. Standing by his bed, she said with a sad smile, "Well, my naïve friend, was I wrong?" Sang was choked up for a long time, then admitted how wrong he had been and asked her to rescue him. Lian-xiang said, "The disease has entered the vital regions below the heart, and there's no way to save you. I came to say my last farewell to you, and to show you that it was not jealousy." Sang was terribly upset and said, "There's something I have beneath my pillow—please destroy it for me." Lian-xiang reached under and found the slipper, then took it over in the lamp to examine it, turning it over in her hand. In a flash Li entered the room, but then suddenly caught sight of Lian-xiang and turned to make her escape. Lian-xiang blocked the doorway with her body, and Li found herself hemmed in with no way out.

When Sang took her to task for everything she had done to him, Li had no way to answer. Lian-xiang laughed. "Now I have a chance to confront you face to face. Some time ago you told our young friend that his previous illness could only have been brought on by me. How about now?" Li bowed her head and admitted she had been in the wrong. Then Lian-xiang said, "You're so beautiful, and yet you used love against him as if he were your enemy."

At that, Li fell to the floor and burst into tears, begging for mercy. Lian-xiang then helped her up and questioned her in detail about her life. Li said, "I was the daughter of the Assistant Li. I died young and was buried here just outside the walls. Li Shang-yin wrote how when the spring silkworm dies, its threads of longing end. In my case the spring silkworm may have died, but

those threads remained and did not end. I just wanted to live with him happily; it was never my intention to bring about his death." Then Lian-xiang said, "I have heard that ghosts gain advantage by someone's death, because after that person dies they can be with him forever. Is that true?" Li answered, "No, it's not true. When two ghosts meet, there's no way they can enjoy themselves together. If they could, there are more than enough young men in the underworld!" Lian-xiang said, "Foolish girl! A man can't take doing it every night even with a human being—much less with a ghost!" Then Li asked, "But foxes bring about people's deaths. What technique do you have that this is not true for you?" Lian-xiang answered, "Those are the vampire foxes that suck the vital essences out of a person—I'm not that sort. There really are foxes that don't do people any harm, but there are absolutely no ghosts that don't do people harm—the Yin humors are too strong in them."

As Sang heard them talking, he realized for the first time that they really were a fox and a ghost. Fortunately he was so used to them that he wasn't alarmed by them at all. The only thing on his mind was his sinking breath, now as thin as a thread; and without realizing it, he groaned in misery. Lian-xiang consulted with Li. "What are we going to do about him?" Li blushed crimson and demurred. Lian-xiang laughed and said, "I'm afraid that if he gets strong and healthy again, you'll be so jealous you'll be eating sour grapes." Li straightened her sleeves in a demure attitude: "If there were some doctor of national standing who could undo my betrayal of our friend, then I would bury my head in the earth and never be so shameless as to show my face in the world again."

Lian-xiang then opened a pouch and took out some medicine. "I knew long ago it would reach this stage, so after leaving Sang I gathered these herbs on the Three Mountains of the immortals; and now that they have been curing for three months, the ingredients are at last ready. If he takes these, they will restore him to health, even if the malignancy has brought him to the edge of death. Nevertheless, the medicine must be helped along by the very same means by which he contracted the disease. That means that it is you who must do your best to save him." Li asked, "What is required?" Lian-xiang answered, "A drop of spit from your mouth. I will put in the pill, and then you put your mouth on his and spit into it." A glow of embarrassment rose on Li's cheeks; she lowered her head and fidgeted, looking at the slipper. Then Lian-xiang teased her, "I guess the slipper is the only thing that satisfies you." At this Li became even more ashamed and seemed as though she couldn't endure it. Lian-xiang then said, "This is an ordinary remedy for fevers—why are you holding back in this case?" Then she put the pill between Sang's lips and put increasing pressure on Li. Li had no choice but to spit on it. Lian-xiang said, "Again!" And she spit on it again. After spitting on it a few more times, the pill finally went down his throat. After a short while, there was a rumbling in his belly like the sound of thunder. She gave him another pill and this time touched her own lips to his and dissolved it with her breath. Sang felt a fire in his abdomen, and his vitality flared forth. Lian-xiang said, "He's better!"

When Li heard the rooster crow, she grew anxious and departed. Since Sang was still an invalid, Lian-xiang had to stay and nurse him, since he had no way to get his own meals. She locked up the door to give the false impression that he had gone back to his home region so that no one would come to visit him. She kept by his side day and night, and every evening Li too would come and give her wholehearted help. She treated Xiang-lian like a sister, and Xiang-lian too came to feel a deep affection for her.

After three months, Sang was as healthy as ever. After that Li would stay away for several evenings at a time, and when she did come, she would take a quick look and leave. When she faced them, she seemed troubled and unhappy. Lian-xiang would always try to get her to spend the night with them, but she was never willing. Once Sang went after her and picked her up to bring her back; her body was as light as one of the straw dolls used in burials. When she found that she couldn't get away, she lay down in her clothes and curled her body into a ball that wasn't even two feet wide. Lian-xiang increasingly felt sorry for her and secretly had Sang put his arms around her and try to be intimate with her, but he couldn't wake her up even by shaking her. Sang fell off to sleep; and when he woke up and looked for her, she was long gone.

For more than ten days after that, she didn't come again. She was very much on Sang's mind, and he would often take out the slipper and fondle it together with Lian-xiang. Lian-xiang said, "It's so lonely now. I still care for her, and as a man you must feel it even more." Then Sang said, "It used to be that she would come whenever I fondled the slipper; I did always wonder about that, but I never suspected she was a ghost. Now looking at this slipper and thinking of her face really makes me miserable." Then he began to weep.

The wealthy Zhang household had a fifteen-year-old daughter, Yan-er, who died suddenly without showing any signs of sickness. After a night had passed, she returned to consciousness. She got up, looked around, and started to run away. The Zhangs barred the door, and she couldn't get out. At this the young woman said, "I'm the spirit of the daughter of Assistant Li. I have been deeply touched by the kind attentions of Mr. Sang, and there's a piece of footwear of mine that still remains at his house. I really am a ghost, so it's not going to do any good to lock me up." Since there was a certain coherence in what she was saying, they questioned her about how she came to her present state. But she simply looked around in bewilderment, confused and unable to explain herself. Someone said that Mr. Sang was sick and had gone back to his native region, but the young woman insisted that this was erroneous.

The people in the household were quite perplexed. Sang's neighbor to the east heard about this, so he climbed over the wall to peek in Sang's house; there he saw Sang talking together with a beautiful woman. He burst in to catch them by surprise, but in a moment of confusion he lost track of her. Alarmed, the neighbor asked Sang for an explanation; and Sang laughed. "As I said to you quite clearly before, if it was a female I'd invite her in."

Then Sang's neighbor told him what Yan-er had said. Sang unlocked the door and wanted to go find out what was going on, but there was no way he could.

When Mrs. Zhang heard that Sang had not, after all, gone back to his native place, she thought the whole matter was even stranger. She sent an old serving woman to get the slipper, which Sang produced and handed over to her. Yan-er was delighted when she got it; but when she tried to put it on, it was smaller than her foot by a full inch, and she was greatly alarmed. When she then took a mirror to look at herself, she was in a daze, suddenly realizing that she had come to life in this other body. At she explained the full course of events, and at last her mother believed her. When the young woman looked at her face in the mirror, she wept loudly, saying, "I had some self-confidence in my looks back then, yet whenever I saw Lian-xiang, I still felt embarrassment by comparison. But as it is now, I'm even less attractive as a human being than as a ghost." She would just hold the slipper and wail inconsolably. She covered herself up with a quilt and lay stiff. They would try to feed her, but she wouldn't eat, and her flesh and skin became all swollen. For a full seven days she didn't eat; but she did not die and the swelling gradually subsided. At that point, she felt so hungry she couldn't bear it and began to eat again. After several days itching covered her whole body, and the skin all fell away. When she got up in the morning, her bed slippers fell from her feet, and when she went to put them on again, they were too large and didn't fit. Then she tried on her old slipper, and now it fit perfectly. She was delighted. Then she looked at herself in the mirror again and found that her brows, her eyes, her cheeks, and chin were all just as they had been originally—and at this she was even more delighted. She then bathed, combed her hair, and went to see her mother, and all who saw her were pleased.

When Lian-xiang heard about this marvel, she urged Sang to send a matchmaker with an offer of marriage; but because of the discrepancy in the fortunes of the two households, Sang didn't dare proceed with rash haste. On the old lady's birthday, he went along with her sons-in-law to congratulate her. The old lady saw his name and had Yan-er look through the curtain to see if she recognized him. Sang was the last to arrive, and the young woman burst out, grabbed his sleeve, and wanted to go home with him. Only after her mother scolded her did she grow embarrassed and go back in. Sang had gotten a clear look at her, and without knowing it, tears began to fall from his eyes. At this, he prostrated himself on the floor in front of the old lady and didn't get up. She in turn helped him up and didn't take it as bad manners. As Sang left, he asked one of the young woman's uncles to represent him in negotiations for the marriage. The old woman deliberated and chose a lucky day for to take him as her son-in-law.

When Sang went back, he told Lian-xiang about this, and they discussed how to handle matters; but then Lian-xiang grew depressed for a long time and finally wanted to take her leave of him. Sang grew quite alarmed and wept. Then Lian-xiang said, "You are going to be married with all the

proper ceremonies, and if I go along with you, I'll lose all respect." Sang planned with Lian-xiang to first take her back to her own home, and then to go get Yan-er and bring her back as his bride. Lian-xiang agreed. Sang then explained the situation to Mrs. Zhang, who, on hearing that he had a concubine, became furious and reproached him bitterly. But Yan-er did her best to explain matters, and Mrs. Zhang did as she asked. When the day came, Sang went to get his bride and bring her home. The furnishings of his house had been extremely messy and ill kept; but when he got back, there were woolen rugs laid down on the ground from the gate into the main hall, and thousands of lanterns in sparkling rows like brocade. Lian-xiang helped the new bride under the green wedding awning, and when the bridal veil was lifted, they were as happy to see one another as ever.

Lian-xiang joined them in the ritual exchange of winecups and questioned Yan-er in detail on the marvel of her recent spirit wandering. Yan-er then said, "That day, I was depressed and upset. I just felt that I was no longer human and that my body had become something unclean. After I left you, I was so distraught that I didn't go back to my grave but let myself drift along with the wind. Whenever I saw a living person, I felt envious of them. In the daytime I stayed among the plants and trees, and by night I let my feet drift along. Then I happened to come to the Zhang household and saw a young girl lying on a bed. I approached her and then came right up next to her, not knowing that I could come to life."

When Lian-xiang heard this, she remained quiet, as if something were on her mind. Several months later, Lian-xiang gave birth to a child. After the delivery she became gravely ill, and her condition steadily deteriorated. She clutched Yan-er's arm and said, "If I can burden you with my bastard, let my son be your son." Yan-er wept and reassured her. They called in a shaman doctor, but Lian-xiang immediately sent him away. As she lay on her deathbed, her breath grew ragged, while Sang and Yan-er were both weeping. Suddenly she opened her eyes and said, "Don't be like that. You find joy in life; I find joy in death. If destiny permits, ten years from now we may get to meet again." After uttering these words, she was gone. When they drew back the covers to gather her up, the corpse had changed into a fox. Sang couldn't bear to treat her as something unhuman and gave her a lavish funeral.

They named her son Kit, and Yan-er treated him if he were her own issue. Every year at the Qing-ming Festival she would take Kit in her arms and go weep at Lian-xiang's tomb. After several years Sang won a provincial degree from his native region, and the household gradually became more affluent. Yan-er had unfortunately not had a child of her own, and while Kit was very clever, he was frail and sickly. Yan-er always wanted Sang to take a concubine. One day a servant announced, "There's an old lady outside the gate with a girl she wants to sell." Yan-er called out to have them brought in. When she saw her, she said amazed, "Lian-xiang has reappeared!" When Sang looked at her and saw that she did indeed resemble Lian-xiang, he too was shocked. They asked how old she was, and woman answered that she

was fourteen. "How much do you want for her?" And the old woman said, "This little piece of flesh is all I have. It's enough for me that I find a place, that I am able to get enough eat and that in the future my old bones not just be thrown in some ditch."

Sang paid her well and let her stay. Yan-er took the girl by the hand and took her into a room where they could be private; then she pinched the girl's chin and said with a laugh, "Do you recognize me?" The girl replied that she did not, and Yan-er questioned her about her background. The girl said, "My name is Wei, and my father was a bean-paste merchant in Xu-cheng. He's been dead three years." When Yan-er thought about it and counted, Lian-xiang had been dead for exactly fourteen years. She looked the girl over carefully again, and all her features and the way she moved bore an uncanny resemblance. Then she patted the girl on the top of the head, shouting, "Lian-xiang! Lian-xiang! Don't fool us in your promise to see us again in ten years!"

All of a sudden the young girl seemed as if waking from a dream and said, "Huh?" Then she looked Yan-er over carefully. Sang laughed and said, "It's like that line of verse:

As if they were old acquaintances,
the swallows come back again."

Tears streaming down her face, the girl said, "It's true! I heard my mother say that when I was born, I could already speak. They thought it was unlucky, so they gave me dog's blood to drink in order to forget my previous existence. Today it's like just waking up from a dream. Aren't you my friend Li, who was ashamed to be a ghost?" Then they all talked about their earlier lives together, with grief and joy mingling.

One day on the festival for visiting the graves, Yan-er said, "This is the day that Sang and I go to weep at your tomb every year." Then the girl joined them on the visit to the tomb; the wild grasses were growing everywhere, while the trees planted by the tomb had already reached a double handspan in girth. The girl too sighed, and Yan-er said to Sang, "Lian-xiang and I have been close to one another in two lifetimes now, and we can't bear to be apart. Our bones should be buried in the same grave." Sang did as she asked; he opened Li's tomb to get her remains, then took them back to bury with Lian-xiang's. Friends and relatives heard about this marvel and stood by the graveside in formal attire. Unexpectedly there were hundreds gathered there.

In 1670, I visited Yi-zhou during my travels south; unable to go on because of a storm, I stopped at an inn there. A certain Liu Zi-jing was there, a relative of Sang's, and he showed me a work entitled "Mr. Sang's Story" by Wang Zizhang, a member of his set. This was a long work of more than ten thousand characters. I finished reading it, and the above is an abbreviated version.

Here follows the judgment of the *Chronicle of Wonders*: A dead person sought to live, and a living person sought to die. Is not a human body the hardest thing to attain in this world? Yet it seems to happen that those

who have such a human body always use it in such a way that they come to shamefulness that makes them in life inferior to the fox, and in simply vanishing away their death is inferior to the ghost.

Xiao-cui

Wang, the Grand Chamberlain of Ceremonials, was a native of Yue. When he was still a boy, he was napping, when all of a sudden the sky grew dark and there was a mighty clap of thunder. An animal larger than a cat came and hid under his body, squirming and refusing to go. After a while the sky cleared up, and the animal immediately went straight out. When Wang looked closely and saw that it was not a cat, he grew frightened and called to his big brother in the other room. His brother heard him and said cheerfully, "Well, brother, you're going to reach a very exalted position—this was a fox that came to you to escape being destroyed by thunder and lightning."

Afterward the young man did indeed pass the metropolitan examination at a young age, and he rose from the post of county magistrate to become a Censor. He had one son whose name was Yuan-feng, a simpleton who at the age of sixteen didn't know the difference between male and female. As a result, no one of his own class was willing to marry their daughters to him. Wang was worried about him.

It happened that a woman brought a girl to his gate and requested that she be made Yuan-feng's wife. When Wang looked the girl over, she smiled in the most fetching manner—she was a beauty of the highest order. Delighted, he asked the name, and the woman said, "Our family is named Yu, and my daughter is Xiao-cui. She's sixteen." He then discussed the question of price with her, and she said, "With me she has eaten rough fare and has never been able to eat her fill. Now in a single day she will find herself living in spacious apartments, waited on by servants, and having all the meat and fine rice she can eat. If she is content, then my own wishes are satisfied. I'm not going to haggle over a price for her as if I were selling vegetables!"

Wang's wife was very pleased and rewarded the woman generously. Then the woman bade her daughter bow to Wang and his wife and instructed her: "These are to be your parents. You should serve them conscientiously. I'm very busy and am going away for a while. I'll be back in a few days." Wang ordered his servant to hitch up the carriage to see her home, but the woman said, "I don't live far from here, and I don't want to be a bother." Then she went out the gate. Xiao-cui didn't seem to miss her at all, but at once went to the dressing table and began to play around with various ways of making herself up. Wang's wife doted on her.

After several days, the mother did not return. They asked Xiao-cui where she lived, but she seemed befuddled and couldn't tell them the way. Consequently they set up separate apartments, and had her formally married to Yuan-feng. When the relatives heard that the Wangs had picked up a poor girl as Yuan-feng's bride, they all made fun of them; but when they saw the girl, everyone was amazed, and the gossip quieted down.

Xiao-cui was also very clever and could see what pleased and angered her in-laws. For their part, Wang and his wife were fond of the girl far beyond an ordinary affection, and they were apprehensive lest she dislike their son for his simple-mindedness. But Xiao-cui was very good-natured, and didn't despise him for it at all. Instead she enjoyed having a good time; she sewed a piece of cloth into a round ball and then kicked it about for fun. Wearing leather shoes, she could kick it twenty or thirty paces, then inveigle Yuan-feng to run after it and pick it up for her. Yuan-feng and the maids were always going one after another, running with sweat.

One day Wang Senior happened to be passing by. With a *thunk* the ball came flying and hit him square in the face. Xiao-cui and the maids all made themselves scarce, but Yuan-feng continued to leap up and down as he ran to get it. Wang Senior was angry and threw a rock at him, whereupon the boy collapsed to the ground, crying. Wang Senior informed his wife about this, and she went to reprimand the girl. Xiao-cui lowered her head with a faint smile, while digging her hands into the bed. Once Mrs. Wang had left, she went back to her old pranks. Using powder and paint, she made up Yuan-feng's face to look like a ghost. When Mrs. Wang saw this, she grew furious and shouted insults at the girl. Xiao-cui just leaned against a table and fiddled with her sash, not frightened but also not saying anything. Mrs. Wang couldn't stand it any more and took a cane to her son. When Yuan-feng started yelling, the girl's expression changed and she bent her knees to beg Mrs. Wang to show mercy. Mrs. Wang's rage abruptly left her; she let go of the cane and left.

Smiling, Xiao-cui then pulled Yuan-feng into a room, where she brushed the dust off his clothes, wiped the tears from his eyes, rubbed the welts where he had been beaten, and fed him dates and chestnuts. Yuan-feng stopped crying and cheered up. Xiao-cui then shut the gate of the courtyard and again dressed Yuan-feng up, this time as the Overlord Xiang Yu and then as the Khan of the desert.¹ She for her own part put on fine clothes, tied her waist tight, and did the swaying dance of Yu in the commander's tent.² Then she would stick the tail feather of a pheasant in her piled hair, and strum the mandolin in a continuous flood of notes.³ They did this every day, laughing and making an uproar in the room. Since Wang Senior thought his son was a simpleton, he couldn't bring himself to scold his son's wife too harshly. When he heard a bit of what was going on, he seemed to dismiss the matter.

On the same street about a dozen doors down there was another Mr. Wang, a Supervisory Censor, and the two Wangs couldn't stand one another.

¹Here and with the ghost make-up, Xiao-cui is probably imitating conventional theatrical costume.

²This refers to the famous scene in the *Historical Records* and in later theater in which Xiang Yu, the great competitor of Liu Bang for the empire after the fall of the Qin, finds himself at last surrounded by Han troops and holds a small feast in which he laments his fate and bids farewell to his lady Yu.

³Here Yuan-feng is playing the Khan to whom the Han court lady Wang Zhao-jun was married against her will. Xiao-cui plays Wang Zhao-jun, lamenting her fate on the mandolin.

The triennial review of officials for promotion had just taken place, and Censor Wang resented that our Mr. Wang had been given charge of the seal of the Investigator for the He-nan Circuit. Censor Wang was looking for a way to harm him. Wang Senior knew about his machinations and was very worried, having no way to protect himself. One evening when he retired early, Xiao-cui put on a cap and sash and dressed herself up as the Chief Minister. She cut threads of white silk to make herself a full beard and also dressed up two of the serving girls in blue gowns to act as her bodyguards. Then she secretly mounted herself astride one of the horses in the stable and went out, saying in play, "I am going to pay a call on Mr. Wang."

She galloped to the gate of Supervisory Censor Wang and struck her attendants with her riding whip, declaring loudly, "I was going to pay a call on *Investigator* Wang! Why should I bother to pay a call on *Supervisory Censor* Wang?" Then she turned the horse around and went back home. But when she had almost reached the gate, the gatekeeper mistakenly took her for the real thing and rushed in to inform Wang Senior. Wang Senior hurriedly got up to go out to welcome him. When he realized that this was a prank of his son's wife, he was furious and said to Mrs. Wang, "Others have chastised me for my shortcomings, but now this clown character from the women of my own household pays me a visit to announce them publicly. My downfall must not be far off!" Mrs. Wang grew angry, rushed into Xiao-cui's room, and yelled at her. But Xiao-cui only smiled foolishly and didn't offer a word in her defense. Mrs. Wang would have whipped her, but she couldn't bring herself to; she would have put her out of the house, but then she would have had no home. Both husband and wife were so upset and annoyed that they couldn't go to sleep all night long.

The Chief Minister at the time was a flamboyant figure; his behavior, his attire, and his entourage were little different from Xiao-cui's costume; and Supervisory Censor Wang also made the mistake of taking her for the real thing. He went to keep watch at Wang Senior's gate that night, and when the guest had not left by midnight, he suspected that the Chief Minister and Wang Senior were hatching some secret plot. The next day when he saw Wang Senior at dawn court, he asked him, "Did His Excellency go to your house last night?" Suspecting that the Supervisory Censor was making fun of him, Wang Senior hemmed and hawed in embarrassment and didn't really answer him. At this, Censor Wang's suspicions were confirmed even more strongly; he laid his plots against Wang Senior to rest and from that point on tried to get into Wang Senior's good graces. Wang Senior figured out what had been going through Censor Wang's mind and was privately delighted; yet he secretly directed his wife to urge Xiao-cui to mend her ways. Xiao-cui answered her with a smile.

After another year the Chief Minister was dismissed from office, and it happened that a private letter sent to Wang Senior was mistakenly delivered to Supervisory Censor Wang. Censor Wang was delighted and first used good friends of Wang Senior to go borrow ten thousand cash. Wang Senior refused. Then the Censor himself went to Wang Senior's house. Wang Se-

nior was looking for his official cap and gown but could find neither; the Censor waited for him for a long time and then became angry at Wang Senior's cavalier treatment of him and was about to leave in a huff. Suddenly he saw Yuan-feng dressed in imperial dragon robes and a crown of jade; there was a young woman pushing him out from behind the door. The Censor was quite shocked, but then he smiled and was nice to the lad. Making him take off the imperial robes and crown, the Censor took them and left.

When Wang Senior came out hurriedly, his visitor was already long gone. When he heard what had happened, his face turned white, and weeping loudly, he said, "This young woman is our nemesis. On this very day our entire family and all our relations will be executed." And together with Mrs. Wang he took a stick and went off to find Xiao-cui. Xiao-cui already knew this and closed her door, bearing their curses and insults. Wang Senior was furious and took an ax to her door. From within, Xiao-cui smiled and told him, "Don't work yourself up into such a rage, sir. As long as I am here, I will bear the rack and tongs and headman's ax myself and I won't let any harm come to you, my in-laws. If you go on like this, do you want to kill me to shut me up?" And then Wang Senior stopped.

When Censor Wang got home, he wrote out a denunciation to the throne indicting Wang Senior for *lèse-majesté*, using the imperial robes and crown for evidence. His Majesty was surprised and examined the evidence: the "crown" was plaited from sorghum stalks, while the "robes" were a tattered piece of yellow bundling cloth. The Emperor was furious at such false charges. He also had Yuan-feng summoned to his presence; and when he saw from his manner that Yuan-feng was obviously simple-minded, he said with a laugh, "So this would be our Son of Heaven." Then he had Censor Wang sent down to the Judiciary for trial. Censor Wang had also charged that there was a witch girl in Wang Senior's house. The judiciary thoroughly questioned the family servants, and they all said that it was just a simple-minded boy and his touched wife who spent their days playing games. The neighbors also offered nothing to contradict this. The case was then closed and ex-Censor Wang was sent off to serve in the army in Yun-nan.

From this point on, Wang Senior considered Xiao-cui something extraordinary. And since her mother had not returned in such a long time, he considered that she might not be a human being. He sent his wife to question her, but Xiao-cui just laughed and said nothing. When she was pressed even harder, she covered her mouth and said, "Don't you realize that I'm the daughter of the Jade Emperor in Heaven?"

Soon afterward Wang was promoted to one of the senior positions in the capital. He was over fifty and always felt troubled at not having any grandchildren. Xiao-cui had lived with them three years, and every night she slept apart from Yuan-feng, so it seemed that they had never had intimate relations. Mrs. Wang moved the bed and directed Yuan-feng to sleep together with his wife. After several days, Yuan-feng came and told his mother, "Take my bed away—I absolutely won't come back. Every night Xiao-cui puts her feet and thighs on my belly, and I can hardly breathe. She's also got

the habit of poking around a person's thighs." Every one of the maids was smirking. Mrs. Wang shouted at them, whacked them, and made them leave.

One day Xiao-cui was bathing in her chamber. Yuan-feng saw her and wanted to join her. Xiao-cui laughed and stopped him, ordering him to wait a while. When she got out, she poured more scalding hot water into the tub, took off his robe and pants, and then with a maid helped him to get in. Yuan-feng felt like he was suffocating from the steam and shouted that he wanted to get out. Xiao-cui wouldn't listen to him and covered him over with a blanket. After a while he ceased to make any more sounds, and when they opened it to look, he had expired. Xiao-cui smiled contentedly and was not alarmed. She dragged him out and lay him on the bed. She wiped his body until it was dry and clean, and then put a double quilt over him. Mrs. Wang had heard about this and came into the room weeping: "You crazy girl! Why did you kill my son?"

Xiao-cui beamed her most charming smile and said, "With a son as simple-minded as this, you're better off with none at all." Mrs. Wang grew even more enraged and charged Xiao-cui with her head lowered. All the maids tried to pull her back and calm her down. Amid all this commotion, one maid declared, "Yuan-feng just groaned!" When Mrs. Wang stopped weeping and felt him, she found he was breathing, and a great sweat was pouring from his body, soaking the mat and bedding. After a little while longer the sweat stopped, and he suddenly opened his eyes and looked all around, scrutinizing each member of the household as if he didn't recognize them. Then he said, "When I think back on the past, it all seems like a dream—why is that?" Since his speech no longer seemed simple-minded, Mrs. Wang was amazed. She took him by the hand to go consult with his father, and on being questioned repeatedly, he was in fact no longer simple-minded. They were delighted as if they had just obtained a rare treasure.

When evening came, they moved his bed back to where it had been, and again made it up with covers and a blanket to watch what he would do. When Yuan-feng entered the room, he sent all the maidservants away. When they looked in the next morning, the bed had not been slept in. From that point on there was no more simple-mindedness on his part or craziness on her part; all was rosy between husband and wife, and the two were inseparable.

After more than a year, Wang Senior was impeached by the faction of Censor Wang and dismissed from office for a minor offense. The family had a jade vase long ago presented to them by the Vice-Censor of Guang-xi, its value a thousand pieces of cash. They had taken it out to offer as a bribe to a powerful official. Xiao-cui liked it and was holding it when it slipped from her hands and shattered. She was so ashamed that she threw herself down. Wang Senior and his wife, being on edge because of his dismissal from office, flew into a rage when they heard about it. In turn they yelled at her and cursed her. Then Xiao-cui roused herself and went out, saying to Yuan-feng, "During the time I've been in your family, the things I've protected and pre-

served have not been limited to just a single vase, so why am I not left with some respect! I'll tell you the truth: I am not a human being. When my mother was going to be struck by lightning, she was very generously protected by your father. Moreover, you and I have a predestined span of five years together, so she brought me to repay that kindness he once did and to fulfill an abiding wish. I have been spat upon, I have borne curses, and more hairs have been pulled from my head than I can count. The reason I didn't go off immediately was because our five years together were not up. But now, how can I stay here one moment longer!" With that she went off in a temper, and by the time he went after her, she was long gone.

Wang Senior was despondent and felt lost, but his regrets did no good. When Yuan-feng entered her chamber and cast eyes on the powders and slippers she had left behind, he broke into tears and wanted to die. He was unwilling to eat or sleep and every day grew more wasted and emaciated. Wang Senior was quite worried and quickly set about to arrange a second marriage to console him, but Yuan-feng was not pleased with the idea. He only sought out a skilled painter to portray Xiao-cui's likeness, and day and night for almost two years he would pour libations and pray before it.

It happened once that for one reason or another he was coming back from another village as the bright moon was already casting its glow. Outside the village there was a garden of a gentry household, and as Yuan-feng rode his horse past outside the wall, he heard someone laughing and talking. He pulled up on the reins and had his groom hold the bridle. When he stood on the saddle and looked over, there were two girls playing on the other side. Clouds were passing over the moon and it was so dusky he couldn't make them out clearly. He heard one who was wearing azure clothes say, "You should be kicked out of here!" Then one wearing red clothes said, "You're in my garden. Who's going to get kicked out?" Then the one in azure replied, "You're shameless. You couldn't be a wife and got yourself driven away, and you still presume to claim this as your property?" The one wearing red said, "Well, it's better than being an old maid without ever having been betrothed."

When Yuan-feng listened to the sound of her voice, it sounded very much like Xiao-cui's, and he quickly called to her. The one in azure went off, saying, "I'm not going to quarrel with you any more. Your young man has come." Then the one in red came over, and it was indeed Xiao-cui. He was beside himself with delight. She had him climb over the wall and helped him down, saying, "I haven't seen you for years. You're all skin and bones!" Yuan-feng took hold of her hands and wept, telling her everything and how much he had missed her. Xiao-cui said, "I knew it, but I couldn't bring myself to face your family again. Now as I was playing with my big sister in the garden, we've met again unexpectedly—this shows that what is predestined can't be avoided."

He asked her to come home with him, but she refused. Then he asked to stay in her garden, and to this she agreed. Yuan-feng sent a servant to hurry off and tell his mother. His mother got up in surprise and went off in a sedan

chair. The lock was opened, and she came into the pavilion in the garden. Xiao-cui immediately rushed over to welcome her politely. Mrs. Wang clutched her arm and shed tears, earnestly declaring her previous faults, and virtually overwhelmed, she said, "If you are willing to overlook those painful memories, come home with me and comfort me in my old age." But Xiao-cui adamantly refused. Mrs. Wang was then concerned that this pavilion out in the wilds was too solitary and dreary, and she made plans to have many people work there. But Xiao-cui said, "We don't want to have anyone else around but the two serving girls who formerly were with us; beyond that, I would can't entirely do without someone to take care of us; beyond that, I would have only an old servant to act as the gatekeeper. We don't need any others at all." Mrs. Wang agreed to everything she said. She left Yuan-feng to convalesce in the garden, providing him only his food and other daily needs. Xiao-cui urged Yuan-feng to marry again, but he wouldn't go along with her.

After more than a year, Xiao-cui's features and her voice gradually became different from what they had been previously. When Yuan-feng took out her portrait and compared it with her present state, they were as far apart as two different people. He thought this very strange. Xiao-cui said, "When you look at me today, how can my beauty compare to what it used to be?" Yuan-feng said, "You're beautiful as you are now, but not quite as much so as you used to be." Xiao-cui said, "You mean, I've gotten old!" Yuan-feng replied, "How could you get old so quickly, only in your early twenties?" Xiao-cui laughed and burned the portrait, and when Yuan-feng tried to rescue it, it was already ashes. One day she said to Yuan-feng, "Before, when I lived at your house, your father said that I would die without bearing any children. Your parents are old, and I truly cannot bear a child; I'm afraid that this will ruin the succession of your family line. Please marry someone and set her up in your home. She could wait on your parents all the time and you could go back and forth between here and there—that would work out well in every way."

Yuan-feng agreed and sent the bride-price to the home of the Han-lin Compiler Zhong. When the blessed day drew near, Xiao-cui prepared clothes and slippers for the new bride and had them sent to her mother's home. And when the bride entered Wang's gate her speech, her appearance, and her movements were not the slightest bit different from those of Xiao-cui. Yuan-feng thought this extremely strange. When he went to the pavilion in her garden, he didn't know where Xiao-cui was. He asked a servant girl, and she took out a red cloth kerchief, saying, "Madam has gone to her mother's home for a time, and she left this for you." He unrolled the kerchief, and a ring was knotted to it, and in his heart he knew that she was not coming back. Then he took the serving girls and went home with them.

Even though he never forgot Xiao-cui for a moment, Yuan-feng was fortunate that every time he looked at his new bride, it was like seeing his old love. Then he realized that Xiao-cui had foreseen his marriage to Miss Zhong and had first changed her own appearance in order to comfort him when he would miss her in days to come.

Here follows the judgment of the Chronicler of Wonders: A fox still thought to repay a kindness done, even one done through unconscious virtue. Were they not contemptible who, having received the blessing of a second lease on life, yet were still aghast at a broken pot? As the moon wanes and is full again, so in the mortal world division came to fullness and reunion. And then, at her ease she departed. Now we can see that the loves of immortals are deeper still than those in the common world.

Blue Maid

Huo Huan, also known as Huo Kuang-jiu, was a native of Jin. His father, a county sheriff, had died before his time, leaving Huo Huan at a very tender age. Huo Huan was an exceptionally clever boy, and at the age of eleven he was enrolled among students for a civil service position as a "gifted lad."⁴ But his mother, who doted on him to excess, forbade him to leave the family compound, and by the age of thirteen he still couldn't tell all his uncles and cousins apart.

In the same ward of the city there was a review judge, a Mr. Wu, who became a devotee of the Way and went off into the mountains, never to return. He had a daughter, Blue Maid, fourteen years of age and beautiful beyond the common measure. When younger, she had surreptitiously read her father's books and come to idolize the Maiden Goddess He. When her father disappeared, she made up her mind not to marry, and her mother could do nothing about it.

One day Huo Huan caught a glimpse of her outside the gate. Although the boy knew nothing about such things, he felt an intense love for her, but he couldn't explain it in words. He straightway told his mother to send someone to arrange an engagement. His mother knew that it would not be possible and raised objections. Huo Huan grew depressed and dissatisfied; and his mother, fearing to thwart her son's will, engaged a go-between to convey the proposal to the Wu family. As expected, they did not agree. Huo Huan was constantly brooding and trying to devise schemes, but he could see no way.

It happened once that a Daoist came to their gate, carrying in his hand a small hand-spade about a foot in length. Huo Huan took it to look it over and asked, "What's it used for?" The Daoist answered, "It's a tool for digging out herbs. Although it's small, it can penetrate hard stone." Huo Huan didn't really believe him, so the Daoist immediately cut into the stone of the garden wall, which, at every motion of his hand, fell away as if it were decomposed. Huo Huan was amazed; he kept on examining it and didn't put it down. The Daoist then laughed and said, "Since you like it so much, let me give it to you as a gift." Huo Huan was delighted and tried to give him money for it, but the Daoist refused to accept it and left.

When Huo Huan took it back and tried it on a range of rock and brick,

there was hardly any resistance. All of a sudden it came to his mind that if he made a hole in the wall, he could see that beautiful girl, not realizing that it was wrongful behavior. After the bell of the watch had rung, he cut his way right through the wall and went directly to the Wu mansion. There, after digging holes through several more layers of walls, he reached the inner courtyard. He saw a lamp fire still burning in a small chamber; and when he hid himself and spied in, it was Blue Maid taking off her evening attire. In a little while, the candle went out and all was silent. When he made a hole in the next wall and went inside, the girl was already sound asleep. Then he took off his shoes and quietly got on her bed. He was afraid that if she woke, startled, he would be yelled at and forced to leave; so he nestled down by the side of her embroidered gown, smelling her sweet breath, and his heart's desire was secretly satisfied. After his endeavors through half the night, he was utterly exhausted; and closing his eyes just a little, he went off to sleep without realizing it.

The girl woke up and heard the sound of breathing. Then she opened her eyes and saw light coming in through the hole. Terrified, she hurriedly got up and in the darkness unbolted the door and got out of the room. Then she knocked on the windows and called to the women of the household, who lit lanterns, grabbed canes, and went to her room. When they got there they saw a young adolescent, dressed as a student, sleeping obliviously on her embroidered bed. Examining him carefully, they recognized him as young Huo. Only after they prodded him did he wake up, and then he got up at once, his eyes sparkling like shooting stars. He didn't even seem to be very frightened, just too embarrassed to say a word. Since everyone was treating him like a burglar, he was afraid they were going to yell at him.

At that point, Huo began to cry and said, "I'm not a burglar—it was really only because I was in love with Blue Maid and wanted to be close to her sweetness." But everyone then doubted that a child could have dug holes in several walls. At this, Huo Huan took out his spade and told them about its remarkable powers. They each put it to the test and were utterly astounded, exclaiming that it was a gift from the gods. They were all going to tell Mrs. Wu, but Blue Maid hung her head in brooding and seemed to think this would not be a good thing to do. The other women divined what was on her mind, so they said, "This boy is from an eminent and respectable household, and he hasn't violated your honor in the least. The best thing to do would be to let him loose and make him leave, then to have him once again seek a betrothal. In the morning we'll make up an excuse to your mother about a burglar. How would that be?" Blue Maid didn't answer, and the women then hurried Huo Huan to get going. Huo Huan wanted his spade back, and they all laughed and said, "You foolish boy! You still can't forget this tool of ruin!"

Huo Huan spied a phoenix hairpin beside the pillow and furtively put it in his sleeve, but a maid saw him do it and instantly told everybody. Blue Maid said nothing, nor did she get angry. One old woman slapped him on the neck and said, "Don't think he's so innocent—he's extremely tricky";

⁴"Gifted lad" was the term used for those who passed the preliminary qualifying examination at a young age.

and she dragged him along to the hole he had dug, from which he then made his way out.

When Huo Huan got home, he didn't dare tell his mother the truth. He simply urged her to send the matchmaker to the Wus again. But Huo Huan's mother couldn't bear an open rejection and instructed all the matchmakers to arrange a marriage with someone else as quickly as possible. Blue Maid found out about this and her heart was in a panic. She secretly conveyed her innermost feelings to her mother. The mother was pleased and let the matchmaker know. It happened, however, that a young servant girl let out the secret of what had gone on previously, and Mrs. Wu felt so humiliated that she couldn't contain her rage. When the matchmaker arrived, she met an even greater outburst of anger, as Mrs. Wu struck the ground with her cane and railed against Huo Huan and his mother as well. The matchmaker was frightened and snuck back, giving Mrs. Huo a full account of how things stood. Then Huo Huan's mother also flew into a rage, saying, "I was totally ignorant of what that wicked boy did. Why should I bear the brunt of such rudeness! Why didn't they kill that wild boy and that wanton girl both while they were twining their legs together!"

From that point on, whenever she met her relations she would immediately tell the whole story. When Blue Maid heard about this, she could have died from shame. And Mrs. Wu too greatly regretted the whole thing, but there was nothing she could do to stop Mrs. Huo from talking. Blue Maid secretly sent someone to tactfully approach Huo Huan's mother, swearing to her that she would not marry anyone else. Her words were very moving; and Mrs. Huo, touched by them, spoke of it no further. And negotiations to arrange another marriage for Huo Huan were subsequently halted.

It happened that a Mr. Ou-yang of Shensi was magistrate of the town, and when he saw Huo Huan's writing, he developed a high opinion of his capacities. Sometimes he had Huo summoned to the county office, where he treated him with the greatest kindness and generosity. One day he asked Huo Huan, "Are you married?" To which Huo Huan replied that he was not yet. When Ou-yang questioned him in some detail, Huo Huan responded, "Long ago I became pledged to the young daughter of the former review judge Mr. Wu, but later, because of a minor feud, the matter has been left hanging." Ou-yang asked him, "Do you still want to go through with it or not?" At this Huo Huan grew embarrassed and said nothing. Ou-yang laughed and said, "I'll get it done for you." At once he sent the sheriff and the local schoolteacher with the proper bride gifts to the Wus. Mrs. Wu was delighted, and the betrothal was settled.

When the year of engagement passed, Huo Huan brought Blue Maid home as his bride. As soon as Blue Maid entered the gate, she threw the spade on the ground, saying, "This is a thing for burglars. Get rid of it." But Huo Huan laughed. "Don't snub our go-between!" Then he hung it as a treasure from his sash, and it never left his person. Blue Maid was of a gentle, kindly, yet reticent disposition. Every day she would pay her respects to her mother-in-law three times, but for the remainder of the day she would just close her

door and sit quietly, not concerning herself very much with household duties. Yet if Huo's mother were gone elsewhere to offer condolences or congratulations, the management of household affairs was always in good order.

After more than a year, she gave birth to a son, Meng-xian. She left everything to the charge of a wet nurse and seemed not to be particularly concerned for the child. After another five years, she abruptly said to Huo Huan, "By now the course of our love has lasted eight years. Our time left together is short and the separation will be long. Nothing can be done about it!" Huo Huan was startled and asked her to explain, but she kept silent, and in full attire went to pay her respects to her mother-in-law, then returned to her own room. When he went after Blue Maid to question her, she was lying on her bed, face up, and not breathing. Both mother and son mourned for her deeply. They purchased a fine coffin for her and had her buried. Huo's mother was already frail and aging. Whenever she took the child in her arms, she would think of his mother, and it was as if her heart would break. After this she grew sick and became so exhausted that she could not get up. She felt a revulsion against taking any nourishment. The only thing she wanted was a certain fish dish that could not be obtained anywhere close by, but could be purchased only at a place a hundred miles away.

At the time the hired couriers had all been sent on various errands; and Huo, who was genuinely devoted to his mother, was in a hurry and couldn't wait. Taking money for his expenses, he set off by himself, and didn't stop traveling day and night. But then he found himself in the mountains, with the sunlight already sinking to darkness; he was hobbling on both feet and couldn't go an inch further. An old man came up behind him and said, "You must have gotten blisters on your feet." Huo Huan answered that he had. Then the old man led him over to sit by the side of the road and struck some flint to make a fire. Using some herbs he had in a paper packet, he steamed both of Huo Huan's feet. When Huo tried to walk again, not only had the pain stopped but he also felt stronger and more energetic. Deeply touched, Huo Huan expressed his gratitude, and the old man asked, "Why are you in such a hurry?" Huo explained that his mother was sick, and from there proceeded to tell the events that led up to it. The old man then asked, "Why don't you marry someone else?" Huo Huan answered that he had not found a good-looking woman. The old man then pointed to a mountain village in the distance and said, "There's a good-looking woman there. If only you could go off with me there, I would arrange something for you." But Huo declined on the grounds that his mother was sick and required a certain fish. At this the old man folded his hands and said that if he should come to the village someday, he should just ask for Old Wang. Then he went his way. When Huo got home, he cooked the fish and offered it to his mother. Huo's mother improved somewhat, and in several days she quickly got better.

Huo Huan then had a servant and horse readied to go look for the old man. When he reached the spot he had been before, he could no longer tell

where the village was. He wandered around for some time as the evening glow of the sun gradually sank away. The hills and valleys were very confusing; unable to get a clear view to orient himself, Huo climbed a hilltop with his servant to look for a village. The mountain path was rough and steep, too difficult to continue to ride, so he went up on foot, engulfed in the darkening colors of mist. There he paced about, looking in all directions, but there was still no sign of a village. He started down the mountain but couldn't find the path back. Anxiety seemed to burn in his heart like a fire. As he sought some refuge in the wilderness, night's blackness descended the sheer cliff. Fortunately, several feet below him there was a swathe of wild moss; and when he lowered himself and lay on it, its width was just enough for his body. When he looked down, all was blackness and he couldn't see the bottom. Huo was terrified and didn't dare make the least movement. He was also fortunate that there were small trees growing all along the side of the slope that held his body back like a railing.

After a while he noticed that near his feet there was a small cave opening. Huo felt overjoyed, and keeping his back against the rock, he wriggled into it. There he felt safer and hoped to wait until daybreak to call for help. Shortly thereafter, there was a beam of light like a star in the deeper part of the cave. He started to go toward it, and after a couple of miles he suddenly caught sight of a cottage with a porch; there were no lamps or candles, yet the light there was bright as day. A beautiful woman came out from a room; he looked at her carefully, and it was Blue Maid. When she saw Huo, she was startled. "How could you get in here?" Without taking the time to explain, Huo took her hands and sobbed pitifully. Blue Maid tried to comfort him. When she asked about his mother and their son, Huo gave an account of all their troubles, and Blue Maid also grew melancholy. Then Huo said, "You've been dead for more than a year now—this must be the underworld." Blue Maid replied, "No, this is a precinct of the immortals. I didn't die back then, and what you buried was only a bamboo cane. Since you have come here, you have the destiny to become an immortal."

Thereupon she took him in to pay his respects to her father, a man with a long beard seated at the head of the hall. Huo hastened to bow to him, and Blue Maid said, "Mr. Huo has come." The old man rose in surprise, took his hand, and politely asked after him. Then he said, "It's a wonderful thing that you've come here—it's your fate to stay here." But Huo politely declined, saying that he could not stay long because of his mother. The old man said, "I understand that, but there won't be any harm if you linger on here a few days." Then they fed him fine foods and wine, and in the west hall they had a serving girl set up a bed, which she covered with brocade bedding.

As Huo was withdrawing for the night, he tried to get Blue Maid to share the bed with him. She refused him, saying, "This is not the sort of place to permit such improper intimacies." But Huo clutched her arm and wouldn't let her go. Outside the window could be heard the derisive laughter of the serving girl, and Blue Maid became even more embarrassed. As they were

struggling, the old man came in and screamed at Huo, "Be gone at once! Your commonness defiles my cave!" Huo had always been obstinate, and unable to endure the embarrassment, he colored and said, "The feelings that occur between man and a woman can't be helped—why must you spy on me? I don't mind getting out of here right now; just have your daughter go along with me."

The old man didn't object and ordered Blue Maid to go with him, opening the back door to see them off. Once he had tricked Huo into going out the gate, the father shut the door and disappeared. When Huo looked around, there wasn't the slightest seam or crack in the sheer cliff that loomed before him. He was utterly alone and had no place to go. He looked up into the sky where the sinking moon was hanging on high and the stars had already grown sparse.

He remained there in despair for quite some time, and then his grief turned to resentment. He faced the cliff and shouted, but there was no reply. His fury mounted; he took the spade from his waist and set to digging his way in through the rock, hacking away and cursing. In the twinkling of an eye he had burrowed in three or four feet, and he heard the muffled sound of someone saying, "Damn him!" Huo then put all his strength into it and dug even more quickly. Suddenly the end of his cave opened wide into a double door. He pushed Blue Maid out through the tunnel, saying, "Let's go, let's go!" At once the wall closed up again behind them. Then she said angrily, "Since you loved me as your wife, how can you treat my father like this? What kind of old Daoist was it gave you that disastrous tool that can aggravate and persecute a person to death!"

Having found Blue Maid, Huo's mood was somewhat calmer. He didn't argue any more but simply worried about the danger of the road and how hard it would be to get back. Blue Maid broke off two branches and had each of them put the branches between their legs. At once these transformed into horses and in no time they arrived at his house. By that point, Huo had been missing for seven days.

Huo had previously become separated from his servant. The servant looked for Huo but couldn't find him, then went back and informed Huo's mother. His mother sent people to search everywhere in the mountain valleys for him, but no trace was found. Huo's mother had been beside herself with worry, and when she heard that her son had returned, she went out overjoyed to welcome him back. When she looked up and saw Blue Maid, she almost collapsed from the shock. Huo told her the general story, and his mother became calmer and more cheerful. Because of the bizarre nature of what had happened to her, Blue Maid was worried about provoking general gossip and wanted to have the family move at once. Huo's mother agreed with her. They had an estate in another district, and after a fixed period they set off to go there, and no one knew anything about it.

They lived together there for eighteen years. Blue Maid had a daughter who married into the Li family of the same town. Afterward, Huo's mother passed away at a ripe old age. Blue Maid told Huo, "In the field of tall grasses

of my home there is a pheasant nesting on eight eggs. That's where she should be buried. You and our son Meng-xian should take the coffin there and see to the funeral service. Our son is already grown, and it is fitting that he should remain in the mourning hut by the grave. There's no need to have him return with you." Huo did as she said, and came back alone after the funeral. After more than a month, Meng-xian went to visit them, and his father and mother were both long gone. He asked an old servant about them, and she said, "They went to a funeral and never came back." He knew that a marvel had transpired, but all he could do was heave a great sigh.

Meng-xian's reputation as a writer was much bruited about, but he had difficulties in the examination and in forty days he did not pass. Later, as part of the local quota of candidates, he participated in the Shun-tian examination, where he met a young man in the same dormitory as himself. This young man was seventeen or eighteen, a splendid and nonchalant young man with a certain spiritual manner. Meng-xian was quite drawn to him. When he looked at his paper, Meng-xian saw that he was Huo Zhong-xian, on stipend from Shun-tian district.⁵ Shocked, he stared in disbelief and told his own name. Zhong-xian also thought it remarkable and asked where he was from and his relatives.

Meng-xian told him in detail, at which Zhong-xian was delighted and said, "When I set off for the capital, my father advised me that among the examinees if I met someone named Huo from Shansi, he was of my family, and that I should welcome the acquaintance. Now it's happened. But how is it that our names are so similar?" Meng-xian then questioned him about the names of his parents and grandparents, and when Zhong-xian finished, Meng-xian said in surprise, "But these my own father and mother!" Zhong-xian was still uncertain because of the disparity in age, but Meng-xian said, "My father and mother are both immortals—how can one judge their age by their appearance?" When he told the story of all that had transpired, Zhong-xian believed him.

After the examination, they didn't take time off to rest but made travel preparations and returned to Zhong-xian's home together. As soon as they reached the gate, one of the family servants came out to welcome them and told them that the night before their father and mother had disappeared. Both men were very surprised. Zhong-xian went in and asked his wife to tell him about it. His wife said, "Last night we were drinking wine together, and your mother said to me, 'You and your husband are still young and inexperienced. But tomorrow his elder brother will come, and I won't worry any more.' When I went into their rooms in the morning, they were de-

⁵It is common practice to vary the names of brothers and sisters in a set, distinguishing them by changing one character of a two-character given name. Often, as in this case, the variation indicates the degree of seniority. Meng-xian is thus the "Senior Immortal," and Zhong-xian is the "Middle-Brother Immortal." For someone named Huo Meng-xian, who thought he was an only son, to meet someone named Huo Zhong-xian might be startling because this would be the proper name to give to his younger brother.

serted." When the brothers heard this, they stamped their feet and were stricken with grief. Zhong-xian still wanted to go after them, but gave up when Meng-xian expressed the opinion that it would do no good. Zhong-xian had passed the district examination. But since the family tombs were located in Jin, he went back there with his brother. They still hoped that their father and mother were still in the mortal world somewhere and asked for information about them wherever they went. But no trace of them was ever found.

Here follows the judgment of the Chronicler of Wonders: In making a hole in the wall and going to sleep on her bed, he showed naïveté in thought; in digging through the cliff and abusing the old man, he showed rash wildness in action; the reason why the immortal brought the couple together was purely a desire to reward his devotion to his mother with a gift of eternal life. Nevertheless, having mingled with the mortal world and begotten children, why couldn't they have stayed to the end? What brought her to abandon her sons several times in thirty years? Strange indeed!