

The Magnanimous Girl

By P'u Sung-ling

At Chin-ling there lived a young man named Ku, who had considerable ability but was very poor; and having an old mother, he was very loth to leave home. So he employed himself in writing or painting for people, and gave his mother the proceeds, going on thus till he was twenty-five years of age without taking a wife. Opposite to their house was another building, which had long been untenanted; and one day an old woman and a young girl came to occupy it, but there being no gentleman with them young Ku did not make any inquiries as to who they were or whence they hailed. Shortly afterwards it chanced that just as Ku was entering the house he observed a young lady come out of his mother's door. She was about eighteen or nineteen, very clever and refined looking, and altogether such a girl as one rarely sets eyes on; and when she noticed Mr. Ku, she did not run away, but seemed quite self-possessed. "It was the young lady over the way; she came to borrow my scissors and measure," said his mother, "and she told me that there was only her mother and herself. They don't seem to belong to the lower classes. I asked her why she didn't get married, to which she replied that her mother was old. I must go and call on her 'to-morrow, and find out how the land lies. If she doesn't expect too much, you could take care of her mother for her." So next day Ku's mother went, and found that the girl's mother was deaf, and that they were evidently poor, apparently not having a day's food in the house. Ku's mother asked what their employment was, and the old lady said they trusted for food to her daughter's ten fingers. She then threw out some hints about uniting the two families, to which the old lady seemed to agree; but, on consultation with her daughter, the latter would not consent. Mrs. Ku returned home and told her son, saying, "Perhaps she thinks we are too poor. She doesn't speak or laugh, is very nice-looking, and as pure as snow; truly no ordinary girl." There ended that; until one day, as Ku was sitting in his study, up came a very agreeable young fellow, who said he was from a neighbouring village, and engaged Ku to draw a picture for him. The two youths soon struck up a firm friendship and met constantly, when it happened that the stranger chanced to see the young lady of over the way. "Who is that?" said he, following her with his eyes. Ku told him, and then he said, "She is certainly pretty, but rather stern in her appearance." By-and-by Ku went in, and his mother told him the girl had come to beg a little rice, as they had had nothing to eat all day. "She's a good daughter," said his mother, "and I'm very sorry for her. We must try and help them a little;" Ku thereupon shouldered a peck of rice, and, knocking at their door, presented it with his mother's compliments. The young lady received the rice but said nothing; and then she got into the habit of coming over and helping Ku's mother with her work and household affairs, almost as if she had been her daughter-in-law, for which Ku was very grateful to her, and whenever he had anything nice he always sent some of it in to her mother, though the young lady herself never once took the trouble to thank him. So things went on until Ku's mother got an abscess on her leg, and lay writhing in agony day and night. Then the young lady devoted herself to the invalid, waiting on her and giving her medicine with such care and attention that at last the sick woman cried out, "Oh, that I could secure such a daughter-in-law as you, to see this old body into its grave!" The young lady soothed her, and replied, "Your son is a hundred times more filial than I, a poor widow's only daughter." "But even a filial son makes a bad nurse," answered the patient; "besides I am now drawing towards the evening of my life, when my body will be exposed to the mists and the dews, and I am vexed

in spirit about our ancestral worship and the continuance of our line." As she was speaking Ku walked in; and his mother, weeping, said, "I am deeply indebted to this young lady; do not forget to repay her goodness." Ku made a low bow, but the young lady said, "Sir, when you were kind to my mother, I did not thank you; why, then, thank me?" Ku thereupon became more than ever attached to her; but could never get her to depart in the slightest degree from her cold demeanour towards himself. One day, however, he managed to squeeze her hand, upon which she told him never to do so again; and then for some time he neither saw nor heard anything of her. She had conceived a violent dislike to the young stranger above-mentioned; and one evening when he was sitting talking with Ku, the young lady reappeared. After a while she got angry at something he said, and drew from her robe a glittering knife about a foot long. The young man, seeing her do this, ran out in a fright and she after him, only to find that he had vanished. She then threw her dagger up into the air, and *whish!* a streak of light like a rainbow, and something came tumbling down with a flop. Ku got a light, and ran to see what it was; and lo! there lay a white fox, head in one place and body in another. "There is your *friend*," cried the girl; "I knew he would cause me to destroy him sooner or later." Ku dragged it into the house, and said, "Let us wait till tomorrow to talk it over; we shall then be more calm." Next day the young lady arrived, and Ku inquired about her knowledge of the black art; but she told Ku not to trouble himself about such affairs, and to keep it Secret or it might be prejudicial to his happiness. Ku then entreated her to consent to their union, to which she replied that she had already been as it were a daughter-in-law to his mother, and there was no need to push the thing further. "Is it because I am poor?" asked Ku. "Well, I am not rich," answered she, "but the fact is I had rather not." She then took her leave, and the next evening when Ku went across to their house to try once more to persuade her, the young lady had disappeared, and was never seen again.