

THE BOAT-GIRL BRIDE.

WANG KULI-NGAN was a young man of good family. It happened once when he was travelling southwards, and had moored his boat to the bank, that he saw in another boat close by a young boat-girl embroidering shoes. He was much struck by her beauty, and continued gazing at her for some time, though she took not the slightest notice of him. By-and-by he began singing—

“The Lo-yang lady lives over the way:
[Fifteen years is her age I should say].”

to attract her attention, and then she seemed to perceive that he was addressing himself to her; but, after just raising her head and glancing at him, she resumed her embroidery as before. Wang then threw a piece of silver towards her, which fell on her skirt; however she merely picked it up, and flung it on to the bank, as if she had not seen what it was, so Wang put it back in his pocket again. He followed up by throwing her a gold bracelet, to which she paid no attention whatever, never taking her eyes off her work. A few minutes after her father appeared, much to the dismay of Wang, who was afraid he would see the bracelet; but the young girl quietly placed her feet over it, and concealed it from his sight. The boatman let go the painter, and away they went down stream, leaving Wang sitting there, not knowing what to do next. And, having recently lost his wife, he regretted that he had not seized this opportunity to make another match; the more so, as when he came to ask the other boat-people of the place, no one knew anything about them. So Wang got into his own boat, and started off in pursuit; but evening came on, and, as he could see nothing of them, he was obliged to turn back and proceed in the direction where business was taking him. When he had finished that, he returned, making inquiries all the way along, but without hearing anything about the object of his search. On arriving at home, he was unable either to eat or to sleep, so much did this affair occupy his mind; and about a year afterwards he went south again, bought a boat, and lived in it as his home, watching carefully every single vessel that passed either up or down, until at last there was hardly one he didn't know by sight. But all this time the boat he was looking for never reappeared.

Some six months passed away thus, and then, having exhausted all his funds, he was obliged to go home, where he remained in a state of general inaptitude for anything. One night he dreamed that he entered a village on the river-bank, and that, after passing several houses, he saw one with a door towards the south, and a palisade of bamboos inside. Thinking it was a garden, he walked in and beheld a beautiful magnolia, covered with blossoms, which reminded him of the line—

“And Judas-tree in flower before her door.”

A few steps farther on was a neat bamboo hedge, on the other side of which, towards the north, he found a small house, with three columns, the door of which was locked; and another, towards the south, with its window shaded by the broad leaves of a plaintain-tree. The door was barred by a clothes-horse, on which was hanging an embroidered petticoat; and, on seeing this, Wang stepped back, knowing that he had got to the ladies' quarters; but his presence had already been noticed inside, and, in another moment, out came his heroine of the boat. Overjoyed at seeing her, he was on the point of grasping her hand, when suddenly the girl's father arrived, and, in his consternation, Wang waked up, and found that it was all a dream. Every incident of it, however, remained clear and distinct in his mind, and he took care to say nothing about it to anybody, for fear of destroying its reality.

Another year passed away, and he went again to Chinkiang, where lived an official, named Hsü, who was an old friend of the family, and who invited Wang to come and take a cup of wine with him. On his way thither, Wang lost his way, but at length reached a village which seemed familiar to him, and which he soon found, by the door with the magnolia inside, to be identical, in every particular, with the village of his dream. He went in through the doorway, and there was everything as he had seen it in his dream, even to the boat-girl herself. She jumped up on his arrival, and, shutting the door in his face, asked what his business was there. Wang inquired if she had forgotten about the bracelet, and went on to tell her how long he had been searching for her, and how, at last, she had been revealed to him in a dream. The girl then begged to know his name and family; and when she heard who he was, she asked what a gentleman like himself could want with a poor boat-girl like her, as he must have a wife of his own. "But for you," replied Wang, "I should, indeed, have been married long ago." Upon which the girl told him if that was really the case, he had better apply to her parents, "although," added she, "they have already refused a great many offers for me. The bracelet you gave me is here, but my father and mother are just now away from home; they will be back shortly. You go away now and engage a match-maker, when I dare say it will be all right if the proper formalities are observed." Wang then retired, the girl calling after him to remember that her name was Mêng Yün, and her father's Mêng Chiang-li. He proceeded at once on his way to Mr. Hsü's, and after that sought out his intended father-in-law, telling him who he was, and offering him at the same time one hundred ounces of silver, as betrothal-money for his daughter. "She is already promised," replied the old man; upon which Wang declared he had been making careful inquiries, and had heard, on all sides, that the young lady was not engaged, winding up by begging to know what objection there was to his suit. "I have just promised her," answered her father, "and I cannot possibly break my word;" so Wang went away, deeply mortified, not knowing whether to believe it or not. That night he tossed about a good deal; and next morning, braving the ridicule with which he imagined his friend would view his wished-for alliance with a boat-girl, he went off to Mr. Hsü, and told him all about it. "Why didn't you consult me before?" cried Mr. Hsü; "her father is a connection of mine." Wang then went on to give fuller particulars, which his friend interrupted

by saying, "Chang-li is indeed poor, but he has never been a boatman. Are you sure you are not making a mistake?" He then sent off his elder son to make inquiries; and to him the girl's father said, "Poor I am, but I don't *sell* my daughter. Your friend imagined that I should be tempted by the sight of his money to forego the usual ceremonies, and so I won't have anything to do with him. But if your father desires this match, and everything is in proper order, I will just go in and consult with my daughter, and see if she is willing." He then retired for a few minutes, and when he came back he raised his hands in congratulation, saying, "Everything is as you wish;" whereupon a day was fixed, and the young man went home to report to his father. Wang now sent off betrothal presents, with the usual formalities, and took up his abode with his friend, Mr. Hsü, until the marriage was solemnized, three days after which he bade adieu to his father-in-law, and started on his way northwards. In the evening, as they were sitting on the boat together, Wang said to his wife, "When I first met you near this spot, I fancied you were not of the ordinary boating-class. Where were you then going?" "I was going to visit my uncle," she replied. "We are not a wealthy family, you know, but we don't want anything through an improper channel; and I couldn't help smiling at the great eyes you were making at me, all the time trying to tempt me with money. But when I heard you speak, I knew at once you were a man of refinement, though I guessed you were a bit of a rake; and so I hid your bracelet, and saved you from the wrath of my father." "And yet," replied Wang, "you have fallen into my snare after all;" adding, after a little pressure, "for I can't conceal from you much longer the fact that I have already a wife, belonging to a high official family." This she did not believe, until he began to affirm it seriously; and then she jumped up and ran out of the cabin. Wang followed at once, but, before he could reach her, she was already in the river; whereupon he shouted out to boats to come to their assistance, causing quite a commotion all round about; but nothing was to be seen in the river, save only the reflection of the stars shining brightly on the water. All night long Wang went sorrowfully up and down, and offered a high reward for the body, which, however, was not forthcoming. So he went home in despair, and then, fearing lest his father-in-law should come to visit his daughter, he started on a visit to a connection of his, who had an appointment in Honan. In the course of a year or two, when on his homeward journey, he chanced to be detained by bad weather at a roadside inn of rather cleaner appearance than usual. Within he saw an old woman playing with a child, which, as soon as he entered, held out its arms to him to be taken. Wang took the child on his knee, and there it remained, refusing to go back to its nurse; and, when the rain had stopped, and Wang was getting ready to go, the child cried out, "Pa-pa gone!" The nurse told it to hold its tongue, and, at the same moment, out from behind the screen came Wang's long-lost wife. "You bad fellow," said she, "what am I to do with this?" pointing to the child; and then Wang knew that the boy was his own son. He was much affected, and swore by the sun that the words he had uttered had been uttered in jest, and by-and-by his wife's anger was soothed. She then explained how she had been picked up by a passing boat, the occupant of which was the owner of the house they were in, a man of sixty years of age, who had

no children of his own, and who kindly adopted her. She also told him how she had had several offers of marriage, all of which she had refused, and how her child was born, and that she had called him Chi-shêng, and that he was then a year old. Wang now unpacked his baggage again, and went in to see the old gentleman and his wife, whom he treated as if they had actually been his wife's parents. A few days afterwards they set off together towards Wang's home, where they found his wife's real father awaiting them. He had been there more than two months, and had been considerably disconcerted by the mysterious remarks of Wang's servants; but the arrival of his daughter and her husband made things all smooth again, and when they told him what had happened, he understood the demeanour of the servants which had seemed so strange to him at first.