

The Laughing Ghost

By P'ou Song-lin

Siu Long-mountain was one of the most celebrated students of the district of Perfect-flowers. Having mastered the mysterious theories of the ancient Classics, he took a fancy in the researches of the Taoist magicians, whose temples may be found in the smallest villages of the Empire. He soon discovered that, for the greater number, they were impostors; and, being proud of his newly acquired science, he concluded that none of them possessed any occult power.

When he came to this somewhat hasty conclusion, he was seated alone in his library; the night was already advancing; a small oil lamp hardly illuminated his books on the table he was sitting at.

“Yes, there is no doubt; nothing exists outside the material appearances. There is nothing occult in the world, and nothing can come out of nothingness.”

As he was saying these words half aloud, he was startled by an unearthly laugh which seemed to come from behind his back. He turned quickly round; but nothing was to be seen.

His heart beating, he was listening intently; the laugh came from another part of the room.

Long-mountain was brave, but as people are brave who have only met the ordinary dangers of civilised life, such as barking dogs, insulting coolies, or angry dealers presenting a long-deferred bill. He tried in vain to believe it was only a joke imposed on him by some friend; nothing could prevail upon his growing terror.

Straining his eyes, he looked at the part of the room the laugh seemed to come from. At first he could not see anything, but by degrees he perceived a black shadow moving in a corner, then a strange form with a horse's head and a man's body, all covered with long black hair; the teeth were big and sharp as so many mountain-peaks. The eyes of this dreadful creature began shining so much that the whole room was illuminated. Then it began moving towards the man.

This was too much; the student screamed like a dying donkey, and, bursting the door open, he ran out into the courtyard.

From an open door in the western pavilion a ray of light crossed the darkness; four or five men were playing cards, drinking, and swearing. Long-mountain ran into their room, and, panting, explained his vision.

The men, being drunk, wanted to see the Thing; holding lanterns and lamps, they accompanied their visitor back to his studio. When they passed the doorway, Long-mountain screamed again; the Thing was still there. He would have run away had not the men, laughing and jesting, shown him what the Ghost in reality was—a long dress hung in a corner to a big hook, on which sat a black cat mewing desperately.

When the men closed the door and left him alone, the student was deeply ashamed of his terror; shaken by his emotion, he went to bed and tried to sleep. Sleep would not come; his nervousness seemed to increase. Starting at the smallest noise, he remained a long time wide awake; then he lost consciousness.

In the silence one only heard the cries of the night-birds and the buzzing of the autumn's insects; the lamp was out, but a brilliant moon began to pour its silver light through the window.

The door suddenly creaked; Long-mountain awoke and sat up on his bed; the door slowly opened, and the same Thing he had seen and heard entered the room and advanced towards the

bed, while the same unearthly laugh came from the long and unshapely head; the flaming eyes were fixed on the student.

When the Thing was near the bed, Long-mountain fell heavily and did not move any more.

The Ghost stopped, put his hand on the breast of the man, remained in that position a moment, then went quickly and silently out of the room.

A man was standing outside.

“What did he say?” asked he.

“Be quiet!” said the Ghost, taking off his horse’s head and discovering a man’s very serious face. “The joke was good. But we have done it too well. I think he is dead of terror; we had better be as silent as a tomb about all this. The magistrate would never believe in a joke; we would be held responsible for this death and pay a heavy penalty.”