

## THE BOATWOMAN OF THE BLUE RIVER

In those days, Nanking was still the capital of China; the Ming dynasty was flourishing. It was during the reign of the Emperor Hoai-Tsong. The city, which was seven leagues around, was enclosed by formidable ramparts, so high that it was always pitch dark beneath the triple vaulted gates that pierced it at intervals. Those gates were surmounted by fortresses and high towers, the edges of whose roofs disappeared beneath the multicolored fluttering of pennants and flags.

Sentinels stood watch on the walls; soldiers proudly camped by the gates, leaning on their lances, questioning all comers.

The walls of the city contained mountains, lakes and rivers; the streets, broad and straight, bordered by superb palaces, were traversed by triumphal arches with sculpted and turned up roofs. In the distance, the tall tower of Li-cou-Li, the marvel of marvels, was visible. That tower, constructed two thousand seven hundred years before on the order of King A-You, had only three stories at first; two hundred years after its foundation, the Emperor Kien-Ouan repaired it and had the relics of Fo sealed within its walls. The Mongols burned it a thousand years later, but Yong-Lo rebuilt it, dedicated it to the Mother-Empress and called it the Tower of Gratitude, Li-cou-Li. It rose to a great height, with nine superimposed galleries; its walls, lined with yellow, red and white porcelain, shone like a pheasant's wings; the nine roofs, laid with green tiles, resembled emeralds, and the wind made charming music by agitating the thousand tiny bells suspended from every story, large statues were erected on the terraces of gods and spirits, and at the top of the tower a golden sphere scintillated like the sun.

In that era, shady gardens surrounded the tower of Li-cou-Li, hiding peaceful dwellings with very high roofs, constructed in cedar-wood. Bamboo palisades pierced with trellised gates only closed by latches surrounded those cool gardens; on stone pillars near each gate, two chimerical dogs or two dragons in bronze or varnished wood were set.

One evening in the fourth year of Emperor Hoai-Tsong's reign, shortly before sunset, a young man lifted the latch of a gate and came out of one those gardens. He saw the deserted square and walked rapidly, staying close to the palisade, without paying any heed to the dangling branches that brushed his face.

The young man was tall and well-built, handsome of face; his dark eyes, very long, elevated toward the temples, were full of pride; his eyebrows were slender and as smooth as velvet; his mouth resembled a flower. He was dressed in a black satin robe with a floral pattern in gold thread, tightened at the waist by a blue silk belt; his skullcap was also blue.

He reached another enclosure and stopped.

No sound was audible save for that of birds singing in the trees. The setting sun was already reddening the sky. The face of the Li-cou-Li Tower was resplendent.

The young man tried to peer into the garden through the branches, but the foliage formed a thick curtain and he could not see anything. Then he clapped his hands together, weakly at first, and then more forcefully.

At that signal, the head quivered and a young woman showed herself, only allowing her pretty head to be seen, which made a hole in the foliage.

"Is that you. Li-Tso-Pé?" she said, with an affectionate smile.

"Lon-Foo," said Li-Tso-Pé, rapidly, "go to the tomb of your ancestors; I'll join you there; take the Street of the Iron Lions; I'll take another route."

"I'll run!" said Lon-Fo, frightened by the expression of sadness imprinted on Li-Tso-Pé's face

The young man drew away at a rapid pace and went to the cemetery. He arrived well before the young woman and sat down on a tomb, at the foot of a stone horseman.

Horsemen similar to the one by which Li-Tso-Pé had stopped were visible on other tombs in all directions. The four feet of the horses were fixed in the ground, half-disappearing in tall grass. The warriors were represented in battle dress, brandishing their lances. Long avenues bordered by stone dromedaries, elephants or lions, facing one another, could also be seen. All these statues stood out in black against the pale pink and blue sky, and long oblique shadows extended over the ground.

Soon, a slender and graceful form slipped through the forest formed by the massive or slender legs of the stone animals; it reached the tomb close to which Li-Tso-Pé was sitting, and sat down beside him.

"Here I am," she said. "There is anguish in my heart, for I saw that your face is sad."

"Listen, Lon-Foo," he said. "My stepfather wants me to marry the daughter of a great magistrate."

"Is that possible?" cried Lon-Foo. "Doesn't he know, then, that your father and mine decided that we would marry one another? Has your mother forgotten her first husband to the extent of no longer remembering that solemn promise?"

"Since she has remarried, my mother is submissive to her new master; she has, however, tried to plead our cause—but my stepfather does not want to hear any of it."

"Can he force us to commit a crime against filial piety? Rather than disobey my dead father, I would kill myself instantly upon his tomb."

"It's certainly better to die than to fail in one's duty, but nothing is desperate yet. Listen—I've made a plan. I'm going to flee the country this very evening; I'll remain far away, without sending any news, until the woman intended for me finds another husband."

Lon-Foo made no reply, but began to weep.

"Alas," said Li-Tso-Pé, "this separation is a misfortune, but it will save us from a greater misfortune. We must try to harden our hearts. I'm going to leave you, therefore, Lon-Foo."

"I'm accustomed to seeing you. How can I bear your absence?"

"Would you prefer me to be another woman's husband, Lon-Foo?"

"Who can tell whether someone who leaves will ever come back?" said Lon-Foo, sobbing. "Who can tell whether, when he comes back, the one who remains will still be there?"

"What do you want me to do?" said Li-Tso-Pé, moved to tears. "Speak; I will stay if you order it."

"No, no, go," said Lon-Foo. "Go; I shall be strong, and whatever happens, I swear to you on the household gods of my father, who lies here, that nothing can make me change."

"Farewell, then," said Li-Tso-Pé. "The daylight is fading; it's time to go home." The two friends shook hands and separated, sadly.

As the young woman was going back through the cemetery, a man praying over a magnificent tomb saw her, and seemed to be interested in her. He noticed her tears and thought that she was weeping for a recently-deceased parent. When he left the cemetery the man sent away an escort that was waiting for him with a gesture. He had not lost sight of the young woman, who, absorbed in her grief, did not see anything. He followed her, and when she had returned to her home, the man wrote on a tablet: *Li-co-Li Tower Square, the house of the blue dragons.*

Lon-Foo was an orphan. Her mother had died bringing her into the world; her father had lost his life in a glorious battle. The young woman lived alone with her old grandmother and a few servants. Their fortune was modest, but more than sufficient for their needs. Lon-Foo was seventeen years old. Brought up by her grandmother, full of indulgence, she had enjoyed a liberty greater than that ordinarily granted to young Chinese women; she did little embroidery, preferring reading or playing in the open air. She spent a great deal of time in the garden of the interior apartment where women have the custom of shutting themselves away, especially after the day when she had seen Li-Tso-Pé.

On the night of her fiancé's departure, Lon-Foo did not sleep and wept incessantly. So, the following morning, when she looked at herself in her polished steel mirror, like the disk of the moon, she saw that her eyes were red and swollen; in order not to make her grandmother anxious, she wanted to get rid of the traces of her tears, and she washed her pretty faces several times over in fresh water.

While she was thus occupied, a rap on the gong at the entranced door caused her to shiver.

*Who is that, so early in the morning?* she wondered.

She came down precipitately from her bedroom to the ground floor. Her grandmother was already under the awning of the house, and two servants were running to the garden gate, but when they opened it there was no one there, merely a lacquer box placed on the ground. The servants picked it up and brought it to their mistress.

"What's this?" exclaimed the grandmother, raising her arms to the heavens. "How do we know that this box is for us?"

"There's a letter under the silk cord sealing the box," said a servant.

Lon-Foo took the letter, written on red paper, and unfolded it.

"To the beautiful Lon-Foo, someone powerful offers these valueless objects," she read aloud.

"God Fo!" said the grandmother. "Someone powerful! How can he know you?"

"I don't know," said the young woman. "It's doubtless a joke, and the box is filled with stones."

"Let's see," said the old woman, lifting the lid.

The two women uttered simultaneous cries of amazement; a marvelous pearl necklace from Tartary was rolled up in several coils at the bottom of the box, like a sleeping serpent. The pearls were as big as peas, all similar and of unparalleled purity. It would certainly have been impossible to find a comparable necklace in the whole of the empire. The box also contained hairpins garnished with rubies and a complete set of ornaments: bracelets, clasps and sheaths to protect fingernails, in green jade worked with exquisite perfection.

"How beautiful it all is!" exclaimed the old woman, clapping her hands. "I've never seen anything so magnificent in my entire life!"

*Where can it have come from?* wondered Lon-Foo, vaguely frightened. *It's certainly not Li-Tso-Pé who's sending me a necklace that only a queen could wear.*

The day passed in conjectures. Lon-Foo ended up imagining that pursued thieves had deposited the box in front of the door to deflect suspicion. She therefore began, with her grandmother's help, to compose a letter in which she explained what had happened to the city's magistrates. She had not yet finished writing it when the gong sounded again, struck with violence, and at the same time, a host of pages, grooms and lantern-bearers invaded the garden and arranged themselves in two rows to either side of the pathway.

Amazed, the two women had advanced beneath the overhanging roof of the house. They saw a mandarin of the first rank approaching, in a fine costume of the court, followed by two men, one bearing a parasol of honor and the other a crystal seal on a silk cushion.

The mandarin came straight to the young woman and bent his knee before her. "Is your name Lon-Foo?" he asked, humbly.

"Yes..." stammered Lon-Foo, tremulously.

"Well then, young woman, happiest of all the women of the kingdom, privileged beauty to whom I may only speak on my knee, know that the man from whom you received presents this morning, the man who has sent me to you, is the man before whom everyone bows down and trembles, the master of our lives and yours, the Emperor of China."

"The Emperor!" cried the grandmother, collapsing into a chair.

"Yes, the Son of Heaven himself!" said the mandarin. "He has seen Lon-Foo returning from the cemetery, and is informing her that he wants to take her for a wife, and that tomorrow, a magnificent cortege will come to fetch her in order to take her in great pomp to the imperial palace." The high functionary added: "I hope that when she is the favorite wife of our master, the beautiful Lon-Foo will not forget the messenger who first brought her the good news."

And after further salutations, the mandarin drew away, without the astounded Lon-Foo having said a single word.

The joyous bewilderment of the grandmother was so profound that she did not notice Lon-Foo's sadness and alarm. She sent servants in quest of all her acquaintances, to tell them the good news, and the house was soon full of people. Lon-Foo allowed herself to be complimented without appearing to perceive those who were clustering around her; she did not speak and did not look at anyone. People thought that her new situation had already made her proud and scornful.

When Lon-Foo retired to her room that night, she let herself to fall into a chair and remained motionless for a long time, her gaze fixed on the floor.

Suddenly, she got to her feet, and emerged from the stupor that had numbed her.

"It's necessary to act right away," she said. "I'm still free; tomorrow, in the palace, I shall be a prisoner."

She opened the door of her grandmother's bedroom slightly and listened. She heard a strong and steady respiration; her aged relative was asleep. She went along the landing and listened again. A profound silence reigned within the house. The servants were also asleep.

Then Lon-Foo went back into her room, opened a few chests, took out her savings—a very small sum—and threw a dark-hued robe over her shoulders. She put out the light and went quietly down the

stairs. The door of the house was sealed internally by an iron bar, which the young woman was unable to displace, but she opened a window and jumped down into the garden. The bamboo fence was only closed by a latch. Lon-Foo opened and closed the gate; then, half-hidden by one of the dragons covered with dark blue enamel that flanked the entrance, she looked at the little house and garden for one last time.

“Oh, my dear Li-Tso-Pé,” she said, shedding tears, “perhaps I shall never see this corner of earth again, where I have been so happy, but it is Heaven that has protected us by ordering your departure! What dangers would be amassed today over the head of the Emperor’s rival!”

Lon-Foo crossed Li-cou-Li Square determinedly and plunged into a street. The darkness was profound; the sky was covered, and no light was shining at any window. The young woman did not know where she was going; she walked rapidly, feeling the all with her hand, occasionally stumbling, but never stopping. She soon went into a tangle of narrow back-streets that were not yet asleep; the noise of voices and laughter could be heard; threads of light filtered under doors; the oiled paper of windows was vaguely lit. Slightly frightened, Lon-Foo went forward hesitantly. Nevertheless, she hazarded a glance through a crack into one of the houses in which there were muffled noises; she perceived drunken men sitting at tables. The young woman leapt backwards, and fled more rapidly. Suddenly, at a street corner, she saw the lanterns of a police patrol shining.

*Alas, she thought, what would become of me if I were caught by those soldiers, and how would I explain my presence out of doors after the second curfew has sounded?*

She had backed up against a small dark house, and thought she could hear a hoarse voice inside, which seemed to be counting money. Lon-Foo knocked on the door resolutely, preferring to fall into the midst of a gang of thieves than into the hands of the police, who would take her home.

The door opened; the young woman went in hurriedly and closed it behind her.

“What are you doing?” cried an old woman sitting on a pile of rags and shapeless debris. “Women of ill repute don’t come into our home. I told you not to open the door.” She was addressing an old man whose weather-beaten and wrinkled face looked like an old baked apple, and who was looking at Lon-Foo in bewilderment.

“I open it when someone knocks,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” said Lon-Foo, “I’m from a good family; I left my father’s house to flee the ill-treatment of a stepmother. I only knocked at your door to avoid the police patrol.”

“Oh well, wait until it’s passed by,” said the old woman, with the indifference of someone too overburdened with worries to take an interest in the troubles of others.

“Wait until it’s passed by,” repeated the old man.

Then they both resumed counting the copper coins, which they moved about on the floor with their fingernails, and no longer paid the slightest attention to Lon-Foo.

The young woman looked around. A round paper lantern, badly torn, set on the floor between the old couple, illuminated the only room that made up their dwelling in a bizarre fashion. The ground formed the floor, the roof-tiles served as a ceiling. There was no furniture, but strange heaps of rags and debris of every sort seemed to be serving as chairs and tables; a few cracked porcelain bowls were placed on one of them.

When she raised her eyes to the wall, Lon-Foo could not suppress a cry of fright, for she thought she saw a row of hanged men that the light of the lantern was causing to tremble and twitch. She could distinctly see the feet of some of them, shod in old boots of threadbare satin, and others with their heads covered with hats, pulled down to the chin. On looking more closely, the young woman perceived that there were no legs in the boots, not heads beneath the hats, and that the hanged men were simply old costumes, faded, discolored and tattered, but very carefully disposed along the wall. Lon-Foo smiled at her surprise. A flaking sign, which was hung above the door of the house by day, told her that her hosts were old clothes merchants; she brought her gaze back to the inhabitants of the miserable dwelling.

They were still moving the copper coins around.

“You can count them a thousand times,” said the woman, finally, “but the total won’t increase.”

“It’s still a quarter of a liang short,” said the man.

“Yes, and tomorrow, the owner of the house will throw us out and take our merchandise.”

“He’ll throw us out!” repeated the man, anxiously.

"I'll make up the sum," said Lon-Foo, then, taking a silver coin from her belt, "on condition that you let me spend the night here and that you exchange my silken garments for the costume of a woman of the people."

The couple raised their heads to look at Lon-Foo, whose presence they had forgotten; a smile contracted the old man's face, but the woman shook her head.

"You're making fun of us," she said.

"Not at all," said Lon-Foo, throwing the silver coin into the midst of the copper coins. Do you have the costume I need?"

"You're a good young woman," said the old lady, getting to her feet swiftly. "It's Heaven that sent you to us."

She went to unhook several costumes and show them to Lon-Foo. The one she chose was almost decent, composed of wide trousers in brown fabric, a blue cotton tunic and a vast straw hat that could easily hide her face. Then the old woman scattered a packet of rags in a corner of the room and covered them with a fragment on rush-mat.

"That's all I can offer you to sleep on," she said to Lon-Foo.

The young woman lay down on her rustic bed.

Son, the light was put out, and nothing more was heard in the obscurity but the sonorous snoring of the old couple.

Lon-Foo did not sleep. At first light she got up, took off her silken garments and put on the costume of the woman of the people; then she left the house without making a sound.

The neighborhood was still deserted; a few emaciated dogs, ferreting in the gutters, were the sole population of the wretched streets. The young woman hastened out of that sordid quarter and reached a broad avenue going down to the river. Soon, the Eldest Son of the Ocean was rolling its azure waves before her.

The morning sky threw silvery reflections over the water; an almost-insensible breeze caused a frisson to run over the surface of the water and deformed the image of a pagoda situated on the bank. Aquatic birds were piping and fluttering their wings in the rushes; cranes were launching themselves from the tops of trees uttering long cries, and the high mountains on the horizon were vaguely profiled among the pink and lilac mists of the Orient.

Lon-Foo sat down on the grass at the edge of the Blue River, deep in thought. What would become of her, all alone, so young, knowing nothing of life? She knew how to play with a shuttlecock, cultivate flowers and raise rare birds, but she had no aptitude for any kind of manual labor appropriate to her new condition.

She took her little purse from her sleeve and emptied it into her lap. A few gold liangs clinked gaily. It was something, but very little if she wanted to live on that sum until a change of reign. She counted her liangs several times and smiled as she remembered her hosts of the previous evening counting their copper coins over and over again.

At that moment, Lon-Foo heard footsteps close by. A man advanced to the edge of the river and hailed someone. A cry responded to his appeal, and a boat glided through the rushes to land in front of him.

The man leapt into the boat, which drew away from the bank and crossed the river.

Lon-Foo followed it with her eyes. It was one of those vessels known as *chan-pans*, surmounted by a little cabin covered with a bamboo mat—a cabin that served as the boatman's lodgings. Lon-Foo noticed that the person steering the boat was an old woman.

*She's dressed as I am*, the young woman said to herself. *I am therefore, costumed as a boatwoman. That, moreover, is a profession that would suit me very well.*

After having deposited the passenger on the other bank, the boat returned to a station near Lon-Foo, who stood up and gestured to the boatwoman.

"You want to go across?" said the old woman.

"No," said Lon-Foo. "I want to ask you a question. Where can one buy a boat like yours?"

"A new one?"

"New or old, it doesn't matter."

"If I could get a good price, I'd gladly give up mine and go to live with my children," the boatwoman said. "I'm getting old, and the damp isn't good for me."

"You'd really sell me your boat!" cried Lon-Foo, joyfully. "What price do you want?"

"Three gold liangs," said the old woman, at hazard.

"I'll give them to you."

The boatwoman opened her eyes very wide, and when she saw the liangs shining, she grabbed them swiftly, leapt on to the bank and, after several bows, went away rapidly. She feared that the young buyer might change her mind; she had sold her boat for nearly triple what it was worth.

"You'll find a few provisions and two measures of rice in the cabin, which I'll throw in as well!" she called, from a distance.

*Why flee so quickly?* Lon-Fo wondered. *I would have liked to ask her for some indications as to how to steer the boat.*

At that moment a peasant arrived on the water's edge and jumped into the boat.

"Let's go, quickly," he said. "I'm in a hurry, take me over to the other bank."

Rather embarrassed, Lon-Foo descended into the *chan-pan* with great precaution, then sat down and picked up the oars, but she was so inexperienced in their use that the boat swayed, made a thousand zigzags, and made very little headway.

"Have you lost your mind?" shouted the peasant, angrily. "Do you want to tip me in the water?"

"I'm not awake yet," said Lon-Foo.

She reached the other bank, however, and the peasant, after having cursed the boatwoman violently, went off without paying the price of the crossing.

These insults made Lon-Foo want to cry, but she soon pulled herself together.

*Bah!* she said to herself. *If that man knew that I'm sought by the Emperor, he'd throw himself at my feet with his forehead in the dust.*

Throughout the day, the young boatwoman had even more difficulty steering her boat through the vessels of every kind that furrowed the river; she almost capsized several times, but by dusk she knew as well as anyone how to guide a *chan-pan* over the Blue River.

Worn out by fatigue, she slept in the rustic cabin made of sheets of bamboo more soundly than she had ever slept in her own pretty bedroom.

During this time, the Emperor Hoai-Tsong, irritated by encountering obstacles to the accomplishment of his will, had become violently angry. He had maltreated his ministers and threatened several of them to cut off their heads if Lon-Foo were not found within a determined interval. The palace and the city were thus in an extraordinary state of agitation; rewards were promised to anyone who could provide information as to the whereabouts of the young person. Couriers left for all the provinces, and the entire Empire was soon searching for the beautiful Lon-Foo demanded in marriage by the Emperor.

Rumor of the adventure reached the ears of Li-Tso-Pé, who had gone to defend the frontier menaced by the Mongols. The young man, bitten to the core by anxiety, immediately left his post and took the road to Nanking again.

Meanwhile, people were on the trail of Lon-Foo; her clothes had been found in the clothes merchant's house, and he had given a description of the costume she had taken. It was also learned that an old boatwoman of the Blue River had suddenly been replaced by a young woman of extreme beauty.

The Emperor was therefore informed that the woman he sought was undoubtedly the young boatwoman whose origin was unknown.

Hoai-Tsong wanted to convince himself, and he went to the river bank in disguise, to the spot that had been indicated to him.

As the Emperor approached the *chan-pan*, Lon-Foo, lying in the shade of the cabin, was singing in a low voice a song that she had composed while thinking about Li-Tso-Pé. The Emperor listened, and this is what he heard:

"Since you left me, I no longer live on the land. Day and night, the limpid water of the Blue River rocks me.

"The autumn wind has changed the greenery to gold. Where has the time gone when we chatted through the branches, while the yellow leaves fell lightly?

"Can all the Emperor's treasures outweigh duty accomplished? Can all his power efface a promise made to the dead?

"Where are you, then? What are you doing while my tears, drop by drop, fall into the river?"

“Good,” said the Emperor, when Lon-Foo had ceased singing. “I know now why she disdains me, and has fled,”

He climbed into Lon-Foo’s boat and lifted her up urgently. “Young woman,” he said. “Would you care to take me to the other shore?”

“Certainly, Lord,” Lon-Foo replied. “Is it not my profession to cross the river at any hour?”

“This profession does not seem worthy of you,” said the Emperor.

“It suits me very well and I would be incapable of following any other,” said Lon-Foo, taking the boat away from the bank.

“Those pretty white hands, like jade, are not made for gripping coarse oars. That ravishing face ought to dread the stings of the sun,” Hoai-Tsong continued. “It is in the shelter of the imperial palace that it ought to bloom; it is a scepter of gold and precious stones that this delicate hand ought to hold.”

On hearing these words, Lon-Foo went very pale, and looked fearfully at the man sitting facing her.

“You’re mocking me, Lord,” she said, in a tremulous voice. “A poor peasant like me! I would be an ink-stain on the white satin.”

“What good is there in hiding any longer, Lon-Foo?” said the Emperor, suddenly. “Why did you flee two months ago? Why have you hidden when I was turning the whole empire upside-down searching for you?”

“God of Heaven! You’re the Emperor!” cried the young woman, letting go of the oars and putting her hands together.

“For everyone else, I am the Emperor,” said Hoai-Tsong. “For you, I am merely a friend.”

“Have pity on me, great Emperor!” cried Lon-Foo, throwing herself on her knees.

“What!” said Hoai-Tsong. “Is that the way you greet me?”

“I am not worthy of this favor,” the young woman said. “The honor you do me crushes me. I implore you, do not concern yourself with me any longer.”

“I heard the song you were singing just now,” the Emperor said, frowning. “Your fiancé is far away, you said; he would be dead if I knew his name; erase that name from your memory and wipe away your tears; I will take you to my palace and place you among my wives. Resistance is futile; I am the master.”

“Alas,” Lon-Foo murmured, “I am lost!”

The Emperor made a sign. Immediately, the banks were covered with people; joyful music suddenly burst forth; junks decked with flags, opening their great bamboo-matting sails like wings, advanced from all sides, laden with mandarins and high functionaries in ceremonial costumes.

On seeing herself the prisoner of that crowd, submissive to the Emperor, Lon-Foo raised her eyes to the heavens desperately.

“My dear Li-Tso-Pé,” she cried, “Pray to God that our souls will be joined one day, for in this world we shall never see one another again!” And with one bound she leapt into the river.

The Emperor uttered a terrible cry.

The junks arrived rapidly; several men threw themselves into the river and dived. Hoai-Tsong’s eyes never quit the place where Lon-Foo had disappeared.

“There! Look there!” he said.

The divers reappeared, and then dived again.

Several minutes went by, which seemed like centuries to the watchers. The Emperor stamped his feet with rage and dolor.

It was not until an hour has passed that the young woman was brought back to the surface of the water. She was dead.

At the moment when Lon-Foo’s corpse was deposited on the bank, a fully-armed warrior arrived on his horse at a fast gallop. He dismounted and cleared a path through the crowd. On perceiving Lon-Foo lying lifeless on the bank he uttered a scream and knelt beside the young woman.

“Oh, my love!” he cried. “You have kept your word; you have died in order to remain faithful to your promise, and here you are, like a spring flower surprised by white frost; I would not have been able to save you from the Emperor, but I have arrived in time to die with you; your hand is still warm, your soul is waiting for its traveling companion, fluttering nearby. Be not impatient, my tender Lon-Foo—here I am!”

For an instant, a blade was seen to gleam; then a stream of blood flowed over the ground.

“I ask but one favor of the Emperor, that he bury me next to the one who has died or me,” said Li-Tso-Pé, as he expired.

The Emperor remained standing, his arms folded, biting his lips, hiding his anger and his dolor from that entire crowd. He looked at the cadaver of the young man who had been preferred to him, with hatred.

“Should we accede to the dead man’s desire and have the two fiancés buried side by side?” asked a mandarin.

“No, I forbid it,” said the Emperor, curtly.

Then he drew away and returned to his palace.

A short while after this adventure, the Mongols invaded Chinese territory. Hoai-Tsong, dethroned, was killed. He was the last sovereign of the Ming dynasty.

One can still see, in the old cemetery of Nanking, the sepulchers of Lon-Foo and Li-Tso-Pé. Each of the two tombs is shaded by a magnificent acacia. They are far apart, but the two trees have extended their branches, which have met up and are interlaced.