

Joining the Immortals

By P'u Sung-ling

A Mr. Chou, of Wên-têng, had in his youth been fellow-student with a Mr. Ch'êng, and a firm friendship was the result. The latter was poor, and depended very much upon Chou, who was the elder of the two. He called Chou's wife his "sister," and had the run of the house just as if he was one of the family. Now this wife happening to die in childbed, Chou married another named Wang; but as she was quite a young girl, Ch'êng did not seek to be introduced.¹ One day her younger brother came to visit her, and was being entertained the "inner" apartments² when Ch'êng chanced to call. The servant announced his arrival, and Chou bade him ask Mr. Ch'êng in. But Ch'êng would not enter, and took his leave. Thereupon Chou caused the entertainment to be moved into the public part of the house, and, sending after Ch'êng, succeeded in bringing him back. They had hardly sat down before some one came in to say that a former servant of the establishment had been severely beaten at the magistrate's yamên; the facts of the case being that a cow-boy of the Huang family connected with the Board of Rites had driven his cattle across the Chou family's land, and that words had arisen between the two servants in consequence; upon which the Huang family's servant had complained to his master, who had seized the other and had sent him in to the magistrate's, where he had been bamboosed. When Mr. Chou found out what the matter was, he was exceedingly angry, and said, "How dares this pig-boy fellow behave thus? Why, only a generation ago his master was my father's servant! He emerges a little from his obscurity, and immediately thinks himself I don't know what!" Swelling with rage, he rose to go in quest of Huang, but Ch'êng held him back, saying, "The age is corrupt: there is no distinction between right and wrong. Besides, the officials of the day are half of them thieves, and you will only get yourself into hot water." Chou, however, would not listen to him; and it was only when tears were added to remonstrances that he consented to let the matter drop. But his anger did not cease, and he lay tossing and turning all night. In the morning he said to his family, "I can stand the insults of Mr. Huang; but the magistrate is an officer of the Government, and not the servant of influential people. If there is a case of any kind, he should hear both plaintiff and defendant, and not act like a dog, biting anybody he is set upon. I will bring an action against the cow-boy, and see what the magistrate will do to him." As his family rather egged him on, he accordingly proceeded to the magistrate's and entered a formal plaint; but that functionary tore up his petition, and would have nothing to do with it. This roused Chou's anger, and he told the magistrate plainly what he thought of him, in return for which contempt of court he was at once seized and bound. During the forenoon Mr. Ch'êng called at his house, where he learnt that Chou had gone into the city to prosecute the cow-boy, and immediately hurried after him with a view to stop proceedings. But his friend was already in the gaol, and all he could do was to stamp his foot in anger. Now it happened that three pirates had just been caught; and the magistrate and Huang, putting their heads together, bribed these fellows to say that Chou was one of their gang, whereupon the higher authorities were petitioned to deprive him of his status

¹ This is a characteristic touch. Only the most intimate of friends ever see each other's wives.

² Where the women of the family live, and into which no stranger ever penetrates. Among other names by which a Chinese husband speaks of his wife, a very common one is "the inner [wo] man."

as a graduate,³ and the magistrate then had him most unmercifully bamboosed.⁴ Mr. Ch'êng gained admittance to the gaol, and, after a painful interview, proposed that a petition should be presented direct to the Throne. "Alas!", said Chou, "here am I bound and guarded, like a bird in a cage. I have indeed a young brother, but it is as much as he can do to provide me with food." Then Ch'êng stepped forward, saying, "I will perform this service. Of what use are friends who will not assist in the hour of trouble?" So away he went, and Chou's son provided him with money to defray his expenses. After a long journey he arrived at the capital, where he found himself quite at a loss as to how he should get the petition presented. However, hearing that the Emperor was about to set out on a hunting tour, he concealed himself in the market-place, and when His Majesty passed by, prostrated himself on the ground with loud cries and gesticulations. The Emperor received his petition, and sent it to the Board of Punishments,⁵ desiring to be furnished with a report on 'the case. It was then more than ten months since the beginning of the affair, and Chou, who had been made to confess to this false charge, was already under sentence of death; so that the officers of the Board were very much alarmed when they received the Imperial instructions, and set to work to re-hear the case in person. Huang was also much alarmed, and devised a plan for killing Mr. Chou by bribing the gaolers to stop his food and drink; so that when his brother brought provisions he was rudely thrust back and prevented from taking them in. Mr. Ch'êng complained of this to the Viceroy of the province, who investigated the matter himself, and found that Chou was in the last stage of starvation, for which the gaolers were bamboosed to death. Terrified out of his wits, Huang, by dint of bribing heavily, succeeded in absconding and escaping a just punishment for his crimes. The magistrate, however, was banished for perversion of the law, and Chou was permitted to return home, his affection for Ch'êng being now very much increased. But ever after the prosecution and his friend's captivity, Mr. Ch'êng took a dismal view of human affairs, and one day invited Chou to retire with him from the world. The latter, who was deeply attached to his young wife, threw cold water on the 'proposition, and Mr. Ch'êng pursued the subject no farther, though his own mind was fully made up. Not seeing him for some days afterwards, Mr. Chou sent to inquire about him at his house; but there they all thought he was at Chou's, neither family, in fact, having seen anything of him.' This looked suspicious, and Chou, aware of his peculiarity, sent off people to look for him, bidding them search all the temples and monasteries in the neighbourhood. He also from time to time supplied Ch'êng's son with money and other necessities.

Eight or nine years had passed away, when suddenly Ch'êng re-appeared, clad in a yellow cap and stole, and wearing the expression of a Taoist priest, you was delighted, and seized his arm, saying, "Where have you been?—letting me search for you all over the place." "The solitary cloud and the wild crane," replied Ch'êng, laughing, "have no fixed place of abode. Since we last met my equanimity has happily been restored." Chou then ordered wine, and they chatted together on what had taken place in the interval. He also tried to persuade Ch'êng to detach himself from the Taoist persuasion, but the latter only smiled and answered nothing. "It is absurd!" argued Chou. "Why cast aside your wife and child as you would an old pair of shoes?" "Not so," answered Ch'êng; "if men wish to cast me aside, who is there who can do so now?"

³ Until which he would be safe, by virtue of his degree, from the degrading penalty of the bamboo.

⁴ This is the instrument commonly used for flogging criminals in China, and consists of a strip of split bamboo planed down smooth. Strictly speaking there are two kinds, the *heavy* and the *light*; the former is now hardly if ever used. Until, the reign of K'ang Hsi all strokes were given across the back; but that humane Emperor removed the *locus operandi* lower down, "for fear of injuring the liver or the lungs."

⁵ It is a principle of Chinese jurisprudence that no sentence can be passed until the prisoner has confessed his guilt—a principle, however, frequently set aside in practice.

Chou asked where he lived, to which he replied, "In the Great Pure Mansion on Mount Lao." They then retired to sleep on the same bed; and by-and-by Chou dreamt that Ch'êng was lying on his chest so that he could not breathe. In a fright he asked him what he was doing, but got no answer; and then he waked up with a start. Calling to Ch'êng and receiving no reply, he sat up and stretched out his hand to touch him. The latter, however, had vanished, he knew not whither. When he got calm, he found he was lying at Ch'êng's end of the bed, which rather startled him. "I was not tipsy last night," reflected he; "how could I have got over here?" He next called his servants, and when they came and struck a light, lo! he was Ch'êng. Now Chou had had a beard, so he put up his hand to feel for it, but found only a few straggling hairs. He then seized a mirror to look at himself, and cried out in alarm: "If this is Mr. Ch'êng, where on earth am I?" By this time he was wide awake, and knew that Ch'êng had employed magic to induce him to retire from the world. He was on the point of entering the ladies' apartments; but his brother, not recognising who he was, stopped him, and would not let him go in; and as he himself was unable to prove his own identity, he ordered his horse that he might go in search of Ch'êng. After some days' journey he arrived at Mount Lao; and, as his horse went along at a good rate, the servant could not keep up with him. By-and-by he rested awhile under a tree, and saw a great number of Taoist priests going backwards and forwards, and among them was one who stared fixedly at him. So he inquired of him where he should find Ch'êng; whereat the priest laughed and said, "I know the name. He is probably in the Great Pure Mansion." When he had given this answer he went on his way, Chou following him with his eyes about a stone's throw, until he saw him speak with some one else, and, after saying a few words, proceed onwards as before. The person whom he had spoken with came on to where Chou was, and turned out to be a fellow-townsmen of his. He was much surprised at meeting Chou, and said, "I haven't seen you for some years. They told me you had gone to Mount Lao to be a Taoist priest. How is it you are still amusing yourself among mortals?" Chou told him who he really was; upon which the other replied, "Why, I thought the gentleman I just met was you! He has only just left me, and can't have got very far." "Is it possible," cried Chou, "that I didn't know my own face?" Just then the servant came up, and away they went full speed, but could not discover the object of their search. All around them was a vast desert, and they were at a loss whether to go on or to return. But Chou reflected that he had no longer any home to receive him, and determined to carry out his design to the bitter end; but as the road was dangerous for riding, he gave his horse to the servant, and bade him go back. On he went cautiously by himself, until he spied a boy sitting by the wayside alone. He hurried up to him and asked the boy to direct him where he could find Mr. Ch'êng. "I am one of his disciples," replied the lad; and, shouldering Chou's bundle, started off to shew the way. They journeyed on together, taking their food by the light of the stars, and sleeping in the open air, until, after many miles of road, they arrived in three days at their destination. But this Great Pure locality was not like that generally spoken of in the world. Though as late as the middle of the tenth moon, there was a great profusion of flowers along the road, quite unlike the beginning of winter. The lad went in and announced the arrival of a stranger, whereupon Mr. Ch'êng came out, and Chou recognised his own features. Ch'êng grasped his hand and led him inside, where he prepared wine and food, and they began to converse together. Chou noticed many birds of strange plumage, so tame that they were not afraid of him; and these from time to time would alight on the table and sing with voices like Pan-pipes. He was very much astonished at all this, but a love of mundane pleasures had eaten into his soul, and he had no intention of stopping. On the ground were two rush-mats, upon which Ch'êng invited his friend to sit down with him. Then about midnight a serene calm stole over him; and while he was dozing off for a moment, he

seemed to change places with Ch'êng. Suspecting what had happened, he put his hand up to his chin, and found it covered with a beard as before. At dawn he was anxious to return home, but Ch'êng pressed him, to stay; and when three days had gone by Ch'êng said to him, "I pray you take a little rest now: to-morrow I will set you on your way." Chou had barely closed his eyelids before he heard Ch'êng call out, "Everything is ready for starting!" So he got up and followed him along a road other than that by which he had come, and in a very short time he saw 'his home in the distance. In spite of Chou's entreaties, Ch'êng would not accompany him so far but made Chou go, waiting himself by the roadside. So the latter went alone, and when he reached his house, knocked at the door. Receiving no answer he determined to get over the wall, when he found that his body was as light as a leaf, and with one spring he was over. In the same manner he passed several inner walls, until he reached the ladies' apartments, where he saw by the still burning lamp that the inmates had not yet retired for the night. Hearing people talking within, he licked a hole in the paper window⁶ and peeped through, and saw his wife sitting drinking with a most disreputable-looking fellow. Bursting with rage, his first impulse was to surprise them in the act; but seeing there were two against one, he stole away and let himself out by the entrance-gate, hurrying off to Ch'êng, to whom he related what he had seen, and finally begged his assistance. Ch'êng willingly went along with him; and when they reached the robin, Chou seized a big stone and hammered loudly at the door. All was then confusion inside, so Chou hammered again, upon which the door was barricaded more strongly than before. Here Ch'êng came forward with his sword⁷ and burst the door open with a crash. Chou rushed in, and the man inside rushed out; but Ch'êng was there, and with his sword cut his arm right off. Chou rudely seized his wife, and asked what it all meant; to which she replied that the man was a friend who sometimes came to take a cup of wine with them. Thereupon Chou borrowed Ch'êng's sword and cut off her head,⁸ hanging up the trunk on a tree in the courtyard. He then went back with Ch'êng. By-and-by he awaked and found himself on the bed, at which he was somewhat disturbed, and said, "I have had a strangely confused dream, which has given me a fright." "My brother," replied Ch'êng, smiling, "you look upon dreams as realities: you mistake realities for dreams." Chou asked what he meant by these words; and then Ch'êng shewed him his sword besmeared with blood. Chou was terrified, and sought to destroy himself; but all at once it occurred to him that Ch'êng might be deceiving him again. Ch'êng divined his suspicions, and made haste at once to see him home. In a little while they arrived at the village gate, and then Ch'êng said, "Was it not here that, sword in hand, I awaited you that night? I cannot look upon the unclean spot. I pray you go on, and let me stay here. If you do not return by the afternoon, I will depart alone." Chou then approached his house, which he found all shut up as if no one was living there; so he went into his brother's.

The latter, when he beheld Chou, began to weep bitterly, saying, "After your departure, thieves broke into the house and killed my sister-in-law, hanging her body upon a tree. Alas! alas! The murderers have not yet been caught." Chou then told him the whole story of his dream, and begged him to stop further proceedings; at all of which his brother was perfectly lost in

⁶ Wooden frames covered with a semi-transparent paper are used all over the northern provinces of China; in the south, oyster-shells, cut square and planed down thin, are inserted tile-fashion in the long narrow spaces of a wooden frame made to receive them, and used for the same purpose. But glass is gradually finding its way into the houses of the well-to-do, large quantities being made at Canton and exported to various parts of the empire.

⁷ Every Taoist priest has a magic sword, corresponding to our "magician's wand."

⁸ In China, a man has the right to slay his adulterous wife, but he must slay her paramour also; both or neither. Otherwise, he lays himself open to a prosecution for murder. The act completed, he is further, bound to proceed at once to the magistrate of the district and report what he has done.

astonishment. Chou then asked after his son, and his brother told the nurse to bring him in; whereupon the former said, "Upon this infant are centred the hopes of our race."⁹ Tend him well; for I am going to bid adieu to the world." He then took his leave, his brother following him all the time with tears in his eyes to induce him to remain. But he heeded him not; and when they reached the village gate his brother saw him go away with Ch'êng. From afar he looked back and said, "Forbear, and be happy!" His brother would have replied; but here Ch'êng whisked his sleeve, and they disappeared. The brother remained there for some time, and then went back overwhelmed with grief. He was an unpractical man, and before many years were over all the property was gone and the family reduced to poverty. Chou's son, who was growing up, was thus unable to secure the services of a tutor, and had no one but his uncle to teach him. One morning, on going into the school-room, the uncle found a letter lying on his desk addressed to himself in his brother's handwriting. There was, however, nothing in it but a fingernail about four inches in length. Surprised at this, he laid the nail down on the ink-slab while he went out to ask whence the letter had come. This no one knew; but when he went back he found that the ink-stone had been changed into a piece of shining yellow gold. More than ever astonished, he tried the nail on copper and iron things, all of which were likewise turned to gold. He thus became very rich, sharing his wealth with Chou's son; and it was bruited about that the two families possessed the secret of transmutation.¹⁰

⁹ The importance of male offspring in Chinese social life is hardly to be expressed in words. To the son is confided the task of worshipping at the ancestral tombs, the care of the ancestral tablets, and the due performance of all rites and ceremonies connected with the departed dead. No Chinaman will die, if he can help it, without leaving a son behind him. If his wife is childless he will buy a concubine; and we are told on page 41, vol. xiii., of the *Liao Chai*, that a good wife, "who at thirty years of age has not borne a child should forthwith pawn her jewellery and purchase a concubine for her husband; for to be without a son is hard indeed!" Another and a common resource is to adopt a nephew; and sometimes a boy is bought from starving parents, or from a professional kidnapper. Should a little boy die, no matter how young, his parents do not permit even him to be without the good offices of a son. They adopt some other child on his behalf; and when the latter grows up it becomes his duty to perform the proper ceremonies at his baby father's tomb. Girls do not enjoy, the luxury of this sham posterity. They are quietly buried in a hole near the family vault, and their disembodied spirits are left to wander about in the realms below uncared for and unappeased. It must not be inferred, however, from this that the position of woman in China is low, as such is far from being the case. Every mother shares in the ancestral worship, and her name is recorded on the tombstone, side by side with that of her husband. Hence it is that Chinese tombstones are always to the memory either of a father or of a mother, or of both, with occasionally the addition of the grandfather and grandmother, and sometimes even that of the generation preceding.

¹⁰ The belief that a knowledge of alchemy is obtainable by leading the life of a pure and perfect Taoist is one of the numerous additions in later ages to this ancient form of religion.