

Jen Hsiu

By P'u Sung-ling

Jen Chien-chih was a native of Yü-t'ai, and a dealer in rugs and furs. One day he set off for Shensi, taking with him every penny he could scrape together; and on the road he met a man who told him that his name was Shên Chu-t'ing, and his native place Su-ch'ien. These two soon became firm friends, and entered into a masonic¹ bond with each other, journeying on together by the same stages until they reached their destination. By-and-by Mr. Jen fell sick, and his companion had to nurse him, which he did with the utmost attention, but for ten days he gradually got worse and worse, and at length said to Shên, "My family is very poor. Eight mouths depend upon my exertions for food; and now, alas! I am about to die, far from my own home. You and I are brothers. At this distance there is no one else to whom I can look. Now in my purse you will find two hundred ounces of silver. Take half, and when you have defrayed my funeral expenses, use the balance for your return journey; and give the other half to my family, that they may be able to send for my coffin.² If, however, you will take my mortal remains with you home to my native place, these expenses need not be incurred." He then, with the aid of a pillow, wrote a letter, which he handed to Shên, and that evening he died. Thereupon Shên purchased a cheap coffin for some five or six ounces of silver; and, as the landlord kept urging him to take away the body, he said he would go out and seek for a temple where it might be temporarily deposited. But he ran away and never went back to the inn; and it was more than a year before Jen's family knew what had taken place. His son was just about seventeen years of age, and had recently been reading with a tutor; but now his books were laid aside, and he proposed to go in search of his father's body. His mother said he was too young; and it was only when he declared he would rather not live than stay at home, that with the aid of the pawn-shop³

¹ Besides the numerous secret societies so much dreaded by the Government, membership of which is punishable by death, very intimate friends are in the habit of adopting each other as sworn brothers, bound to stand by one another in cases of danger and difficulty, to the last drop of blood. The bond is cemented by an oath, accompanied by such ceremonies as fancy may at the moment dictate. The most curious of all, however, are the so-called "Golden Orchid" societies, the members of which are young girls, who have sworn never to enter into the matrimonial state. To such an extent have these sisterhoods spread in the Kuang-tung Province, that the authorities have been compelled to prohibit them under severe penalties.

² A Chinaman loves to be buried alongside of his ancestors, and poor families are often put to great straits to pay this last tribute of respect and affection to the deceased. At all large cities are to be found temporary burial grounds, where the bodies of strangers are deposited until their relatives can come to carry them away. Large freights of dead bodies are annually brought back to China from California, Queensland, and other parts to which the Chinese are in the habit of emigrating, to the great profit of the steamer-companies concerned. Coffins are also used as a means of smuggling, respect for the dead being so great that they are only opened under the very strongest suspicion.

³ The never-failing resource of an impecunious Chinaman who has any property whatever bearing an exchange value. The pawnshop proper is a licensed institution, where three per cent. *per month* is charged on all loans, all pledges being redeemable within sixteen months. It is generally a very high brick structure, towering far above the surrounding houses, with the deposits neatly packed up in paper and arranged on the shelves of a huge wooden skeleton-like frame, that completely fills the interior of the building, on the top of which are ranged buckets of water in case of fire, and a quantity of huge stones to throw down on any thieves who may be daring enough to attempt to scale the wall, [In Peking, houses are not allowed to be built above a certain height, as during the long summer months ladies are in the habit of sitting to spin or sew in their courtyards, very lightly clad.] Pawning goods in China is not held to be so disgraceful as with us; in fact, most people, at the beginning of the hot weather, pawn their furs and winter clothes, these being so much more carefully looked after there than they might be at home.

enough money was raised to start him on his way. An old servant accompanied him, and it was six months before they returned and performed the last ceremonies over Jen's remains. The family was thus reduced to absolute destitution; but happily young Hsiu was a clever fellow, and when the days of mourning⁴ were over, took his Bachelor's degree. On the other hand, he was somewhat wild and very fond of gambling; and although his mother strictly prohibited such diversions, all her prohibitions were in vain. By-and-by the Grand Examiner arrived, and Hsiu came out in the fourth class. His mother was extremely angry, and refused to take food, which brought young Hsiu to his senses, and he promised her faithfully he would never gamble again. From that day he shut himself up, and the following year took a first-class degree, coming out among the "senior" graduates. His mother now advised him to take pupils, but his reputation as a disorderly fellow, stuck to him, and no one would entrust their sons to his care.

Just then an uncle of his, named Chang, was about to start with merchandise for the capital, and recommended that Hsiu should go along with him, promising himself to pay all expenses, an offer which Hsiu was only too pleased to accept. When they reached Lin-ch'ing, they anchored outside the Custom House, where they found a great number of salt-junks, in fact a perfect forest of masts; and what with the noise of the water and the people it was quite impossible to sleep. Besides, as the row was beginning to subside, the clear rattle of dice from a neighbouring boat fell upon Hsiu's ear, and before long he was itching to be back again at his old games. Listening to hear if all around him were sound asleep, he drew forth a string of cash that he had brought with him, and thought he would just go across and try his luck. So he got up quietly with his money, and was on the point of going, when he suddenly recollected his mother's injunctions, and at once tying his purse-strings laid himself down to sleep. He was far too excited, however, to close his eyes; and after a while got up again and re-opened his purse. This he did three times, until at last it was too much for him, and off he went with his money. Crossing over into the boat whence the sounds proceeded, he beheld two persons engaged in gambling for high stakes; so throwing his money on the table, he begged to be allowed to join. The others readily consented, and they began to play, Hsiu winning so rapidly that soon one of the strangers had no money left, and was obliged to get the proprietor of the boat to change a large piece of silver for him, proceeding to lay down as much as several ounces of silver for a single stake.

As the play was in full swing another man walked in, who after watching for some time at length got the proprietor to change another lump of silver for him of one hundred ounces in weight, and also asked to be allowed to join. Now Hsiu's uncle, waking up in the middle of the night, and finding his nephew gone, and hearing the sound of dice-throwing hard by, knew at once where he was, and immediately followed him to the boat with a view of bringing him back. Finding, however, that Hsiu was a heavy winner, he said nothing to him, only carrying off a portion of his winnings to their own boat and making the others of his party get up and help him to fetch the rest, even then leaving behind a large sum for Hsiu to go on with. By-and-by the three strangers had lost all their ready money, and there wasn't a farthing left in the boat: upon which one of them proposed to play for lumps of silver, but Hsiu said he never went so high as that. This made them a little quarrelsome, Hsiu's uncle all the time trying to get him away and the proprietor of the boat, who had only his own commission in view, managed to borrow some hundred strings of cash from another boat, and started them all again. Hsiu soon took this out of them; and, as day was beginning to dawn and the Custom House was about to open, he went off with his winnings back to his own boat.

⁴ Nominally of three years'—really of twenty-eight months'—duration.

The proprietor of the gambling-boat now found that the lumps of silver which he had changed for his customers were nothing more than so much tinsel, and rushing off in a great state of alarm to Hsiu's boat, told him what had happened and asked him to make it good; but when he discovered he was speaking to the son of his former travelling companion, Jen-Chien-chih, he hung his head and slunk away covered with shame. For the proprietor of that boat was no other than Shên Chu-t'ing, of whom Hsiu had heard when he was in Shensi; now, however, that with supernatural aid⁵ the wrongs of his father had been avenged, he determined to pursue the man no further. So going into partnership with his uncle, they proceeded north together; and by the end of the year their capital had increased five-fold. Hsiu then purchased the status of *chien-shêng*, and by further careful investment of his money ultimately became the richest man in that part of the country.

⁵ One of the strangers was the disembodied spirit of Hsiu's father, helping his son to take vengeance on the wicked Shên.