

# The Fight With the Foxes

By P'u Sung-ling

In the province of Chih-li, there was a wealthy family in want of a tutor. One day a graduate presented himself at the door, and was asked by the master of the house to walk in; and he conversed so pleasantly that in a short time it was clear to both sides that they were mutually pleased with each other. The tutor said his name was Hu; and when the usual present had been made to him, he was forthwith provided with apartments, and entered very energetically upon his duties, proving himself a scholar of no mean order. He was, however, very fond of roaming, and generally came back in the middle of the night, not troubling himself to knock if the door was locked, but suddenly appearing on the inside. It was therefore suspected that he was a fox, though as his intentions seemed to be harmless, he was treated extremely well, and not with any want of courtesy as if he had been something uncanny. By-and-by he discovered that his master had a daughter, and being desirous of securing the match was always dropping hints to that effect, which his master, on the other hand, invariably pretended not to understand. One day he went off for a holiday, and on the next day a stranger called; who, tying a black mule at the door, accepted the invitation of the master to take a seat within. He was about fifty years of age, very neat and clean in his dress, and gentlemanly in his manners. When they were seated, the stranger began by saying that he was come with proposals of marriage on behalf of Mr. Hu; to which his host, after some consideration, replied that he and Mr. Hu got along excellently well as friends, and there was no object in bringing about a closer connection. "Besides," added he, "my daughter is already betrothed, and I beg you, therefore, to ask Mr. Hu to excuse me." The stranger said he was quite sure the young lady was not engaged, and inquired what might be the objection to the match: but it was all of no avail, until at length he remarked, "Mr. Hu is of a good family; I see no reason why you should have such an aversion to him." "Well, then," replied the other, "I will tell you what it is. We don't like his *species*." The stranger here got very angry, and his host also lost his temper, so that they came to high words, and were already on the way to blows, when the latter bade his servants give the stranger a beating and turn him out. The stranger then retired, leaving his mule behind him; and when they drew near to look at it they found a huge creature with black hair, drooping ears, and a long tail. They tried to lead it away, but it would not move; and on giving it a shove with the hand from behind, it toppled over and was discovered to be only of straw. In consequence of the angry words that had been said, the master of the house felt sure that there would be an attempt at revenge, and accordingly made all preparations; and sure enough the next day a whole host of fox-soldiers arrived, some on horseback, some on foot, some with spears, and others with cross-bows, men and horses trampling along with an indescribable din. The family were afraid to leave the house, and the foxes shouted out to set the place on fire, at which the inmates were dreadfully alarmed; but just then one of the bravest of them rushed forth with a number of the servants to engage the foxes. Stones and arrows flew about in all directions, and many on both sides were wounded; at length, however, the foxes drew off, leaving their swords on the field. These glittered like frost or snow, but when picked up turned out to be only millet-stalks. "Is this all their cunning?" cried their adversary, laughing, at the same time making still more careful preparations in case the foxes should come again. Next day they were deliberating together, when suddenly a giant descended upon them from the sky. He was over ten feet in height by several feet in breadth, and brandished

a sword as broad as half a door; but they attacked him so vigorously with arrows and stones that he was soon stretched dead upon the ground, when they saw that he was made of grass. Our friends now began to make light of their fox-foes, and as they saw nothing more of them for three days their precautions were somewhat relaxed. The foxes, however, soon reappeared, armed with bows and arrows, and succeeded in shooting the master of the house in the back, disappearing when he summoned his servants and proceeded to attack them. Then, drawing the arrow from his back, he found it was a long thorn; and thus the foxes went on for a month or so, coming and going, and making it necessary to take precautions, though not really inflicting any serious injury. This annoyed the master of the family very much, until one day Mr. Hu<sup>2</sup> himself appeared with a troop of soldiers at his back, and he immediately went out to meet him. Mr. Hu withdrew among his men, but the master called to him to come forth, and then asked him what he had done that soldiers should be thus brought against his family. The foxes were now on the point of discharging their arrows; Mr. Hu, however, stopped them; whereupon he and his old master shook hands, and the latter invited him to walk into his old room. Wine being served, his host observed, "You, Mr. Hu, are a man of intelligence, and I trust you will make allowances for me. Friends as we were, I should naturally have been glad to form a connection with you; your carriages, however, horses, houses, &c., are not those of ordinary mortals; and even had my daughter consented, you must know the thing would have been impossible, she being still a great deal too young." Mr. Hu was somewhat disconcerted at this, but his host continued, "It's of no consequence; we can still be friends as before, and if you do not despise us earthly-creatures, there is my son whom you have taught; he is fifteen years old, and I should be proud to see him connected with you if such an arrangement should be feasible." Mr. Hu was delighted, and said, "I have a daughter one year younger than your son; she is neither ugly nor stupid. How would she do?" His host got up and made a low bow, which Mr. Hu forthwith returned, and they then became the best of friends, forgetting all about the former unpleasantness. Wine was given to Mr. Hu's attendants, and every one was made happy. The host now inquired where Mr. Hu lived, that the ceremony of pouring out a libation to the geese<sup>1</sup> might be performed; but Mr. Hu said this would not be necessary, and remained drinking till night, when he went away again. From this time there was no more trouble; and a year passed without any news of Mr. Hu, so that it seemed as if he wished to get out of his bargain. The family, however, went on waiting, and in six months more Mr. Hu reappeared, when, after a few general remarks, he declared that his daughter was ready, and requested that an auspicious day might be fixed for her to come. To her husband's home. This being arranged, the young lady arrived with a retinue of sedan-chairs, and horses, and a beautiful trousseau that nearly filled a room. She was unusually respectful to her father and mother-in-law, and the former was much pleased with the match. Her father and a younger brother of his had escorted her to the house, and conversing away in a most refined style they sat drinking till daybreak before they went away. The bride herself had the gift of foreknowing whether the harvest would be good or bad, and her advice was always taken in such matters. Mr. Hu and his brother, and also their mother, often came to visit her in her new home, and were then very frequently seen by people.

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<sup>1</sup> A very ancient custom in China, originating in a belief that these birds never mate a second time. The libation is made on the occasion of the bridegroom fetching his bride from her father's house.