

Chang's Transformation

By P'u Sung-ling

Chang Yü-tan, of Chao-yüan, was a wild fellow, who pursued his studies at the Hsiao temple. Now it chanced that the magistrate of the district, Mr. Tseng of San-han, had a daughter who was very fond of hunting, and that one day young Chang met her in the fields, and was much struck with her great beauty. She was dressed in an embroidered sable jacket, and rode about on a small palfrey, for all the world like a girl in a picture. Chang went home with the young lady still in his thoughts, his heart being deeply touched; but he soon after heard, to his infinite sorrow and dismay, that Miss Tsêng had died suddenly. Their own home being at a distance, her father deposited the coffin in a temple; the very temple, in fact, where her lover was residing. Accordingly Chang paid to her remains the same respect he would have offered to a god; he burnt incense every morning, and poured out libations at every meal, always accompanied by the following invocation:—"I had hardly seen you when your spirit became ever present to me in my dreams. But you passed suddenly away; and now, near as we are together, we are as far apart as if separated by hills and rivers. Alas! Alas! In life you were under the control of your parents; now, however, there is nothing to restrain you, and with your supernatural power, I should be hearing the rustle of your robe as you approach to ease the sorrow of my heart," Day and night he prayed thus, and when some six months had passed away, and he was one night trimming his lamp to read. He raised his head and saw a young lady standing, all smiles, before him. Rising up, he inquired who she was; to which his visitor replied, "Grateful to you for your love of me, I was unable to resist the temptation of coming to thank you myself." Chang then offered her a seat, and they sat together chatting for some time. From this date the young lady used to come in every evening, and on one occasion said to Chang, "I was formerly very fond of riding and archery, shooting the musk and slaying the deer; my crime is so great that I can find no repose in death. If you have any friendly feelings towards me, I pray you recite, for me the Diamond *sutra* five thousand and forty-eight times, and I will never forget your kindness." Chang did as he was asked, getting up every night and telling his beads before the coffin, until the occasion of a certain festival, when he wished to go home to his parents, and take the young lady with him. Miss Tsêng said she was afraid her feet were too tender to walk far; but Chang offered to carry her, to which she laughingly assented. It was just like carrying a child, she was so light; and by degrees Chang got so accustomed to taking her about with him, that when he went up for his examination she went in too. The only thing was she could not travel except at night. Later on, Chang would have gone up for his master's degree, but the young lady told him it was of no use to try, for it was not destined that he should pass; and accordingly he desisted from his intention. Four or five years afterwards, Miss Tsêng's father resigned his appointment, and so poor was he that he could not afford to pay for the removal of his daughter's coffin, but wanted to bury it economically where it was. Unfortunately, he had no ground of his own, and then Chang came forward and said that a friend of his had a piece of waste land near the temple, and that he might bury it there. Mr. Tsêng was very glad to accept, and Chang kindly assisted him with the funeral,—for what reason the former was quite unable to guess. One night after this, as Miss Tsêng was sitting by Chang's side, her father having already returned home, she burst into a flood of tears, and said, "For five years we have been good friends; we must now part. I can never repay your goodness to me." Chang was alarmed, and asked her what she meant; to which

she replied, "Your sympathy has told for me in the realms below. The sun of my *sutras* is complete, and to-day I am to be born again in the family of a high official, Mr. Lu, of Ho-pei. If you do not forget the present time, meet me there in fifteen years from now, on the 16th of the 8th moon." "Alas!" cried Chang, "I am already over thirty, and in fifteen years more I shall be drawing near the wood."¹ What good will our meeting do?" "I can be your servant," replied Miss Tsêng, "and so make some return to you. But come, escort me a few miles on my way; the road is beset with brambles, and I shall have some trouble with my dress." So Chang carried her as before, until they reached a high road, where they found a number of carriages and horses, the latter with one or two riders on the backs of each, and three or four, or even more 'persons, in every carriage. But there was one richly-decorated carriage, with embroidered curtains and red awnings, in which sat only one old woman, who, when she saw Miss Tsêng, called out, "Ah, there you are." "Here I am," replied Miss Tsêng; and then she turned to Chang and said, "We must part here; do not forget what I told you." Chang promised he would remember; and then the old woman helped her up into the carriage, round went the wheels, off went the attendants, and they were gone. Sorrowfully Chang wended his way home, and there wrote upon the wall the date mentioned by Miss Tsêng; after which, bethinking himself of the efficacy of prayer, he took to reciting *sutras* more energetically than ever. By-and-by he dreamed that an angel appeared to him, and said, "The bent of your mind is excellent indeed, but you must visit the Southern Sea." Asking how far off the Southern Sea was, the angel informed him it was close by; and then waking up, and understanding what was required of him, he fixed his sole thoughts on Buddha, and lived a purer life than before. In three years' time his two sons, Ming and Chêng, came out very high on the list at the examination for the second degree, in spite of which worldly successes Chang continued to lead his usual holy life. Then one night he dreamed that another angel led him among beautiful halls and palaces, where he saw a personage sitting down who resembled Buddha himself. This personage said to him, "My son, your virtue is a matter of great joy; unhappily your term of life is short, and I have, therefore, made an appeal to Gods on your behalf." Chang prostrated himself, and knocked his head upon the ground; upon which he was commanded to rise, and was served with tea, fragrant as the epidendrum. A boy was next instructed to take him to bathe in a pool, the water of which was so exquisitely clear that he could count the fishes swimming about therein. He found it warm as he walked in, and scented like the leaves of the lotus-flower; and gradually the water got deeper and deeper, until he went down altogether and passed through with his head under water. He then waked up in a fright; but from this moment he became more robust and his sight improved. As he stroked his beard the white hairs all came out, and by-and-by the black ones too; the wrinkles on his face were away, and in a few months he had the beardless face of a boy of fifteen or sixteen. He also grew very fond of playing about like other boys, and would sometimes tumble head over heels, and be picked up by his sons. Soon afterwards his wife died of old age, and his sons begged him to marry again into some good family; but he said he should be obliged to go to Ho-pei first; and then, calculating his dates, found that the appointed time had arrived. So he ordered his horses and servants, and set off for Ho-pei, where he discovered that there actually was a high official named Lu. Now Mr. Lu had a daughter, who when born was able to talk, and became very clever and beautiful as she grew up. She was the idol of her parents, and had been asked in marriage by many suitors, but would not accept any of them; and when her father and mother inquired her motives for refusal, she told them the story of her engagement in her former life. "Silly child," said they, reckoning up the time, and laughing at her; "that Mr. Chang would now be about fifty

¹ A very ancient expression signifying "the grave," the word "wood" being used by synecdoche for "coffin."

years of age, a changed and feeble old man. Even if he is still alive, his hair will be white and his teeth gone." But their daughter would not listen to them; and, finding her so obstinate in her determination, they instructed the doorkeeper to admit no strangers until the appointed time should have passed, that thus her expectations might be brought to naught. Before long, Chang arrived, but the doorkeeper would not let him in, and he went back to his inn in great distress, not knowing what to do. He then took to walking about the fields, and secretly making inquiries concerning the family. Meanwhile Miss Tsêng thought that he had broken his engagement, and refused all food, giving herself up to tears alone. Her mother argued that he was probably dead, or in any case that the breach of engagement was no fault of her daughter's; to none of which, however, would Miss Tsêng listen, lying where she was the livelong day. Mr. Lu now became anxious about her, and determined to see what manner of man this Chang might be; so, on the plea of taking a walk, he went out to meet him in the fields, and to his astonishment found quite a young man. They sat down together on some leaves, and after chatting awhile Mr. Lu was so charmed with his young friend's bearing that he invited him to his house. No sooner had they arrived, than Mr. Lu begged Chang to excuse him a moment, and ran in first to tell his daughter, who exerted herself to get up and take a peep at the stranger. Finding, however, that he was not the Chang she had formerly known, she burst into tears and crept back to bed, upbraiding her parents for trying to deceive her thus. Her father declared he was no other than Chang, but his daughter replied only with tears; and then he went back very much upset to his guest, whom he treated with great want of courtesy. Chang asked him if he was not the Mr. Lu, of such and such a position, to which he replied in a vacant kind of way that he was, looking the other way all the time and paying no attention to Chang. The latter did not approve of this behaviour, and accordingly took his leave; and in a few days Miss Tsêng had cried herself to death. Chang then dreamed that she appeared to him, and said, "Was it you after all that I saw? You were so changed in age and appearance that when I looked upon your face I did not know you. I have already died from grief; but if you make haste to the little street shrine and summon my spirit back, I may still recover. Be not late!" Chang then waked, and immediately made inquiries at Mr. Lu's house, when he found that the young lady had been dead two days. Telling her father his dream, they went forth to summon the spirit back; and on opening the shroud, and throwing themselves with lamentations over the corpse, a noise was heard in the young lady's throat, and her cherry lips parted. They moved her on to a bed, and soon she began to moan, to the great joy of Mr. Lu, who took Chang out of the room and, over a bumper of wine, asked some questions about his family. He was glad to find that Chang was a suitable match for his daughter, and an auspicious day was fixed for the wedding. In a fortnight the event came off, the bride being escorted to Chang's house by her father, who remained with them six months before going home again. They were a youthful pair, and people who didn't know the story mistook Chang's son and daughter-in-law for his father and mother. A year later Mr. Lu died; and his son, a mere child, having been badly wounded by some scoundrels, and the family property being almost gone, Chang made him come and live with them, and be one of their own family.