

The Trader's Son

By P'u Sung-ling

In the province of Hunan there dwelt a man who was engaged in trading abroad; and his wife, who lived alone, dreamt one night that some one was in her room. Waking up, she looked about, and discovered a small creature which on examination she knew to be a fox; but in a moment the thing had disappeared, although the door had not been opened. The next evening she asked the cook-maid to come and keep her company; as also her own son, a boy of ten, who was accustomed to sleep elsewhere. Towards, the middle of the night, when the cook and the boy were fast asleep, back came the fox; and the cook was waked up by hearing her mistress muttering something as if she had nightmare. The former then called out, and the fox ran away; but from that moment the trader's wife was not quite herself. When night came she 'dared not blow out the candle, and bade her son be sure and not sleep too soundly. Later on, her son and the old woman having taken a nap as they leant against the wall, suddenly waked up and found her gone. They waited some time, but she did not return, and the cook was too frightened to go and look after her; so her son took a light, and at length found her fast asleep in another room. She didn't seem aware that anything particular had happened, but she became queerer and queerer every day, and wouldn't have either her son or the cook to keep her company any more. Her son, however, made a point of running at once into his mother's room, if he heard any unusual sounds; and though his mother always abused him for his pains, he paid no attention to what she said. Consequently, every one thought him very brave, though at the same time he was always indulging in childish tricks. One day he played at being a mason, and piled up stones upon the window-sill, in spite of all that was said to him; and if any one took away a stone, he threw himself on the ground, and cried like a child, so that nobody dared go near him. In a few days he had got both windows blocked up and the light excluded; and then he set to filling up the chinks with mud. He worked hard all day without minding the trouble, and when it was finished he took and sharpened the kitchen chopper. Every one who saw him was disgusted with such antics, and would take no notice of him. At night he darkened his lamp, and, with the knife concealed on his person sat waiting for his mother to mutter. As soon as she began he uncovered his light, and, blocking up the doorway, shouted out at the top of his voice. Nothing, however, happened, and he moved from the door a little way, when suddenly out rushed something like a fox, which was disappearing through the door, when he made a quick movement and cut off about two inches of its tail, from which the warm blood was still dripping as he brought the light to bear upon it. His mother hereupon cursed and reviled him, but he pretended not to hear her, regretting only as he went to bed that he hadn't hit the brute fair. But he consoled himself by thinking that although he hadn't killed it outright, he had done enough to prevent it coming again. On the morrow he followed the tracks of blood over the wall and into the garden of a family named Ho; and that night, to his great joy, the fox did not reappear. His mother was meanwhile prostrate, with hardly any life in her, and in the midst of it all his father came home. The boy told him what had happened, at which he was much alarmed, and sent for a doctor to attend his wife; but she only threw the medicine away, and cursed and swore horribly. So they secretly mixed the medicine with her tea and soup, and in a few days she began to get better, to the inexpressible delight of both her husband and son. One night, however, her husband woke up and found her gone; and after searching for her with the aid of his son, they discovered her

sleeping in another room. From that time she became more eccentric than ever, and was always being found in strange places, cursing those who tried to remove her. Her husband was at his wits' end. It was of no use keeping the door locked, for it opened of itself at her approach: and he had called in any number of magicians to exorcise the fox, but without obtaining the slightest result. One evening her son concealed himself in the Ho family garden, and lay down in the long grass with a view to detecting the fox's retreat. As the moon rose he heard the sound of voices, and, pushing aside the grass, saw two people drinking, with a long-bearded servant pouring out their wine, dressed in an old dark-brown coat. They were whispering together, and he could not make out what they said; but by-and-by he heard one of them remark; "Get some white wine for tomorrow," and then they went away, leaving the long-bearded servant alone. The latter then threw off his coat, and lay down to sleep on the stones; whereupon the trader's son eyed him carefully, and saw that he was like a man in every respect except that he had a tail. The boy would then have gone home; but he was afraid the fox might hear him, and accordingly remained where he was till near dawn, when he saw the other two come back, one at a time, and then they all disappeared among the bushes. On reaching home his father asked him where he had been, and he replied that he had stopped the night with the Ho family. He then accompanied his father to the town, where he saw hanging up at a hat-shop a fox's tail, and finally, after much coaxing, succeeded in making his father buy it for him. While the latter was engaged in a shop, his son, who was playing about beside him, availed himself of a moment when his father was not looking and stole some money from him, and went off and bought a quantity of white wine, which he left in charge of the wine-merchant. Now an uncle of his, who was a sportsman by trade, lived in the city, and thither he next betook himself. His uncle was out, but his aunt was there, and inquired after the health of his mother. "She has been better the last few days," replied he; "but she is now very much upset by a rat having gnawed a dress of hers, and has sent me to ask for some poison." His aunt opened the cupboard and gave him about the tenth of an ounce in a piece of paper, which he thought was very little; so, when his aunt had gone to get him something to eat, he took the opportunity of being alone, opened the packet, and abstracted a large handful. Hiding this in his coat, he ran to tell his aunt that she needn't prepare anything for him, as his father was waiting in the market, and he couldn't stop to eat it. He then went off; and having quietly dropped the poison into the wine he had bought, went sauntering about the town. At nightfall he returned home, and told his father that he had been at his uncle's. This he continued to do for some time, until one day he saw among the crowd his long-bearded friend. Marking him closely, he followed him, and at length entered into conversation, asking him where he lived. "I live at Pei-ts'un," said he; "where do you live?" "I," replied the trader's son, falsely, "live in a hole on the hillside." The long-bearded man was considerably startled at his answer, but much more so when he added, "We've lived there for generations: haven't *you*?" The other man asked his name, to which the boy replied, "My name is, Hu.¹ I saw you with two gentlemen in the Ho family garden, and haven't forgotten you." Questioning him more fully, the long-bearded man was still in a half-and-half state of belief and doubt, when the trader's son opened his coat a little bit, and showed him the end of the tail he had bought, saying, "The like of us can mix with ordinary people, but unfortunately we can never get rid of this." The long-bearded man then asked him what he was doing there, to which he answered that his father had sent him to buy wine; thereupon the former remarked that that was exactly what he had come for, and the boy then inquired if he had bought it yet or not. "We are poor," replied the stranger, "and as a rule I

¹ *Hu* is the sound of the character for "fox;" it is also the sound of quite a different character, which is used as a surname.

prefer to steal it.” “A difficult and dangerous job,” observed the boy. “I have my masters’ instructions to get some,” said the other, “and what ‘am I to do?” The boy then asked him who his masters were, to which he replied that they were the two brothers the boy had seen that night. “One of them has bewitched a lady named Wang; and the other, the wife of a trader who lives near. The son of the last-mentioned lady is a violent fellow, and cut off my master’s tail, so that he was laid up for ten days. But he is putting her under spells again now.” He was then going away, saying he should never get his wine; but the boy said to him, “It’s much easier to buy than steal. I have some at the wine-shop there which I will give to you. My purse isn’t empty, and I can buy some more.” The long-bearded man hardly knew how to thank him; but the boy said, “We’re all one family. Don’t mention such a trifle. When I have time I’ll come and take a drink with you.” So they went off together to the wine-shop, where the boy gave him the wine, and they then separated. That night his mother slept quietly and had no fits, and the boy knew that something must have happened. He then told his father, and they went to see if there were any results; when lo! they found both foxes stretched out dead in the arbour. One of the foxes was lying on the grass, and out of its mouth blood was still trickling. The wine-bottle was there; and on shaking it they heard that some was left. Then his father asked him why he had kept it all so secret; to which the boy replied that foxes were very sagacious, and would have been sure to scent the plot. Thereupon his father was mightily pleased, and said he was a perfect Ulysses² for cunning. They then carried the foxes home, and saw on the tail of one of them the scar of a knife-wound. From that time they were left in peace; but the trader’s wife became very thin, and though her reason returned, she shortly afterwards died of consumption. The other lady, Mrs. Wang, began to get better as soon as the foxes had been killed; and as to the boy, he was taught riding and archery³ by his proud parent, and, subsequently rose to high rank in the army.

² The name of the Chinese type was Ch’ên P’ing.

³ Skill in archery was until quite lately *de rigueur* for all Manchus, and for those who would rise in the Chinese army.