

A Supernatural Wife

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain Mr. Chao, of Ch'ang-shan, lodged in a family of the name of T'ai. He was very badly off, and, falling sick, was brought almost to death's door. One day they moved him into the verandah, that it might be cooler for him; and, when he awoke from a nap, lo! a beautiful girl was standing by his side. "I am come to be your wife," said the girl, in answer to his question as to who she was; to which he replied that a poor fellow like himself did not look for such luck as that; adding that, being then on his death-bed, he would not have much occasion for the services of a wife. The girl said she could cure him; but he told her he very much doubted that; "And even," continued he, "should you have any good prescription, I have not the means of getting it made up." "I don't want medicine to cure you with," rejoined the girl, proceeding at once to rub his back and sides with her hand, which seemed to him like a ball of fire. He soon began to feel much better, and asked the young lady what her name was, in order, as he said, that he might remember her in his prayers. "I am a spirit," replied she; "and you, when alive under the Han dynasty as Ch'u Sui-liang, were a benefactor of my family. Your kindness being engraven on my heart, I have at length succeeded in my search for you, and am able in some measure to requite you." Chao was dreadfully ashamed of his poverty-stricken state, and afraid that his dirty room would spoil the young lady's dress; but she made him show her in, and accordingly he took her into his apartment, where there were neither chairs to sit upon, nor signs of anything to eat, saying, "You might, indeed, be able to put up with all this; but you see my larder is empty, and I have absolutely no means of supporting a wife." "Don't be alarmed about that," cried she; and in another moment he saw a couch covered with costly robes, the walls papered with a silver-flecked paper; and chairs and tables appear, the latter laden with all kinds of wine and exquisite viands. They then began to enjoy themselves, and lived together as husband and wife, many people coming to witness these strange things, and being all cordially received by the young lady, who in her turn always accompanied Mr. Chao when he went out to dinner anywhere.¹ One day there was an unprincipled young graduate among the company, which she seemed immediately to become aware of; and, after calling him several bad names, she struck him on the side of the head, causing his head to fly out of the window while his body remained inside; and there he was, stuck fast, unable to move either way, until the others interceded for him and he was released. After some time visitors became too numerous, and if she refused to see them they turned their anger against her husband. At length, as they were sitting together drinking with some friends at the Tuan-yang festival,² a white rabbit ran in, whereupon the girl jumped up and said, "The doctor³ has come for me" then, turning to the rabbit, she added, "You go on: I'll

¹ The sexes do not dine together. On the occasion of a dinner-party, private or official; the ladies give a separate entertainment to the wives of the various guests in the "inner" or women's apartments as an adjunct to which a theatrical troupe is often engaged, precisely as in the case of the opposite sex. Singing-girls are, however, present at and share in the banquets of the *roués* of China.

² This occurs on the 5th of the 5th moon, and is commonly known as the Dragon-Boat Festival, from a practice of racing on that day in long, narrow boats. It is said to have been instituted in memory of a patriotic statesman named Ch'ü Yuan, who drowned himself (B.C. 295) because his counsels were unheeded.

³ A hare or rabbit is believed to sit at the foot of the cassia-tree in the moon, pounding the drugs out of which is concocted the elixir of immortality. The first allusion to this occurs in the poems of Ch'ü Yuan.

follow you.” So the rabbit went away, and then she ordered them to get a ladder and place it against a high tree in the back yard, the top of the ladder overtopping the tree. The young lady went up first and Chao close behind her; after which she called out to anybody who wished to join them to make haste up. None ventured to do so with the exception of a serving-boy belonging to the house, who followed after Chao; and thus they went up, up, up, up, until they disappeared in the clouds and were seen no more. However, when the bystanders came to look at the ladder, they found it was only an old door-frame with the panels knocked out; and when they went into Mr. Chao’s room, it was the same old, dirty, unfurnished room as before. So they determined to find out all about it from the serving-boy when he came back; but this he never did.