

The Night on the Battlefield

The Chinese Fairy Book

Chinese

Intermediate
4 min read

Once upon a time there was a merchant, who was wandering toward Shantung with his wares, along the road from the South. At about the second watch of the night, a heavy storm blew up from the North. And he chanced to see an inn at one side of the road, whose lights were just being lit. He went in to get something to drink and order lodgings for the night, but the folk at the inn raised objections. Yet an old man among them took pity on his unhappy situation and said: "We have just prepared a meal for warriors who have come a long distance, and we have no wine left to serve you. But there is a little side room here which is still free, and there you may stay overnight." With these words he led him into it. But the merchant could not sleep because of his hunger and thirst.

Outside he could hear the noise of men and horses. And since all these proceedings did not seem quite natural to him, he got up and looked through a crack in the door. And he saw that the whole inn was filled with soldiers, who were sitting on the ground, eating and drinking, and talking about campaigns of which he had never heard. After a time they began calling to each other: "The general is coming!" And far off in the distance could be heard the cries of his bodyguard. All the soldiers hurried out to receive him. Then the merchant saw a procession with many paper lanterns, and riding in their midst a man of martial appearance with a long beard. He dismounted, entered the inn, and took his place at the head of the board. The soldiers mounted guard at the door, awaiting his commands, and the inn-keeper served food and drink, to which the general did full

justice.

When he had finished his officers entered, and he said to them: "You have now been underway for some time. Go back to your men. I shall rest a little myself. It will be time enough to beat the assembly when the order to advance is given."

The officers received his commands and withdrew. Then the general called out: "Send Asti in!" and a young officer entered from the left side of the house. The people of the inn locked the gates and withdrew for the night, while Asti conducted the long-haired general to a door at the left, through a crack of which shone the light of a lamp. The merchant stole from his room and looked through the crack in the door. Within the room was a bed of bamboo, without covers or pillows. The lamp stood on the ground. The long-bearded general took hold of his head. It came off and he placed it on the bed. Then Asti took hold of his arms. These also came off and were carefully placed beside the head. Then the old general threw himself down on the bed crosswise, and Asti took hold of his body, which came apart below the thighs, and the two legs fell to the ground. Then the lamp went out. Overcome by terror the merchant hurried back to his room as fast as he could, holding his sleeves before his eyes, and laid down on his bed, where he tossed about sleepless all night.

At last he heard a cock crow in the distance. He was shivering. He took his sleeves from his face and saw that dawn was stealing along the sky. And when he looked about him, there he was lying in the middle of a thick clump of brush. Round about him was a wilderness, not a house, not even a grave was to be seen anywhere. In spite of being chilled, he ran about three miles till he came to the nearest inn. The inn-keeper opened the door and asked him with astonishment where he came from at that early hour. So the merchant told him his experiences and inquired as to the sort of place at which he had spent the night. The inn-keeper shook his head: "The whole neighborhood is covered with old battlefields," was his reply, "and all sorts of supernatural things take place on them after dark."

Note: This tale is taken from the Sin Tsi Hia.

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