

Miss Ying-Ning, or the Laughing Girl

By P'u Sung-ling

At Lo-tien, in the province of Shantung, there lived a youth named Wang Tzŭ-fu, who had been left an orphan when quite young. He was a clever boy, and took his bachelor's degree at the age of fourteen, being quite his mother's pet, and not allowed by her to stray far away from home. One young lady to whom he had been betrothed having unhappily died, he was, still in search of a wife when, on the occasion of the Feast of Lanterns, his cousin Wu asked him to come along for a stroll. But they had hardly got beyond the village before one of his uncle's servants caught them up and told Wu he was wanted. The latter accordingly went back; but Wang, seeing plenty of nice girls about and being in high spirits himself, proceeded on alone. Amongst others, he noticed a young lady with her maid. She had just picked a sprig of plum-blossom, and was the prettiest girl he had ever heard of, her smiling face being very captivating. He stared and stared at her quite regardless of appearances and when she had passed by, she said to her maid, "That young fellow has a wicked look in his eyes." As she was walking away, laughing and talking, the flower dropped out of her hand; and Wang, picking it up, stood there disconsolate as if he had lost his wits. He then went home in a very melancholy mood; and, putting the flower under his pillow, lay down to sleep. He would neither talk nor eat; and his mother became very anxious about him, and called in the aid of the priests.¹ By degrees, he fell off in flesh and got very thin; and the doctor felt his pulse and gave him medicines to bring out the disease. Occasionally, he seemed bewildered in his mind, but in spite of all his mother's inquiries would give no clue as to the cause of his malady. One day when his cousin Wu came to the house, Wang's mother told him to try and find out what was the matter; and the former, approaching the bed, gradually and quietly led up to the point in question. Wang, who had wept bitterly at the sight of his cousin, now repeated to him the whole story, begging him to lend some assistance in the matter. "How foolish you are, cousin," cried Wu; "there will be no difficulty at all, I'll make inquiries for you. The girl herself can't belong to a very aristocratic family to be walking alone in the country. If she's not already engaged, I have no doubt we can arrange the affair; and even if she is unwilling, an extra outlay will easily bring her round."² You make haste and get well: I'll see to it all." Wang's features relaxed when he heard these words; and Wu left him to tell his mother how the case stood, immediately setting on foot inquiries as to the whereabouts of the girl. All his efforts, however, proved fruitless, to the great disappointment of Wang's mother; for since his cousin's visit Wang's colour and appetite had returned. In a few days Wu called again, and in answer to Wang's questions falsely told him the affair was settled. "Who do you think the young lady is?" said he. "Why, a cousin of ours, who is only waiting to be betrothed; and though you two are a little near,³ I dare say this difficulty may be overcome." Wang was overjoyed, and

¹ Sickness being supposed to result from evil influences, witchcraft, &c., just as often as from more natural causes.

² The rule which guides betrothals in China is that "the doors should be opposite"—i.e., that the families of the bride and bridegroom should be of equal position in the social scale. Any unpleasantness about the value of the marriage presents, and so on, is thereby avoided.

³ Marriage between persons of the same surname, except in special cases, is forbidden by law, for such are held to be blood relations, descended lineally from the original couple of that name. Inasmuch, however, as the line of descent is traced through the male branches only, a man may marry his cousins on the maternal side without let or hindrance except that of sentiment, which is sufficiently strong to keep these alliances down to a minimum.

asked where she lived; so Wu had to tell another lie, and say, "On the south-west hills, about ten miles from here." Wang begged him again and again to do his best for him, and Wu undertook to get the betrothal satisfactorily arranged. He then took leave of his cousin, who from this moment was rapidly restored to health. Wang drew the flower from underneath his pillow, and found that, though dried up, the leaves had not fallen away. He often sat playing with this flower and thinking of the young lady; but by-and-by, as Wu did not reappear, he wrote a letter and asked him to come. Wu pleaded other engagements, being unwilling to go; at which Wang got into a rage and quite lost his good spirits; so that his mother, fearing a relapse, proposed to him a speedy betrothal in another quarter. Wang shook his head at this, and sat day after day waiting for Wu, until his patience was thoroughly exhausted. He then reflected that ten miles was no great distance, and that there was no particular reason for asking anybody's aid; so, concealing the flower in his sleeve, he went off in a huff by himself without letting it be known. Having no opportunity of asking the way, he made straight for the hills; and after about ten miles' walking, found himself right in the midst of them, enjoying their exquisite verdure, but meeting no one) and with nothing better than mountain paths to guide him. Away down in the valley below, almost buried under a densely luxuriant growth of trees and flowers, he espied a small hamlet, and began to descend the hill and make his way thither. He found very few houses, and all built of rushes, but otherwise pleasant enough to look at. Before the door of one, which stood at the northern end of the village, were a number of graceful willow trees, and inside the wall plenty of peach and apricot trees, with tufts of bamboo between them, and birds chirping on the branches. As it was a private house, he did not venture to go in, but sat down to rest himself on a huge smooth stone opposite the front door. By-and-by he heard a girl's voice from within calling out Hsiao-jung; and noticing that it was a sweet-toned voice, set himself to listen, when a young lady passed with a bunch of apricot-flowers in her hand, which she was sticking into her bent-down head. As soon as she raised her face she saw Wang, and stopped putting in the flowers; then, smothering a laugh, she gathered them together and ran in. Wang perceived to his intense delight that she was none other than his heroine of the Feast of Lanterns; but recollecting that he had no right to follow her in, was on the point of calling after her as his cousin. There was no one, however, in the street, and he was afraid lest he might have made a mistake; neither was there anybody at the door of whom he could make inquiries. So he remained there in a very restless state till the sun was well down in the west, and his hopes were almost at an end, forgetting all about food and drink. He then saw the young lady peep through the door, apparently very much astonished to find him still there; and in a few minutes out came an old woman leaning on a stick, who said to him, "Whence do you come, Sir? I hear you have been here ever since morning. What is it you want? Aren't you hungry?" Wang got up, and making a bow, replied that he was in search of some relatives of his; but the old woman was deaf and didn't catch what he said, so he had to shout it out again at the top of his voice. She asked him what their names were, but he was unable to tell her; at which she laughed and said, "It is a funny thing to look for people when you don't know their names. I am afraid you are an unpractical gentleman. You had better come in and have something to eat; we'll give you a bed, and you can go back to-morrow and find out the names of the people you are in quest of." Now Wang was just beginning to get hungry, and, besides, this would bring him nearer to the young lady; so he readily accepted and followed the old woman in. They walked along a paved path banked on both sides with hibiscus) the leaves of which were scattered about on the ground; and passing through another door, entered a court-yard full of trained creepers and other flowers. The old woman showed Wang into a small room with beautifully white walls and a branch of a crab-apple tree coming through

the window, the furniture being also nice and clean. They had hardly sat down when it was clear that someone was taking a peep through the window; whereupon the old woman cried out, "Hsiao-jung! make haste and get dinner," and a maid from outside immediately answered "Yes, ma'am." Meanwhile, Wang had been explaining who he was; and then the old lady said, "Was your maternal grandfather named Wu?" "He was," replied Wang. "Well, I never!" cried the old woman; "he was my uncle, and your mother and I are cousins, But in consequence of our poverty, and having no sons, we have kept quite to ourselves, and you have grown to be a man without my knowing you." "I came here," said Wang, "about my cousin, but in the hurry I forgot your name." "My name is Ch'in," replied the old lady; "I have no son: only a girl, the child of a concubine, who, after my husband's death, married again⁴ and left her daughter with me. She's a clever girl, but has had very little education; full of fun and ignorant of the sorrows of life. I'll send for her by-and-by to make your acquaintance." The maid then brought in the dinner—a well-grown fowl—and the old woman pressed him to eat. When they had finished, and the things were taken away, the old woman said, "Call Miss Ning," and the maid went off to do so. After some time there was a giggling at the door, and the old woman cried out, "Ying-ning! your cousin is here." There was then a great tittering as the maid pushed her in, stopping her mouth all the time to try and keep from laughing. "Don't you know better than to behave like that?" asked the old woman, "and before a stranger, too." So Ying-ning controlled her feelings, and Wang made her a bow, the old woman saying, "Mr. Wang is your cousin: you have never seen him before. Isn't that funny?" Wang asked how old his cousin was, but the old woman didn't hear him, and he had to say it again, which sent Ying-ning off into another fit of laughter. "I told you," observed the old woman, "she hadn't much education; now you see it. She is sixteen years old, and as foolish as a baby." "One year younger than I am," remarked Wang. "Oh, you're seventeen, are you? Then you were born in the year—under the sign of the horse."⁵ Wang nodded assent, and then the old woman asked who his wife was, to which Wang replied that Ale had none. "What! a clever, handsome young fellow of seventeen not yet engaged?" Ying-ning is not engaged either: you two would make a nice pair if it wasn't for the relationship." Wang said nothing, but looked hard at his cousin; and just then the maid whispered to her, "It is the fellow with the wicked eyes! He's at his old game." Ying-ning laughed, and proposed to the maid that they should go and see if the peaches were in blossom or not; and off they went together, the former with her sleeve stuffed into her mouth until she got outside, where she burst into a hearty fit of laughing. The old woman gave orders for a bed to be got ready for Wang, saying to him, "It's not often we meet: you must spend a few days with us now you are here, and then we'll send you home. If you are at all dull, there's a garden behind where you can amuse yourself, and books for you to read." So next day Wang strolled into the garden, which was of moderate size, with a well-kept lawn and plenty of trees and flowers. There was also an arbour consisting of three posts with a thatched roof, quite shut in on all sides by the luxuriant vegetation. Pushing his way among the flowers, Wang heard a noise from one of the trees, and looking up saw Ying-ning, who at once burst out laughing and nearly fell down. "Don't! don't!" cried Wang, "you'll fall!" Then Ying-ning came down, giggling all the time, until, when she was near the ground, she

⁴ A very unjustifiable proceeding in Chinese eyes, unless driven to it by actual poverty.

⁵ The Chinese years are distinguished by the names of twelve animals—namely, rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, sheep, monkey, cock., dog, and boar. To the common question, "What is your honourable age?" the reply is frequently, "I was born under the —," and the hearer by a short mental calculation can tell at once how old the speaker is, granting, of course, the impossibility of making an error of so much as twelve years.

⁶ Parents in China like to get their sons married as early as possible, in the hope of seeing themselves surrounded by grandsons, and the family name in no danger of extinction. Girls are generally married at from fifteen to seventeen.

missed her hold, and tumbled down with a run. This stopped her merriment, and Wang picked her up, gently squeezing her hand as he did so. Ying-ning began laughing again, and was obliged to lean against a tree for support, it being some time before she was able to stop. Wang waited till she had finished, and then drew the flower out of his sleeve and handed it to her. "It's dead," said she; "why do you keep it?" "You dropped it, cousin, at the Feast of Lanterns," replied Wang, "and so I kept it." She then asked him what was his object in keeping it, to which he answered, "To show my love, and that I have not forgotten you. Since that day when we met, I have been very ill from thinking so much of you, and am quite changed from what I was. But now that it is my unexpected good fortune to meet you, I pray you have pity on me." "You needn't make such a fuss about a trifle," replied she, "and with your own relatives, too. I'll give orders to supply you with a whole basketful of flowers when you go away." Wang told her she did not understand, and when she asked what it was she didn't understand, he said, "I didn't care for the flower itself; it was the person who picked the flower." "Of course," answered she, "everybody cares for their relations; you needn't have told me that." "I wasn't talking about ordinary relations," said Wang, "but about husbands and wives." "What's the difference?" asked Ying-ning. "Why," replied Wang, "husband and wife are always together." "Just what I shouldn't like," cried she, "to be always with anybody."⁷ At this juncture up came the maid, and Wang slipped quietly away. By-and-by they all met again in the house, and the old woman asked Ying-ning where they had been; whereupon she said they had been talking in the garden. "Dinner has been ready a long time. I can't think what you have had to say all this while," grumbled the old woman. "My cousin," answered Ying-ning, "has been talking to me about husbands and wives." Wang was much disconcerted, and made a sign to her to be quiet, so she smiled and said no more; and the old woman luckily did not catch her words, and asked her to repeat them. Wang immediately put her off with -something else, and whispered to Ying-ning that she had done very wrong. The latter did not see that; and when Wang told her that what he had said was private, answered him that she had no secrets from her old mother. "Besides," added she, "what harm can there be in talking on such a common topic as husbands and wives?" Wang was angry with her for being so dull, but there was no help for it; and by the time dinner was over he found some of his mother's servants had come in search of him, bringing a couple of donkeys with them. It appeared that his mother, alarmed at his non-appearance, had made strict search for him in the village; and when unable to discover any traces of him, had gone off to the Wu family to consult. There her nephew, who recollected what he had previously said to young Wang, advised that a search should be instituted in the direction of the hills; and accordingly the servants had been to all the villages on the way until they had at length recognised him as he was coming out of the door. Wang went in and told the old woman, begging that he might be allowed to take Ying-ning with him. "I have had the idea in my head for several days," replied the old woman, overjoyed; "but I am a feeble old thing myself, and couldn't travel so far. If, however, you will take charge of my girl and introduce her to her aunt, I shall be very pleased." So she called Ying-ning, who came up laughing as usual; whereupon the old woman rebuked her,

⁷ This scene should for ever disabuse people of the notion that there is no such thing as "making love" among the Chinese. That the passion is just as much a disease in China as it is with us will be abundantly evident from several subsequent stories; though by those who have lived and mixed with the Chinese people, no such confirmation will be needed. I have even heard it gravely asserted by an educated native that not a few of his countrymen had "died for love" of the beautiful Miss Lin, the charming but fictitious heroine of the so-called *Dream of The Red Chamber*.

Play-goers can here hardly fail to notice a very striking similarity to the close of the first act of Sir W. S. Gilbert's "Sweethearts."

saying, "What makes you always laugh so? You would be a very good girl but for that silly habit. Now, here's your cousin, who wants to take you away with him. Make haste and pack up." The servants who had come for Wang were then provided with refreshment, and the old woman bade them both farewell, telling Ying-ning that her aunt was quite well enough off to maintain her, and that she had better not come back. She also advised her not to neglect her studies, and to be very attentive to her elders, adding that she might ask her aunt to provide her with a good husband. Wang and Ying-ning then took their leave; and when they reached the brow of the hill, they looked back and could just discern the old woman leaning against the door and gazing towards the north. On arriving at Wang's home, his mother, seeing a nice-looking young girl with him, asked in astonishment who she might be; and Wang at once told her the whole story. "But that was all an invention of your cousin Wu's," cried his mother; "I haven't got a sister, and consequently I can't have such a niece." Ying-ning here observed, "I am not the daughter of the old woman; my father was named Ch'in and died when I was a little baby, so that I can't remember anything." "I *had* a sister," said Wang's mother, "who actually did marry a Mr. Ch'in, but she died many years ago, and can't be still living, of course." However, on inquiring as to facial appearance and characteristic marks, Wang's mother was obliged to acknowledge the identity, wondering at the same time how her sister could be alive when she had died many years before. Just then in came Wu, and Ying-ning retired within; and when he heard the story, remained some time lost in astonishment, and then said, "Is this young lady's name Ying-ning?" Wang replied that it was, and asked Wu how he came to know it. "Mr. Ch'in," answered he, "after his wife's death was bewitched by a fox, and subsequently died. The fox had a daughter named Ying-ning, as was well known to all the family; and when Mr. Ch'in died, as the fox still frequented the place, the Taoist Pope⁸ was called in to exorcise it. The fox then went away, taking Ying-ning with it, and now here she is." While they were thus discussing, peals of laughter were heard coming from within, and Mrs. Wang took occasion to remark what a foolish girl she was. Wu begged to be introduced, and Mrs. Wang went in to fetch her, finding her in an uncontrollable fit of laughter, which she subdued only with great difficulty, and by turning her face to the wall. By-and-by she went out; but, after making a bow, ran back and burst out laughing again, to the great discomfiture of all the ladies. Wu then said he would go and find out for them all about Ying-ning and her queer story, so as to be able to arrange the marriage; but when he reached the spot indicated, village and houses had all vanished, and nothing was to be seen except hill-flowers scattered about here and there. He recollected that Mrs. Ch'in had been buried at no great distance from that spot; he found, however, that the grave had disappeared, and he was no longer able to determine its position. Not knowing what to make of it all, he returned home, and then Mrs. Wang told him she thought the girl must be a disembodied spirit. Ying-ning showed no signs of alarm at this remark; neither did she cry at all when Mrs. Wang began to condole with her on no longer having a home. She only laughed in her usual silly way, and fairly puzzled them all. Sharing Miss Wang's room, she now began to take her part in the duties of a daughter of the family; and as for needlework, they had rarely seen anything like hers for fineness. But she could not get over that trick of laughing, which, by the way, never

⁸ The semi-divine head of the Taoist religion, wrongly called the Master of Heavens. In his body is supposed to reside the soul of a celebrated Taoist, an ancestor of his, who actually discovered the elixir of life and became an immortal some eighteen hundred years ago. At death, the precious soul above-mentioned will take up its abode in the body of some youthful member of the family to be hereinafter revealed. Meanwhile, the present Pope makes a very respectable income from the sale of charms, by working miracles, and so forth; and only about 1877 he visited Shanghai, where he was interviewed by several foreigners.

interfered with her good looks, and consequently rather amused people than otherwise, amongst others a young married lady who lived next door. Wang's mother fixed an auspicious day for the wedding, but still feeling suspicious about Ying-ning, was always secretly watching her. Finding, however, that she had a proper shadow,⁹ and that there was nothing extraordinary in her behaviour, she had her dressed up when the day came, in all the finery of a bride; and would have made her perform the usual ceremonies, only Ying-ning laughed so much she was unable to kneel down. They were accordingly obliged to excuse her, but Wang began to fear that such a foolish girl would never be able to keep the family counsel. Luckily, she was very reticent and did not indulge in gossip; and moreover, when Mrs. Wang was in trouble or out of temper, Ying-ning could always bring her round with a laugh. The maid-servants, too, if they expected a whipping for anything, would always ask her to be present when they appeared before their mistress, and thus they often escaped punishment. Ying-ning had a perfect passion for flowers. She got all she could out of her relations, and even secretly pawned her jewels to buy rare specimens; and by the end of a few months the whole place was one mass of flowers. Behind the house there was one especial tree which belonged to the neighbours on that side; but Ying-ning was always climbing up and picking the flowers, for which Mrs. Wang rebuked her severely, though without any result. One day the owner saw her, and gazed at her some time in rapt astonishment; however, she didn't move, deigning only to laugh. The gentleman was much smitten with her; and when she smilingly descended the wall on her own side, pointing all the time with her finger to a spot hard by, he thought she was making an assignation. So he presented himself at nightfall at the same place, and sure enough Ying-ning was there. Seizing her hand, to tell his passion, he found that he was grasping only a log of wood which stood against the wall; and the next thing he knew was that a scorpion had stung him violently on the finger. There was an end of his romance, except that he died of the wound during the night, and his family at once commenced an action against Wang for having a witch-wife. The magistrate happened to be a great admirer of Wang's talent, and knew him to be an accomplished scholar; he therefore refused to grant the summons, and ordered the prosecutor to be barn-boomed for false accusation. Wang interposed and got him off this punishment, and returned home himself. His mother then scolded Ying-ning well, saying, "I knew your too playful disposition would some day bring sorrow upon you. But for our intelligent magistrate we should have been in a nice mess. Any ordinary hawk-like official would have had you publicly interrogated in court; and then how could your husband ever have held up his head again?" Ying-ning looked grave and swore she would laugh no more; and Mrs. Wang continued, "There's no harm in laughing as long as it is seasonable laughter;" but from that moment Ying-ning laughed no more, no matter what people did to make her, though at the same time her expression was by no means gloomy. One evening she went in tears to her husband, who wanted to know what was the matter. "I couldn't tell you before," said she, sobbing; "we had known each other such a short time. But now that you and your mother have been so kind to me, I will keep nothing from you, but tell you all. I am the daughter of a fox. When my mother went away she put me in the charge of the disembodied spirit of an old woman, with whom I remained for a period of over ten years.' I have no brothers: only you to whom I can look. And now my foster-mother is lying on the hillside with no one to bury her and appease her discontented shade. If not too much, I would ask you to do this, that her spirit may be at rest, and know that it was not neglected by her whom she

⁹ Disembodied spirits are supposed to have no shadow and but very little appetite. There are also certain occasions on which they cannot stand the smell of sulphur. Fiske, in his *Myths and Myth-makers* (page 230), says, "Almost universally, ghosts, however impervious to thrust of sword or shot of pistol, can eat and drink like Squire Westerns."

brought up;" Wang consented, but said he feared they would not be able to find her grave; on which Ying-ning said there was no danger of that, and accordingly they set forth together. When they arrived, Ying-ning pointed out the tomb in a lonely spot amidst a thicket, of brambles, and there they found the old woman's bones. Ying-ning wept bitterly, and then they proceeded to carry her remains home with them, subsequently interring them in the Ch'in family vault. That night Wang dreamt that the old woman came to thank him, and when he waked he told Ying-ning, who said that she had seen her also, and had been warned by her not to frighten Mr. Wang. Her husband asked why she had not detained the old lady; but Ying-ning replied, "She is a disembodied spirit, and would be ill at ease for any time surrounded by so much life."¹⁰ Wang then enquired after Hsiao-jung, and his wife said, "She was a fox too, and a very clever one. My foster-mother kept her to wait on me, and she was always getting fruit and cakes for me, so that I have a friendship for her and shall never forget her. My foster-mother told me yesterday she was married."

After this, whenever the great fast-day¹¹ came round, husband and wife went off without fail to worship at the Ch'in family tomb; and by the time a year had passed she gave birth to a son, who wasn't a bit afraid of strangers, but laughed at everybody, and in fact took very much after his mother.

¹⁰ These disembodied spirits are unable to stand for any length of time the light and life of this upper world, darkness and death being as it were necessary to their existence and comfort.

¹¹ The day before the annual spring festival.