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Why the City God of Yench'ên has no Skin on his Face.

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THERE is a curious story told of the Ch'ên Huang Pusa of the city of Yench'ên (or Salt City) in the Kiangsu Province.

As no doubt most readers are aware, the Ch'ên Huang Pusa is the tutelary god of a city, his position in the unseen world answering to that of a Chihhsien, or District Magistrate, among men, if the city under his care be a "hsien;" but if the city hold the rank of "fu," it has two Ch'ên Huang Pusas, one a Prefect, and the other a District Magistrate. One part of his duty consists in sending small demons to carry off the spirits of the dying, of which spirits he afterwards acts as ruler and judge. He is supposed to exercise special care over the "K'u Hwei," or spirits which have no descendants to worship and offer sacrifices to them, and on the occasion of the Seventh Month Festival, he is carried round the city in his chair to maintain order among them, while the people offer food to them, and burn paper money for their benefit. He is also carried in procession at the "Ch'ing Ming" festival, and on the first day of the tenth month.

The particular Ch'ên Huang Pusa who is supposed to be the protector of the city of Yench'ên is in the extremely unfortunate predicament of having no skin to his face, which fact is thus accounted for.

Once upon a time there lived at Yench'ên an orphan boy who was brought up by his uncle and aunt. He was just entering upon his tens when his aunt lost a gold hairpin, and accused him of having stolen it. The boy, whose conscience was clear in the matter, thought of a plan by which his innocence might be proved.

"Let us go to-morrow to Ch'ên Huang Pusa's temple," he said, "and I will there swear a oath before the god, so that he may manifest my innocence.

They accordingly repaired to the temple, and the boy, solemnly addressing the idol, said:

"If I have taken my aunt's gold pin, may my foot twist, and may I fall as I go out of your temple door!"

Alas for the poor suppliant! As he stepped over the threshold, his foot twisted, and he fell to the ground. Of course, everybody was firmly convinced of his guilt, and what could the poor boy say when his own appeal to the god thus turned against him?

After such a proof of his depravity his aunt had no room in her house for her orphan nephew, neither did he himself wish to stay with people who suspected him of theft. So he left the home which had sheltered him for years, and wandered out alone into the cold hard world. Many a hardship did our young hero encounter, but with rare pluck he persevered in his studies, and at the age of twenty odd years became a mandarin.

Our friend appears to have been of a forgiving disposition, for in the course of time he returned to Yench'ên to visit his uncle and aunt. While there, he betook himself to the temple of the deity who had dealt so hardly with him, and prayed for a revelation as to the whereabouts of the lost hairpin. He slept that night in the temple, and was rewarded by a vision in which the Ch'ên Huang Pusa told him that the pin would be found under the floor of his aunt's house.

He hastened back, and informed his relatives, who took up the boards in the place indicated, and lo and behold, there lay the long-lost pin! The women of the house then remembered that the pin had been used for pasting together the various layers of the soles of shoes, and, when night came, had been carelessly left on the table. No doubt the rats, attracted by the smell of the paste which clung to it, had carried it off to their domains under the floor.

Our young mandarin joyfully returned to the temple, and offered sacrifices by way of thanksgiving to the Ch'ên Huang Pusa for bringing his innocence to light, but he could not refrain from addressing to him what one is disposed to consider a well-merited reproach.

"You made me fall down," he said, "and so led people to think I was guilty, and now you accept my gifts. Aren't you ashamed to do such a thing? *You have no face!*

As he uttered the words all the plaster fell from the face of the idol, and was smashed into fragments.

From that day forward the Ch'ên Huang Pusa of Yench'ên has had no skin on his face. People have tried to patch up the disfigured countenance, but in vain: the plaster always falls off, and the face remains skinless.

Some people try to whitewash the character of that Ch'ên Huang Pusa by saying that he was not at home on the day when his temple was visited by the accused boy and his relatives, and that one of the little demons employed by him in carrying off dead people's spirits, out of sheer mischief perpetrated

a practical joke on the poor boy, and thus was the cause of all the trouble. So, according to these special pleaders, it was not the Ch'ên Huang Pusa's fault at all.

In that case, it is certainly hard that his skin should so persistently testify against him by refusing to remain on his face!

