



THE GHOST IN LOVE

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A chapter from an eBook of short ghost and horror stories with LibriVox recordings.

Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisures

Chapter

THE GHOST IN LOVE

On the 15th day of the First Moon, in the second year of the period of "Renewed Principles," the streets of the town of the Eastern Lake were thronged with people who were strolling about.

At the setting of the sun every shop was brightly lit up; processions of people moved hither and thither; strings of boys were carrying lanterns of every form and colour; whole families passed, every member of whom, young or old, small or big, was holding at the end of a thin bamboo the lighted image of a bird, an animal, or a flower.

Richer ones, several together, were carrying enormous dragons whose luminous wings waved at every motion and whose glaring eyes rolled from right to left. It was the Fête of the Lanterns.

A young man, clothed in a long pale green dress, allowed himself to be pushed about by the crowd; the passers-by bowed to him:

"How is my Lord Li The-peaceful?"

"The humble student thanks you; and you, how are you?"

"Very well, thanks to your happy influence."

"Does the precious student soon pass his second literary examination?"

"In two months; ignorant that I am. I am idling instead of working."

The fête was drawing to a close when The-peaceful quitted the main street, and went towards the East Gate, where the house was to be found in which he lived alone.

He went farther and farther: the moving lights were rarer; ere long he only saw before him the fire of a white lantern decorated with two red peonies. The paper globe was swinging to the steps of a tiny girl clothed in the blue linen that only slaves wore. The light, behind, showed the elegant silhouette of another woman, this one covered with a long jacket made in a rich pink silk edged with purple.

As the student drew nearer, the belated walker turned round, showing an oval face and big long eyes, wherein shone a bright speck, cruel and mysterious.

Li The-peaceful slackened his pace, following the two strangers, whose small feet glided silently on the shining flagstones of the street.

He was asking himself how he could begin a conversation, when the mistress turned round again, softly smiled, and in a low, rich voice, said to him:

"Is it not strange that in the advancing night we are following the same road?"

"I owe it to the favour of Heaven," he at once replied; "for I am returning to the East Gate; otherwise I should never have dared to follow you."

The conversation, once begun, continued as they walked side by side. The student learned that the pretty walker was called "Double-peony," that she was the daughter of Judge Siu, that she lived out of the city in a garden planted with big trees, on the road to the lake.

On arriving at his house The-peaceful insisted that his new friend should enter and take a cup of tea. She hesitated; then the two young people pushed the door, crossed the small yard bordered right and left with walls covered with tiles, and disappeared in the house....

The servant remained under the portal.

Daylight was breaking when the young girl came out again, calling the servant, who was asleep. The next evening she came again, always accompanied by the slave bearing the white lantern with two red peonies. It was the same each day following.

A neighbour who had watched these nocturnal visits was inquisitive enough to climb the wall which separated his yard from that of the lovers, and to wait, hidden in the shade of the house.

At the accustomed hour the street-door, left ajar, opened to let in the visitors.

Once in the courtyard, they were suddenly transformed, their eyes became flaming and red; their faces grew pale; their teeth seemed to lengthen; an icy mist escaped from their lips.

The neighbour did not see any more: terrified, he let himself slide to the ground and ran to his inner room.

The next morning he went to the student and told him what he had seen. The lover was paralysed with fear: in order to reassure himself he resolved to find out everything he could about his mistress.

He at once went outside the ramparts, on the road to the lake, hoping to find the house of Judge Siu. But at the place he had been told of there was no habitation; on the left, a fallow plain, sown with tombs, went up to the hills; on the right, cultivated fields extended as far as the lake.

However, a small temple was hidden there under big trees. The student had given up all hope; he entered, notwithstanding, into the sacred enclosure, knowing that travellers stayed there sometimes for several weeks.

In the first yard a bonze was passing in his red dress and shaven head; he stopped him.

"Do you know Judge Siu? He has a daughter——"

"Judge Siu's daughter?" asked the priest, astonished. "Well—yes—but wait, I will show her to you."

The peaceful felt his heart overflowing with joy; his beloved one was living; he was going to see her by the light of day. He quickly followed his companion.

Passing the first court, they crossed a threshold and found themselves in a yard planted with high pine-trees and bordered by a low pavilion. The bonze, passing in first, pushed a door, and, turning round, said:

"Here is Judge Siu's daughter!"

The other stopped, terrified; on a trestle a heavy black lacquered coffin bore this inscription in golden letters: "Coffin of Double-peony, Judge Siu's daughter."

On the wall was an unfolded painting representing the little maid; a white lantern decorated with two red peonies was hung over it.

"Yes, she has been there for the last two years; her parents, according to the rite, are waiting for a favourable day to bury her."

The student silently turned on his heel and went back, not deigning to reply to the mocking bow of the priest.

Evening arrived; he locked himself in, and, covering his head with his blankets, he waited; sleep came to him only at daybreak.

But he could not cease to think of her whom he no longer saw; his heart beat as if to burst, when in the street he perceived the silhouette of a woman which reminded him of his friend.

At last he was incapable of containing himself any longer; one evening he stationed himself behind the door. After a few minutes there was a knock; he opened the door; it was only the little maid:

"My mistress is in tears; why do you never open the door? I come every evening. If you will follow me, perhaps she will forgive you."

The-peaceful, blinded by love, started at once, walking by the light of the white lantern.

The next day the neighbours, seeing that the student's door was open, and that his house was empty, made a declaration to the governor of the town.

The police made an inquest; they collected the evidence of several people who had been watching the nightly visitors the student had received. The bonze of the temple outside the city walls came to say what he knew. The chief of the police went to the road leading to the lake; he crossed the threshold of the little edifice, passed the first yard and at last opened the door of the pavilion.

Everything was in order, but under the lid of the heavy coffin one could see the corner of the long green dress of the student.

In order to do away with evil influences there was a solemn funeral.

Ever since this time, on light clear nights, the passers-by often meet the two lovers entwined together, slowly walking on the road which leads to the lake.