

He swore to this.

That night they slept together, and for several days he kept her hidden in his study without anyone knowing that she was there. Then he decided to confide in his wife, the lady Chen. She feared the consequences if the girl should turn out to have escaped from some influential family, and advised him to send her away. But he paid no heed to her advice.

A few days later, in the marketplace, Wang ran into a Taoist priest, who studied his face with grave concern. 'What strange thing have you encountered?'

'Why, nothing!' replied Wang.

'Nothing? Your whole being is wrapped in an evil aura,' insisted the Taoist. 'I tell you, you are bewitched!'

Wang protested vehemently that he was speaking the truth.

'Bewitched!' muttered the Taoist, as he went on his way.

'Poor fool! Some men blind themselves to the truth even when death is staring them in the face!'

Something in the Taoist's strange words set Wang wondering, and he began to have serious misgivings about the young woman he had taken in. But he could not bring himself to believe that such a pretty young thing could have cast an evil spell on him. Instead he persuaded himself that the Taoist was making it all up, trying to put the wind up him in the hope of being retained for a costly rite of exorcism. And so he put the matter out of his mind and returned home.

He reached his study to find the outer door barred. He was unable to enter his own home. His suspicions now genuinely aroused, he clambered into the courtyard through a hole in the wall, only to find that the inner door was also closed. Creeping stealthily up to a window, he peeped through and saw the most hideous sight, a green-faced monster, a ghoul with great jagged teeth like a saw, leaning over a human pelt, the skin of an entire human body, spread on the bed – on *his* bed. The monster had a paintbrush in its hand and was in the process of touching up the skin in lifelike colour. When the painting was done, it threw down the brush, lifted up the skin, shook it out like a cloak and wrapped itself in it – whereupon it was instantly transformed into his pretty young 'fugitive' friend.

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THE PAINTED SKIN

A certain gentleman by the name of Wang, from the city of Tai-yuan, was out walking early one morning when a young woman passed him carrying a bundle, hurrying along on her own, though with considerable difficulty. He caught up with her, and saw at once that she was a girl of about sixteen, and very beautiful.

'What are you doing out here all alone at this early hour?'

he asked, instantly smitten.

'Why do you bother to ask, since you are only a passer-by and can do nothing to ease my troubles?' was her reply.

'Tell me, what has caused this sorrow of yours? I will do anything I can to help you.'

'My parents were greedy for money,' she replied sadly, 'and sold me as a concubine into a rich man's household. The master's wife was jealous of me, and she was always screaming at me and beating me, until in the end I could bear it no longer and decided to run away.'

'Where are you going?'

'I am a fugitive. I have no place to go.'

'My own humble abode is not far from here,' said Wang. 'I should be honoured if you were to accompany me there.'

She seemed only too pleased at this suggestion and followed him home, Wang carrying her bundle for her. When they arrived, she observed that the house was empty.

'Do you have no family of your own?' she asked.

'This is my private study,' he replied.

'It seems an excellent place to me,' she said. 'But I must ask you to keep my presence here a secret and not to breathe a word of it to anyone. My very life depends on it.'

Wang was absolutely terrified by what he had seen, and crept away on all fours. He went at once in search of the Taoist, but did not know where to find him. He looked for him everywhere and eventually found him out in the fields. Falling on his knees, he begged the priest to save him.

'I can drive her away for you,' said the Taoist. 'But I cannot bring myself to take her life. The poor creature must have suffered greatly and is clearly close to finding a substitute and thus ending her torment.'

He gave Wang a fly-whisk and told him to hang it outside his bedroom door, instructing him to come and find him again in the Temple of the Green Emperor.

Wang returned home. This time he did not dare to go into his study, but slept with his wife, hanging the fly-whisk outside their bedroom. Late that night he heard a faint sound at the door, and not having the courage to look himself, he asked his wife to go. It was the 'girl'. She had come, but had halted on seeing the fly-whisk and was standing there grinding her teeth. Eventually she went away, only to return after a little while.

'That priest thought to scare me!' she cried. 'I'll never give up! Not now, not when I am so close! Does he think I'm going to spit it out, when I'm so near to swallowing it!'

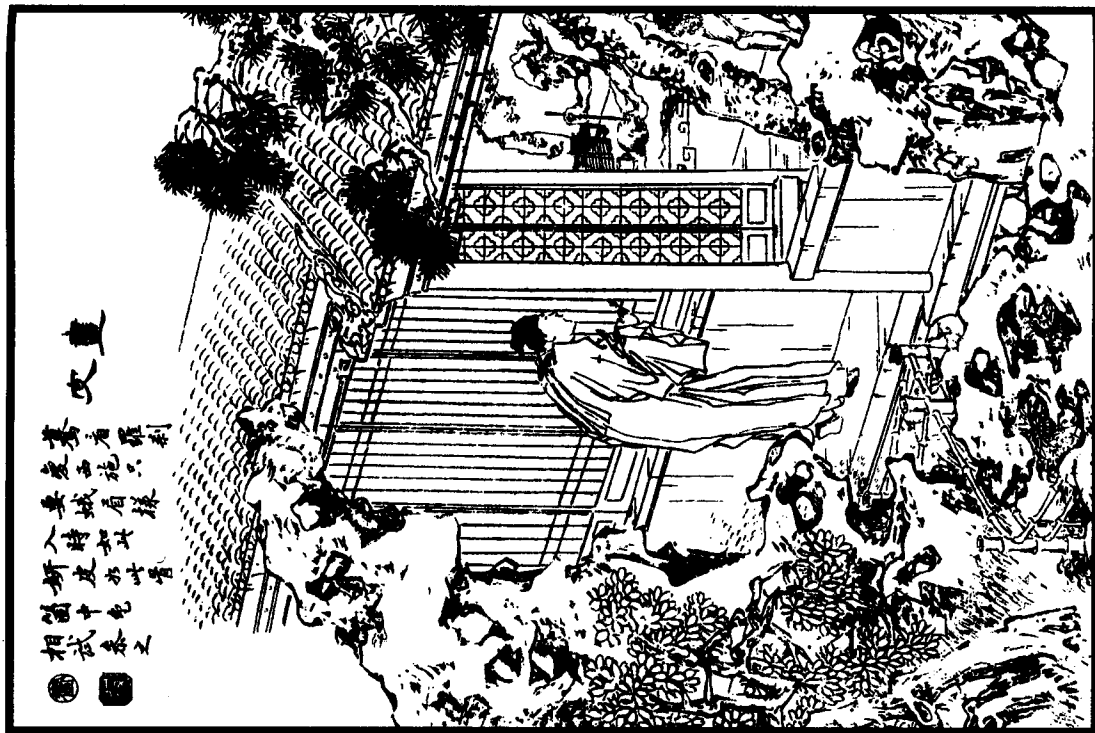
She tore down the fly-whisk and ripped it to pieces, then broke down the door and burst into the bedroom. Climbing straight up on to the bed, she tore open Wang's chest, plucked out his heart and made off with it into the night. Wang's wife began screaming, and a maid came hurrying with a lamp, to find her master lying dead on the bed, his chest a bloody pulp, and her mistress sobbing in silent horror beside him, incapable of uttering a word. The next morning, they sent Wang's younger brother off at once to find the Taoist.

'To think that I took pity on her!' cried the priest angrily. 'Clearly that fiend will stop at nothing!'

He followed Wang's brother back to the house. By now, of course, there was no trace of the 'girl'. The Taoist gazed around him. 'Fortunately she is still close at hand.'

He went on to ask, 'Who lives in the house to the south?'

'That is my family compound,' replied Wang's brother.



He peeped through and saw the most hideous sight.

'That is where she is now,' said the priest.

Wang's brother was appalled at the idea and could not bring himself to believe it.

'Has a stranger come to your house today?' asked the priest.

'How would I know?' replied the brother. 'I went out first thing to the Temple of the Green Emperor to fetch you. I shall have to go home and ask.'

Presently he returned to report that there had indeed been an old lady. 'She called first thing this morning, saying she wanted to work for us. My wife kept her on, and she is still there.'

'That's the very person we're looking for!' cried the Taoist. He strode next door immediately with the brother, and took up a stance in the middle of the courtyard, brandishing his wooden sword.

'Come out, evil one!' he cried. 'Give me back my fly-whisk!'

The old woman came hurtling out of the building, her face deathly pale, and made a frantic attempt to escape, but the Taoist pursued her and struck her down. As she fell to the ground the human pelt slipped from her, to reveal her as the vile fiend she really was, grovelling on the ground and grunting like a pig. The Taoist swung his wooden sword again and chopped off the monster's head, whereupon its body was transformed into a thick cloud of smoke hovering above the ground. The Taoist now took out a bottle-gourd, removed the stopper and placed it in the midst of the smoke. With a whooshing sound the smoke was sucked into the gourd, leaving no trace in the courtyard. He replaced the stopper and slipped the gourd back into his bag.

When they examined the pelt, it was complete in every human detail – the eyes, the hands and feet. The Taoist proceeded to roll it up like a scroll (it even made the same sound), placed it in his bag and set off. Wang's wife, who was waiting for him at the entrance, beseeched him to bring her husband back to life, and when the Taoist protested that he had already reached the limits of his powers, she became more and more hysterical and inconsolable, throwing herself on the ground and absolutely refusing to get up. The Taoist seemed to ponder the matter deeply.

'Truly, I cannot raise the dead,' he said eventually. 'But I can tell you of one who may be able to do so. Go to him, ask him, and I dare say he will be able to help you.'

Wang's wife asked him whom he was referring to.

'He is a madman who frequents the marketplace and sleeps in a dunghill. You must go down on your knees and beg him to help you. If he insults you, madam, you must on no account go against him or be angry with him.'

Wang's brother knew of this beggar. He took his leave of the Taoist, and accompanied his sister-in-law to the marketplace, where they found the man begging by the roadside, singing a crazy song. A good three inches of mucus trailed from his nose, and he was so foul it was unthinkable to go near him. But Wang's wife approached him on her knees.

'Do you love me, my pretty?' leered the mad beggar.

She told him her tale, and he laughed loudly.

'There's plenty of fine men in this world for you to marry! Why bother bringing *him* back to life?'

She pleaded with him.

'You're a strange one!' he said. 'You want me to raise the dead? Who do you take me for – the King of Hell?'

He struck her with his stick and she bore it without a murmur. By now quite a crowd had gathered around them. The beggar spat a great gob of phlegm into the palm of his hand and held it up to her mouth.

'Eat!'

She flushed deeply and could not bring herself to obey his order. Then she remembered what the Taoist had commanded and steeled herself to swallow the congealed phlegm. As it went down her throat it felt hard like a lump of cotton wadding, and even when, after several gulps, she managed to swallow it down, she could still feel it lodged in her chest. The madman guffawed.

'You really do love me then, don't you, my darling?'

And with those words, off he went. The meeting was clearly over, and he paid her no further attention. She followed him into the temple, determined to plead with him again, but though she searched every corner of the temple, she could find no trace of him. So she returned home, greatly downcast,

filled with grief at her husband's appalling death, and overcome with shame and self-disgust at the treatment she had tolerated from the mad beggar. She wailed pathetically and for a time contemplated taking her own life.

When eventually she went to wash the blood from her husband's corpse and prepare it for the coffin, her women stood to one side watching, none of them having the stomach to approach their dead master's corpse. She lifted him up in her arms and started carefully replacing his internal organs, sobbing so fiercely that she began to choke and feel nauseous. Then she felt the lump of phlegm rising in her gullet and brought it up, so suddenly that she had no time to turn away, but spat it directly into the gaping wound in her husband's chest. She stared aghast: the phlegm had become a human heart and lay there throbbing, hot and steaming. In disbelief, she brought the sides of the wound together with both her hands, pressing with all her strength. If she relaxed her grip for an instant, she saw hot steam leaking from the wound. She tore a strip of silk from her dress and bound the wound tightly. In a little while, when she touched her husband's corpse, she felt the warmth returning. She drew the bedcovers fully over it. In the middle of the night when she lifted the covers, he was already breathing through his nose. By the next morning, he was fully alive.

'I was drifting,' he said. 'Everything was confused. It was like a dream. But all the time I felt this pain deep in my heart.'

The wound formed a scar the size of a coin, which disappeared with time.