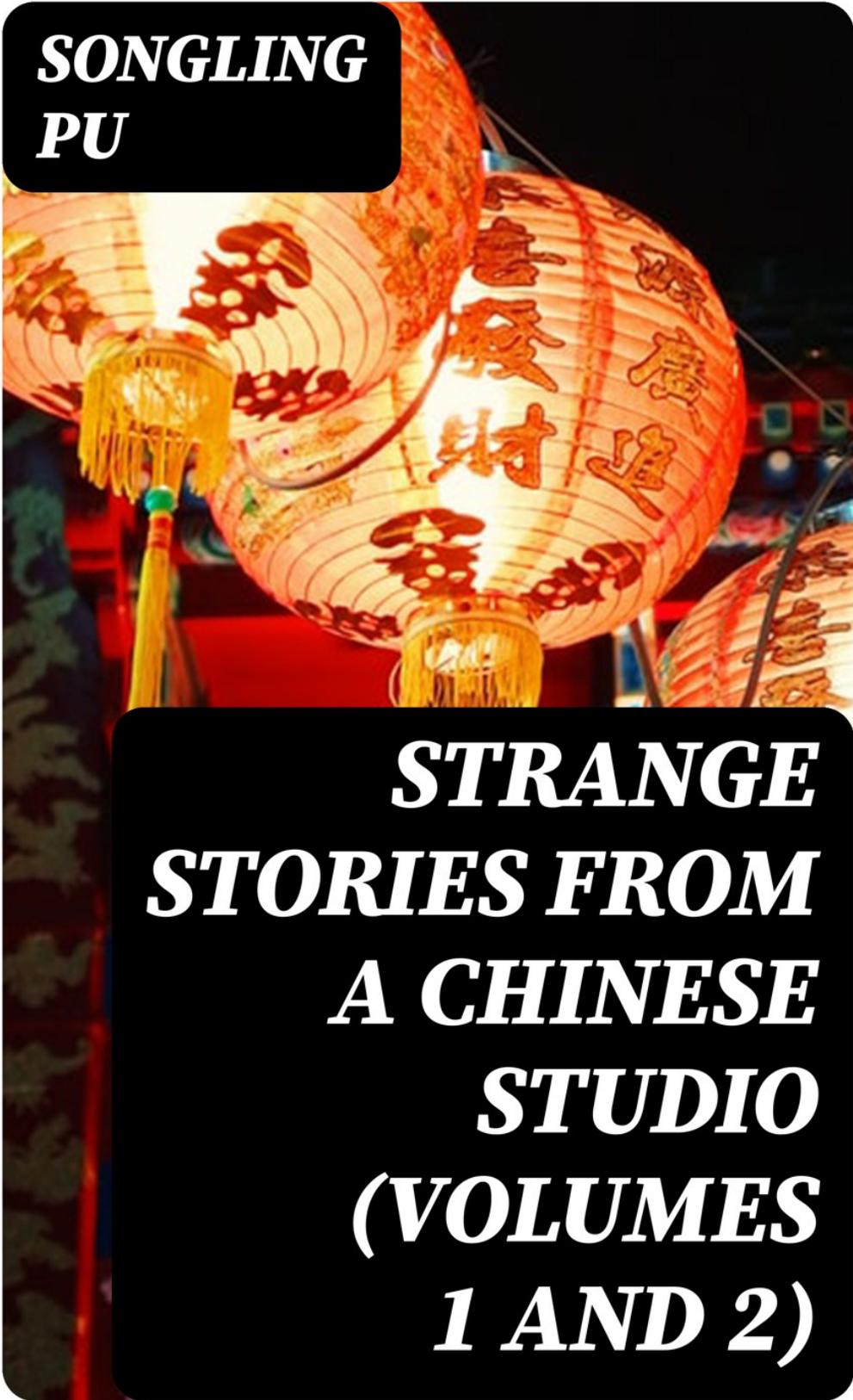


***SONGLING  
PU***

***STRANGE  
STORIES FROM  
A CHINESE  
STUDIO  
(VOLUMES  
1 AND 2)***

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**Songling Pu**

# **Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (Volumes 1 and 2)**

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# INTRODUCTION.

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## I.—PERSONAL.

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—The public has, perhaps, a right to be made acquainted with the title under which I, an unknown writer, come forward as the translator of a difficult Chinese work. In the spring of 1867 I began the study of Chinese at H.B.M.'s Legation, Peking, under an implied promise, in a despatch from the then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, that successful efforts would be rewarded by proportionately rapid advancement in the service of which I was a member. Then followed a long novitiate of utterly uninteresting and, indeed, most repellent labour—inseparable, however, from the acquisition of this language, which throughout its early stages demands more from sheer memory than from the exercise of any other intellectual faculty. At length, in the spring of 1877, while acting as Vice-Consul at Canton, I commenced the translation of the work here offered to the English reader. For such a task I had flattered myself into the belief that I possessed two of the requisite qualifications: an accurate knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language, and an extensive insight into the manners, customs, superstitions, and general social life of

the Chinese. I had been variously stationed at Peking, Tientsin, Takow, and Taiwan Fu (in Formosa), Ningpo, Hankow, Swatow, and Canton, from the latter of which I was transferred—when my task was still only half finished—to Amoy. I had travelled beyond the Great Wall into Mongolia; and I had made the journey overland from Swatow to Canton, a distance of five hundred miles; besides which, in addition to my study of the language, my daily object in life had always been to familiarise myself as much as possible with Chinese sympathies and habits of thought. With these advantages, and by the interesting nature of the subject-matter, I hoped to be able on the one hand to arouse a somewhat deeper interest than is usually taken in the affairs of China; and, on the other, to correct at any rate some of the erroneous views, too frequently palmed off by inefficient and disingenuous workers, and too readily accepted as fact. And I would here draw attention to one most important point; namely, that although a great number of books have been published about China and the Chinese, there are extremely few in which the information is conveyed at first hand; in other words, in which the Chinese are allowed to speak for themselves. <sup>[1]</sup> Hence, perhaps, it may be that in an accurately-compiled work such as Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, allusions to the religious rites and ceremonies of nearly one-third of the human race are condensed within the limits of barely a dozen short passages. Hence, too, it undoubtedly is that many Chinese customs are ridiculed and condemned by turns, simply because the medium through which they have been conveyed has produced a distorted image. Much of what the Chinese do actually believe and

practise in their religious and social life will be found in this volume, in the *ipsissima verba* of a highly-educated scholar writing about his fellow-countrymen and his native land; while for the notes with which I have essayed to make the picture more suggestive and more acceptable to the European eye, I claim only so much authority as is due to the opinion of one qualified observer who can have no possible motive in deviating ever so slightly from what his own personal experience has taught him to regard as the truth.

## II.—BIOGRAPHICAL.

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—The barest skeleton of a biography is all that can be formed from the very scanty materials which remain to mark the career of a writer whose work has been for the best part of two centuries as familiar throughout the length and breadth of China as are the tales of the “Arabian Nights” in all English-speaking communities. The author of “Strange Stories” was a native of Tzu-chou, in the province of Shan-tung. His family name was P’u; his particular name was Sung-ling; and the designation or literary epithet by which, in accordance with Chinese usage, he was commonly known among his friends, was Liu-hsien, or “Last of the Immortals.” A further fancy name, given to him probably by some enthusiastic admirer, was Liu Ch’üan, or “Willow Spring;” but he is now familiarly spoken of simply as P’u Sung-ling. We are unacquainted with the years of his birth or death; however, by the aid of a meagre entry in the *History of Tzü-chou* it is possible to make a pretty good guess at the date

of the former event. For we are there told that P'u Sung-ling successfully competed for the lowest or bachelor's degree before he had reached the age of twenty; and that in 1651 he was in the position of a graduate of ten years' standing, having failed in the interim to take the second, or master's, degree. To this failure, due, as we are informed in the history above quoted, to his neglect of the beaten track of academic study, we owe the existence of his great work; not, indeed, his only production, though the one *par excellence* by which, as Confucius said of his own "Spring and Autumn," men will know him. All else that we have on record of P'u Sung-ling, besides the fact that he lived in close companionship with several eminent scholars of the day, is gathered from his own words, written when, in 1679, he laid down his pen upon the completion of a task which was to raise him within a short period to a foremost rank in the Chinese world of letters. Of that record I here append a close translation, accompanied by such notes as are absolutely necessary to make it intelligible to non-students of Chinese.

### AUTHOR'S OWN RECORD.

"'Clad in wistaria, girdled with ivy;' [2] thus sang San-lü [3] in his *Dissipation of Grief*. [4] Of ox-headed devils and serpent Gods, [5] he of the long-nails [6] never wearied to tell. Each interprets in his own way the music of heaven; [7] and whether it be discord or not, depends upon antecedent causes. [8] As for me, I cannot, with my poor autumn fire-fly's light, match myself against the hobgoblins of the age. [9] I am but the dust in the sunbeam, a fit laughing-stock for devils. [10] For my talents are not those of Yü Pao, [11] elegant explorer of the records of the Gods; I am rather animated by the Spirit of Su Tung-p'o, [12] who loved to hear men speak of the supernatural. I get people to commit what they

tell me to writing, and subsequently I dress it up in the form of a story; and thus in the lapse of time my friends from all quarters have supplied me with quantities of material, which, from my habit of collecting, has grown into a vast pile. <sup>[13]</sup>

“Human beings, I would point out, are not beyond the pale of fixed laws, and yet there are more remarkable phenomena in their midst than in the country of those who crop their hair; <sup>[14]</sup> antiquity is unrolled before us, and many tales are to be found therein stranger than that of the nation of Flying Heads. <sup>[15]</sup> ‘Irrepressible bursts, and luxurious ease,’ <sup>[16]</sup>—such was always his enthusiastic strain. ‘For ever indulging in liberal thought,’ <sup>[17]</sup>—thus he spoke openly without restraint. Were men like these to open my book, I should be a laughing-stock to them indeed. At the cross-roads <sup>[18]</sup> men will not listen to me, and yet I have some knowledge of the three states of existence <sup>[19]</sup> spoken of beneath the cliff; <sup>[20]</sup> neither should the words I utter be set aside because of him that utters them. <sup>[21]</sup> When the bow <sup>[22]</sup> was hung at my father’s door, he dreamed that a sickly-looking Buddhist priest, but half-covered by his stole, entered the chamber. On one of his breasts was a round piece of plaster like a *cash*; <sup>[23]</sup> and my father, waking from sleep, found that I, just born, had a similar black patch on my body. As a child, I was thin and constantly ailing, and unable to hold my own in the battle of life. Our home was chill and desolate as a monastery; and working there for my livelihood with my pen, <sup>[24]</sup> I was as poor as a priest with his alms-bowl. <sup>[25]</sup> Often and often I put my hand to my head <sup>[26]</sup> and exclaimed, ‘Surely he who sat with his face to the wall <sup>[27]</sup> was myself in a previous state of existence;’ and thus I referred my non-success in this life to the influence of a destiny surviving from the last. I have been tossed hither and thither in the direction of the ruling wind, like a flower falling in filthy places; but the six paths <sup>[28]</sup> of transmigration are inscrutable indeed, and I have no right to complain. As it is, midnight finds me with an expiring lamp, while the wind whistles mournfully without; and over my cheerless table I piece together my tales, <sup>[29]</sup> vainly hoping to produce a sequel to the *Infernal Regions*. <sup>[30]</sup> With a bumper I stimulate my pen, yet I only succeed thereby in ‘venting my excited feelings,’ <sup>[31]</sup> and as I thus commit my thoughts to writing, truly I am an object worthy of commiseration. Alas! I am but the bird that, dreading the winter frost, finds no shelter in the tree: the autumn insect that chirps to the moon, and hugs the door for warmth. For where are they who know me? <sup>[32]</sup> They are ‘in the bosky grove, and at the frontier pass’ <sup>[33]</sup>—wrapped in an impenetrable gloom!”

From the above curious document the reader will gain some insight into the abstruse, but at the same time marvellously beautiful, style of this gifted writer. The whole essay—for such it is, and among the most perfect of its kind—is intended chiefly as a satire upon the scholarship of the age; scholarship which had turned the author back to the disappointment of a private life, himself conscious all the time of the inward fire that had been lent him by heaven. It is the key-note to his own subsequent career, spent in the retirement of home, in the society of books and friends; as also to the numerous uncomplimentary allusions which occur in all his stories relating to official life. Whether or not the world at large has been a gainer by this instance of the fallibility of competitive examinations has been already decided in the affirmative by the millions of P'u Sung-ling's own countrymen, who for the past two hundred years have more than made up to him by a posthumous and enduring reverence for the loss of those earthly and ephemeral honours which he seems to have coveted so much.

### III.—BIBLIOGRAPHICAL.

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—*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, known to the Chinese as the *Liao-Chai-Chih-I*, or more familiarly, the *Liao-Chai*, has hardly been mentioned by a single foreigner without some inaccuracy on the part of the writer concerned. For instance, the late Mr. Mayers states in his *Chinese Reader's Manual*, p. 176, that this work was composed “circa A.D. 1710,” the fact being that the collection was actually completed in 1679, as we know by

the date attached to the "Author's Own Record" given above. It is consequently two centuries, almost to the day, since the first appearance of a book destined to a popularity which the lapse of time seems wholly unable to diminish; and the present may fairly be considered a fitting epoch for its first presentation to the English reader in an English dress. I should mention, however, that the *Liao-Chai* was originally, and for many years, circulated in manuscript only. P'u Sung-ling, as we are told in a colophon by his grandson to the first edition, was too poor to meet the heavy expense of block-cutting; and it was not until as late as 1740, when the author must have been already for some time a denizen of the dark land he so much loved to describe, that his aforesaid grandson printed and published the collection now so universally famous. Since then many editions have been laid before the Chinese public, the best of which is that by Tan Ming-lun, a Salt Commissioner, who flourished during the reign of Tao Kuang, and who in 1842 produced, at his own expense, an excellent edition in sixteen small octavo volumes of about 160 pages each. And as various editions will occasionally be found to contain various readings, I would here warn students of Chinese who wish to compare my rendering with the text, that it is from the edition of Tan Ming-lun, collated with that of Yü Chi, published in 1766, that this translation has been made. Many have been the commentaries and disquisitions upon the meaning of obscure passages and the general scope of this work; to say nothing of the prefaces with which the several editions have been ushered into the world. Of the latter, I have selected one specimen, from which the reader will be able to form a

tolerably accurate opinion as to the true nature of these always singular and usually difficult compositions. Here it is:—

## T'ANG MÊNG LAI'S PREFACE.

“The common saying, ‘He regards a camel as a horse with a swelled back,’ trivial of itself, may be used in illustration of greater matters. Men are wont to attribute an existence only to such things as they daily see with their own eyes, and they marvel at whatsoever, appearing before them at one instant, vanishes at the next. And yet it is not at the sprouting and falling of foliage, or at the metamorphosis of insects that they marvel, but only at the manifestations of the supernatural world; though of a truth, the whistling of the wind and the movement of streams, with nothing to set the one in motion or give sound to the other, might well be ranked among extraordinary phenomena. We are accustomed to these, and therefore do not note them. We marvel at devils and foxes: we do not marvel at man. But who is it that causes a man to move and to speak?—to which question comes the ready answer of each individual so questioned, ‘I do.’ This ‘I do,’ however, is merely a personal consciousness of the facts under discussion. For a man can see with his eyes, but he cannot see what it is that makes him see; he can hear with his ears, but he cannot hear what it is that makes him hear; how, then, is it possible for him to understand the rationale of things he can neither see nor hear. Whatever has come within the bounds of their own ocular or auricular experience men regard as proved to be actually existing; and only such things. <sup>[34]</sup> But this term ‘experience’ may be understood in various senses. For instance, people speak of something which has certain attributes as *form*, and of something else which has certain other attributes as *substance*; ignorant as they are that form and substance are to be found existing without those particular attributes. Things which are thus constituted are inappreciable, indeed, by our ears and eyes; but we cannot argue that therefore they do not exist. Some persons can see a mosquito’s eye, while to others even a mountain is invisible; some can hear the sound of ants battling together, while others again fail to catch the roar of a thunder-peal. Powers of seeing and hearing vary; there should be no reckless imputations of blindness. According to the schoolmen, man at his death is dispersed like wind or fire, the origin and end of his vitality being alike unknown; and as those who have seen strange phenomena are few, the number of those who marvel at

them is proportionately great, and the 'horse with a swelled back' parallel is very widely applicable. And ever quoting the fact that Confucius would have nothing to say on these topics, these schoolmen half discredit such works as the *Ch'i-chieh-chih-kuai* and the *Yü-ch'u-chi-i*,<sup>[35]</sup> ignorant that the Sage's unwillingness to speak had reference only to persons of an inferior mental calibre; for his own *Spring and Autumn* can hardly be said to be devoid of all allusions of the kind. Now P'u Liu-hsien devoted himself in his youth to the marvellous, and as he grew older was specially remarkable for his comprehension thereof; and being moreover a most elegant writer, he occupied his leisure in recording whatever came to his knowledge of a particularly marvellous nature. A volume of these compositions of his formerly fell into my hands, and was constantly borrowed by friends; now, I have another volume, and of what I read only about three-tenths was known to me before. What there is, should be sufficient to open the eyes of those schoolmen, though I much fear it will be like talking of ice to a butterfly. Personally, I disbelieve in the irregularity of natural phenomena, and regard as evil spirits only those who injure their neighbours. For eclipses, falling stars, the flight of herons, the nest of a mina, talking stones, and the combats of dragons, can hardly be classed as irregular; while the phenomena of nature occurring out of season, wars, rebellions, and so forth, may certainly be relegated to the category of evil. In my opinion the morality of P'u Liu-hsien's work is of a very high standard, its object being distinctly to glorify virtue and to censure vice, and as a book calculated to elevate mankind may be safely placed side by side with the philosophical treatises of Yang Hsiung which Huan Tan declared to be so worthy of a wide circulation."

With regard to the meaning of the Chinese words *Liao-Chai-Chih-I*, this title has received indifferent treatment at the hands of different writers. Dr. Williams chose to render it by "Pastimes of the Study," and Mr. Mayers by "The Record of Marvels, or Tales of the Genii;" neither of which is sufficiently near to be regarded in the light of a translation. Taken literally and in order, these words stand for "Liao—library—record—strange," "Liao" being simply a fanciful name given by our author to his private library or studio. An apocryphal anecdote traces the origin of this selection to a

remark once made by himself with reference to his failure for the second degree. "Alas!" he is reported to have said, "I shall now have no resource (*Liao*) for my old age;" and accordingly he so named his study, meaning that in his pen he would seek that resource which fate had denied to him as an official. For this untranslatable "Liao" I have ventured to substitute "Chinese," as indicating more clearly the nature of what is to follow. No such title as "Tales of the Genii" fully expresses the scope of this work, which embraces alike weird stories of Taoist devilry and magic, marvellous accounts of impossible countries beyond the sea, simple scenes of Chinese every-day life, and notices of extraordinary natural phenomena. Indeed, the author once had it in contemplation to publish only the more imaginative of the tales in the present collection under the title of "Devil and Fox Stories;" but from this scheme he was ultimately dissuaded by his friends, the result being the heterogeneous mass which is more aptly described by the title I have given to this volume. In a similar manner, I too had originally determined to publish a full and complete translation of the whole of these sixteen volumes; but on a closer acquaintance many of the stories turned out to be quite unsuitable for the age in which we live, forcibly recalling the coarseness of our own writers of fiction in the last century. Others again were utterly pointless, or mere repetitions in a slightly altered form. Of the whole, I therefore selected one hundred and sixty-four of the best and most characteristic stories, of which eight had previously been published by Mr. Allen in the *China Review*, one by Mr. Mayers in *Notes and Queries on China and Japan*,

two by myself in the columns of the *Celestial Empire*, and four by Dr. Williams in a now forgotten handbook of Chinese. The remaining one hundred and forty-nine have never before, to my knowledge, been translated into English. To those, however, who can enjoy the *Liao-Chai* in the original text, the distinctions between the various stories of felicity in plot, originality, and so on, are far less sharply defined, so impressed as each competent reader must be by the incomparable style in which even the meanest is arrayed. For in this respect, as important now in Chinese eyes as it was with ourselves in days not long gone by, the author of the *Liao-Chai* and the rejected candidate succeeded in founding a school of his own, in which he has since been followed by hosts of servile imitators with more or less success. Terseness is pushed to its extreme limits; each particle that can be safely dispensed with is scrupulously eliminated; and every here and there some new and original combination invests perhaps a single word with a force it could never have possessed except under the hands of a perfect master of his art. Add to the above, copious allusions and adaptations from a course of reading which would seem to have been co-extensive with the whole range of Chinese literature, a wealth of metaphor and an artistic use of figures generally to which only the *chef-d'œuvres* of Carlyle form an adequate parallel; and the result is a work which for purity and beauty of style is now universally accepted in China as the best and most perfect model. Sometimes the story runs along plainly and smoothly enough; but the next moment we may be plunged into pages of abstruse text, the meaning of which is so

involved in quotations from and allusions to the poetry or history of the past three thousand years as to be recoverable only after diligent perusal of the commentary and much searching in other works of reference. In illustration of the popularity of this book, Mr. Mayers once stated that "the porter at his gate, the boatman at his mid-day rest, the chair-coolie at his stand, no less than the man of letters among his books, may be seen poring with delight over the elegantly-narrated marvels of the *Liao-Chai*;" but he would doubtless have withdrawn this judgment in later years, with the work lying open before him. Ever since I have been in China, I have made a point of never, when feasible, passing by a reading Chinaman without asking permission to glance at the volume in his hand; and at my various stations in China I have always kept up a borrowing acquaintance with the libraries of my private or official servants; but I can safely affirm that I have not once detected the *Liao-Chai* in the hands of an ill-educated man. Mr. Mayers made, perhaps, a happier hit when he observed that "fairy-tales told in the style of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* would scarcely be a popular book in Great Britain;" though except in some particular points of contact, the styles of these two writers could scarcely claim even the most distant of relationships.

Such, then, is the setting of this collection of *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, many of which contain, in addition to the advantages of style and plot, a very excellent moral. The intention of most of them is, in the actual words of T'ang Mêng-lai, "to glorify virtue and to censure vice,"—always, it must be borne in mind, according

to the Chinese and not to a European interpretation of these terms. As an addition to our knowledge of the folklore of China, and as an *aperçu* of the manners, customs, and social life of that vast Empire, my translation of the *Liao-Chai* may not be wholly devoid of interest. The amusement and instruction I have myself derived from the task thus voluntarily imposed has already more than repaid me for the pains I have been at to put this work before the English public in a pleasing and available form.

STRANGE STORIES

FROM A

CHINESE STUDIO.

# I.

## EXAMINATION FOR THE POST OF GUARDIAN ANGEL. <sup>[36]</sup>

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MY eldest sister's husband's grandfather, named Sung Tao, was a graduate. <sup>[37]</sup> One day, while lying down from indisposition, an official messenger arrived, bringing the usual notification in his hand and leading a horse with a white forehead, to summon him to the examination for his master's degree. Mr. Sung here remarked that the Grand Examiner had not yet come, and asked why there should be this hurry. The messenger did not reply to this, but pressed so earnestly that at length Mr. Sung roused himself, and getting upon the horse rode with him. The way seemed strange, and by-and-by they reached a city which resembled the capital of a prince. They then entered the Prefect's *yamên*, <sup>[38]</sup> the apartments of which were beautifully decorated; and there they found some ten officials sitting at the upper end, all strangers to Mr. Sung, with the exception of one whom he recognised to be the God of War. <sup>[39]</sup> In the verandah were two tables and two stools, and at the end of one of the former a candidate was already seated, so Mr. Sung sat down alongside of him. On the table were writing materials for each, and suddenly

down flew a piece of paper with a theme on it, consisting of the following eight words:—"One man, two men; by intention, without intention." When Mr. Sung had finished his essay, he took it into the hall. It contained the following passage: "Those who are virtuous by intention, though virtuous, shall not be rewarded. Those who are wicked without intention, though wicked, shall receive no punishment." The presiding deities praised this sentiment very much, and calling Mr. Sung to come forward, said to him, "A Guardian Angel is wanted in Honan. Go you and take up the appointment." Mr. Sung no sooner heard this than he bowed his head and wept, saying, "Unworthy though I am of the honour you have conferred upon me, I should not venture to decline it but that my aged mother has reached her seventh decade, and there is no one now to take care of her. I pray you let me wait until she has fulfilled her destiny, when I will hold myself at your disposal." Thereupon one of the deities, who seemed to be the chief, gave instructions to search out his mother's term of life, and a long-bearded attendant forthwith brought in the Book of Fate. On turning it over, he declared that she still had nine years to live; and then a consultation was held among the deities, in the middle of which the God of War said, "Very well. Let Mr. graduate Chang take the post, and be relieved in nine years' time." Then, turning to Mr. Sung, he continued, "You ought to proceed without delay to your post; but as a reward for your filial piety, you are granted a furlough of nine years. At the expiration of that time you will receive another summons." He next addressed a few kind words to Mr. Chang; and the two candidates, having

made their *kotow*, went away together. Grasping Mr. Sung's hand, his companion, who gave "Chang Ch'i of Ch'ang-shan" as his name and address, accompanied him beyond the city walls and gave him a stanza of poetry at parting. I cannot recollect it all, but in it occurred this couplet:—

“With wine and flowers we chase the hours,  
In one eternal spring:  
No moon, no light, to cheer the night—  
Thyself that ray must bring.”

Mr. Sung here left him and rode on, and before very long reached his own home; here he awaked as if from a dream, and found that he had been dead three days, <sup>[40]</sup> when his mother, hearing a groan in the coffin, ran to it and helped him out. It was some time before he could speak, and then he at once inquired about Ch'ang-shan, where, as it turned out, a graduate named Chang had died that very day.

Nine years afterwards, Mr. Sung's mother, in accordance with fate, passed from this life; and when the funeral obsequies were over, her son, having first purified himself, entered into his chamber and died also. Now his wife's family lived within the city, near the western gate; and all of a sudden they beheld Mr. Sung, accompanied by numerous chariots and horses with carved trappings and red-tasselled bits, enter into the hall, make an obeisance, and depart. They were very much disconcerted at this, not knowing that he had become a spirit, and rushed out into the village to make inquiries, when they heard he was already dead.

Mr. Sung had an account of his adventure written by himself; but unfortunately after the insurrection it was not to be found. This is only an outline of the story.

## II. THE TALKING PUPILS.

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AT Ch'ang-ngan there lived a scholar, named Fang Tung, who though by no means destitute of ability was a very unprincipled rake, and in the habit of following and speaking to any woman he might chance to meet. The day before the spring festival of Clear Weather, <sup>[41]</sup> he was strolling about outside the city when he saw a small carriage with red curtains and an embroidered awning, followed by a crowd of waiting-maids on horseback, one of whom was exceedingly pretty, and riding on a small palfrey. Going closer to get a better view, Mr. Fang noticed that the carriage curtain was partly open, and inside he beheld a beautifully dressed girl of about sixteen, lovely beyond anything he had ever seen. Dazzled by the sight, he could not take his eyes off her; and, now before, now behind, he followed the carriage for many a mile. By-and-by he heard the young lady call out to her maid, and, when the latter came alongside, say to her, "Let down the screen for me. Who is this rude fellow that keeps on staring so?" The maid accordingly let down the screen, and looking angrily at Mr. Fang, said to him, "This is the bride of the Seventh Prince in the City of Immortals going home to see her parents, and no village girl that you should stare at her