

Hsiang-ju's Misfortunes

By P'u Sung-ling

At Kuang-p'ing there lived an old man named Fêng, who had an only son called Hsiang-ju. Both of them were graduates; and the father was very particular and strict, though the family had long been poor. Mrs. Fêng and Hsiang-ju's wife had died, one shortly after the other, so that the father and son were obliged to do their household work for themselves.

One night Hsiang-ju was sitting out in the moonlight, when suddenly a young lady from next door got on the wall to have a look at him. He saw she was very pretty, and as he approached her she began to laugh. He then beckoned to her with his hand; but she did not move either to come or to go away. At length, however, she accepted his invitation, and descended the ladder that he had placed for her. In reply to Hsiang-ju's inquiries, the young lady said her name was Hung-yü, and that she lived next door; so Hsiang-ju, who was much taken with her beauty, begged her to come over frequently and have a chat. To this she readily assented, and continued to do so for several months, until one evening old Mr. Fêng, hearing sounds of talking and laughing in his son's room, got up and looked in. Seeing Miss Hung-yü, he was exceedingly angry, and called his son out, saying, "You good-for-nothing fellow! poor as we are, why aren't you at your books, instead of wasting your time like this? A pretty thing for the neighbours to hear of!—and even if they don't hear of it, somebody else will, and shorten your life accordingly."¹ Hsiang-ju fell on his knees, and with tears implored forgiveness; whereupon his father turned to the young lady, and said, "A girl who behaves like this disgraces others as well as herself; and if people find this out, we sha'n't be the only ones to suffer." The old man then went back to bed in a rage, and Miss Hung-yü, weeping bitterly, said to Hsiang-ju, "Your father's reproaches have overwhelmed me with shame. Our friendship is now at an end." "I could say nothing," replied he, "as long as my father was here; but if you have any consideration for me, I pray you think nothing of his remarks." Miss Hung-yü protested, however, that they could meet no more, and then Hsiang-ju also burst into tears. "Do not weep," cried she, "our friendship was an impossible one, and time must sooner or later have put an end to these visits. Meanwhile, I hear there is a very good match to be made in the neighbourhood." Hsiang-ju replied that he was poor; but Miss Hung-yü told him to meet her again the following evening, when she would endeavour to do something for him. At the appointed time she arrived, and, producing forty ounces of silver, presented them to Hsiang-ju; telling him that at a village some distance off there was a Miss Wei; eighteen years of age, who was not yet married because of the exorbitant demands of her parents, but that a little extra outlay would secure for him the young lady's hand. Miss Hung-yü then bade him farewell, and Hsiang-ju went off to inform his father, expressing a desire to go and make inquiries, but saying nothing about the forty ounces. His father, thinking that they were not sufficiently well off, urged him not to go; however, by dint of argument, he finally persuaded the old man that, at any rate, there was no harm in trying. So he borrowed horses and attendants, and set off to the house of Mr. Wei, who was a man of considerable property; and when he got there he asked Mr. Wei to come outside and accord him a few minutes' conversation. Now the latter knew that Hsiang-ju belonged to a very good family; and when he saw all the retinue that Hsiang-ju had

¹ Meaning that it would become known to the Arbiter of life and death in the world below, who would punish him by shortening his appointed term of years. See *The Wei-ch'i Devil*, No. CXXXI.

brought with him, he inwardly consented to the match, though he was afraid that perhaps his 'would-be son-in-law might not be as liberal as he would like. Hsiang-ju soon perceived what Mr. Wei's feelings were, and emptied his purse on the table, at which Mr. Wei was delighted, and begged a neighbour to allow the marriage contract to be drawn up in his house.² Hsiang-ju then went in to pay his respects to Mrs. Wei, whom he found in a small, miserable room, with Miss Wei hiding behind her. Still he was pleased to see that, in spite of her homely toilette, the young lady herself was very nice looking; and, while he was being entertained in the neighbour's house, the old lady said, "It will not be necessary for you, Sir, to come and fetch our daughter. As soon as we have made up a small trousseau for her, we will send her along to you."³ Hsiang-ju then agreed with them upon a day for the wedding, and went home and informed his father, pretending that the Wei family only asked for respectability, and did not care about money. His father was overjoyed to hear this; and when the day came, the young lady herself arrived. She proved to be a thrifty housekeeper and an obedient wife, so that she and her husband got along capitally together. In two years she had a son, who was called Fu-êrh. And once, on the occasion of the great spring festival, she was on her way to the family tombs, with her boy in her arms, when she chanced to meet a man named Sung, who was one of the gentry of the neighbourhood. This Mr. Sung had been a Censor,⁴ but had purchased his retirement, and was now leading a private life, characterised by many overbearing and violent acts. He was returning from his visit to the graves of his ancestors when he saw Hsiang-ju's wife, and, attracted by her beauty, found out who she was; and imagining that, as her husband was a poor scholar, he might easily be induced for a consideration to part with the lady, sent one of his servants to find out how the land lay. When Hsiang-ju heard what was wanted, he was very angry; but, reflecting on the power of his adversary, controlled his passion, and passed the thing off with a laugh. His father, however, to whom he repeated what had occurred, got into a violent rage, and, rushing out, flung his arms about, and called Mr. Sung every name he could lay his tongue to. Mr. Sung's emissary slunk off and went home; and then a number of men were sent by the enraged Sung, and these burst into the house and gave old Fêng and his son a most tremendous beating. In the middle of the hubbub Hsiang-ju's wife ran in, and, throwing her child down on the bed, tore her hair and shrieked for help. Sung's attendants immediately surrounded her and carried her off, while there lay her husband and his father, wounded on the ground, and the baby squalling on the bed. The neighbours, pitying their wretched condition, helped them up on to the couches, and by the next day Hsiang-ju could walk with a stick; however, his father's anger was not to be appeased, and, after spitting a quantity of blood, he died. Hsiang-ju wept bitterly at this, and, taking his child in his arms, used every means to bring the offenders to justice, but without the slightest success. He then heard that his wife had put an end to her own existence, and with this his cup of misery was full. Unable to get his wrongs redressed, he often meditated assassinating Sung in the open

² One important preliminary consists in the exchange of the four pairs of characters which denote the year, month, day, and hour of the births of the contracting parties. It remains for a geomancer to determine whether these are in harmony or not and a very simple expedient for backing out of a proposed alliance is to bribe him to declare that the natiivities of the young couple could not be happily brought together.

³ The bridegroom invariably fetches the bride from her father's house, conveying her to his home in a handsomely-gilt red sedan-chair, closed in on all sides, and accompanied by a band of music.

⁴ The Censorate is a body of fifty-six officials, whose duty it is to bring matters to the notice of the Emperor which might otherwise have escaped attention; to take exception to any acts, including those of His Majesty himself, calculated to interfere with the welfare of the people; and to impeach, as occasion may require the high provincial authorities, whose position, but for this wholesome check, would be almost unassailable. Censors are popularly termed the "ears and eyes" of the monarch.

street,⁵ but was deterred from attempting this by the number of his retainers and the fear of leaving his son with no one to protect him. Day and night he mourned over his lot, and his eyelids were never closed in sleep, when suddenly in walked a personage of striking appearance to condole with him on his losses. The stranger's face was covered with a huge curly beard; and Hsiang-ju, not knowing who he was, begged him to take a seat, and was about to ask whence he came, when all at once he began, "Sir! have you forgotten your father's death, your wife's disgrace?" Thereupon Hsiang-ju, suspecting him to be a spy from the Sung family, made some evasive reply, which so irritated the stranger that he roared out, "I thought you were a man; but now I know that you are a worthless, contemptible wretch." Hsiang-ju fell on his knees and implored the stranger to forgive him, saying, "I was afraid it was a trick of Sung's: I will speak frankly to you. For days I have lain, as it were, upon thorns, my mouth filled with gall, restrained only by pity for this little one and fear of breaking our ancestral line. Generous friend, will you take care of my child if I fall?" "That," replied the stranger, "is the business of women; I cannot undertake it. But what you wish others to do for you, do yourself; and that which you would do yourself, I will do for you." When Hsiang-ju heard these words he knocked his head upon the ground; but the stranger took no more notice of him, and walked out. Following him to the door, Hsiang-ju asked his name, to which he replied, "If I cannot help you I shall not wish to have your reproaches; if I do help you, I shall not wish to have your gratitude." The stranger then disappeared and Hsiang-ju, having a presentiment that some misfortune was about to happen, fled away with his child.

When night came, and the members of the Sung family were wrapped in sleep, someone found his way into their house and slew the ex-Censor and his two sons, besides a maid-servant and one of the ladies. Information was at once given to the authorities; and as the Sung family had no doubt that the murderer was Hsiang-ju, the magistrate, who was greatly alarmed, sent out lictors to arrest him. Hsiang-ju, however, was nowhere to be found, a fact which tended to confirm the suspicions of the Sung family; and they, too, despatched a number of servants to aid the mandarin in effecting his capture. Towards evening the lictors and others reached a hill, and, hearing a child cry, made for the sound, and thus secured the object of their search, whom they bound and led away. As the child went on crying louder than ever, they took it from him and threw it down by the wayside, thereby nearly causing Hsiang-ju to die of grief and rage. On being brought before the magistrate he was asked why he had killed these people; to which he replied that he was falsely accused. "For," said he, "they died in the night, whereas I had gone away in the daytime. Besides," added he, "how, with a crying baby in my arms, could I scale walls and kill people?" "If you didn't kill people," cried the magistrate, "why did you run away?" Hsiang had no answer to make to this, and he was accordingly ordered to prison;

⁵ In the *Book of Rites*, which dates, in its present form, only from the first century B.C., occurs this passage: "With the slayer of his father, a man may not live under the same heaven;" and in the *Family Saying*, a work which professes, though on quite insufficient authority, to record a number of the conversations and apophthegms of Confucius not given in the *Lun-yü*, or Confucian Gospels, we find the following course laid down for a man whose father has been murdered:—"He must sleep upon a grass mat, with his shield for his pillow, he must decline to take office; he must not live under the same heaven (with the murderer). When he meets him in the court or in the market-place, he must not return for a weapon, but engage him there and then;" being always careful, as the commentator observes to carry a weapon about with him. Sir John Davis and Dr. Legge agree in stigmatising this as "one of the objectionable principles of Confucius." It must, however, be admitted that (1) a patched-up work which appeared as we have it now from two to three centuries after Confucius's death, and (a) a confessedly apocryphal work such as the *Family Sayings*, are hardly sufficient grounds for affixing to the fair fame of China's great Sage the positive inculcation of a dangerous principle of blood-vengeance like that I have just quoted.

whereupon he wept and said, "I can die without regret; but what has my child done that he, too, should be punished?" "You," replied the magistrate, "have slain the children of others; how can you complain if your child meets the same fate?" Hsiang-ju was then stripped of his degree and subjected to all kinds of indignities, but they were unable to wring a confession from his lips; and that very night, as the magistrate lay down, he heard a sharp noise of something striking the bed, and, jumping up in a fright, found, by the light of a candle, a small, keen blade sticking in the wood at the head of his couch so tightly that it could not be drawn out. Terribly alarmed at this, the magistrate walked round the room with a spear over his shoulder, but without finding anything; and then, reflecting that nothing more was to be feared from Sung, who was dead, as well as his two sons, he laid Hsiang-ju's case before the higher authorities, and obtained for him an acquittal. Hsiang-ju was released and went home. His cupboard, however, was empty, and there was nothing except his own shadow within the four walls of his house. Happily, his neighbours took pity on him and supplied him with food; and whenever he thought upon the vengeance that had been wreaked, his countenance assumed an expression of joy, but as often as his misfortunes and the extinction of his family came into his mind, his tears would begin to flow. And when he remembered the poverty of his life and the end of his ancestral line, he would seek out some solitary spot, and there burst into an ungovernable fit of grief. Thus things went on for about six months, when the search after the murderer began to be relaxed; and then Hsiang-ju petitioned for the recovery of his wife's bones, which he took home with him and buried. His sorrows made him wish to die, and he lay tossing about on the bed without any object in life, when suddenly he heard somebody knock at the door. Keeping quiet to listen, he distinguished the sound of a voice outside talking with a child; and, getting up to look, he perceived a young lady, who said to him, "Your great wrongs are all redressed, and now, luckily, you have nothing to ail you." The voice seemed familiar to him, but he could not at the moment recall where he had heard it; so he lighted a candle, and Miss Hung-yü stood before him. She was leading a small, happy-looking child by the hand; and after she and Hsiang-ju had expressed their mutual satisfaction at meeting once more, Miss Hung-yü pushed the boy forward, saying, "Have you forgotten your father?" The boy clung to her dress, and looked shyly at Hsiang-ju, who, on examining him closely, found that he was Fu-êrh. "Where did he come from?" asked his father, in astonishment, not unmingled with tears. "I will tell you all," replied Miss Hung-yü. "I was only deceiving you when I said I belonged to a neighbouring family. I am really a fox, and, happening to go out one evening, I heard a child crying in a ditch. I took him home and brought him up; and, now that your troubles are over, I return him to you, that father and son may be together." Hsiang-ju wiped away his tears and thanked her heartily; but Fu-êrh kept close to Miss Hung-yü, whom he had come to regard as a mother, and did not seem to recognise his father again. Before daybreak Miss Hung-yü said she must go away; but Hsiang-ju fell upon his knees and entreated her to stop, until at last she said she was only joking, adding that, in a new establishment like theirs, it would be a case of early to rise and late to bed. She then set to work cutting fuel and sweeping up, toiling hard as if she had been a man, which made Hsiang-ju regret that he was too poor to have all this done for her. However, she bade him mind his books, and not trouble himself about the state of their affairs, as they were not likely to die of hunger. She also produced some money, and bought implements for spinning, besides renting a few acres of land and hiring labourers to till them. Day by day she would shoulder her hoe and work in the fields, or employ herself in mending the roof, so that her fame as a good wife spread abroad, and the neighbours were more than ever pleased to help them. In half-a-year's time their home was like that of a well-to-do family, with plenty of servants about; but one day Hsiang-ju said to Miss

Hung-yü, "With all that you have accomplished on my behalf, there is still one thing left undone," On her asking him what it was, he continued: "The examination for master's degree is at hand, and I have not yet recovered the bachelor's degree of which I was stripped." "Ah," replied she, "some time back I had your name replaced upon the list; had I waited for you to tell me, it would have been too late." Hsiang-ju marvelled very much at this, and accordingly took his master's degree. He was then thirty-six years of age, the master of broad lands and fine houses; and Miss Hung-yü, who looked delicate enough to -be blown away by the wind, and yet worked harder than an ordinary labourer's wife, keeping her hands smooth and nice in spite of winter weather, gave herself out to be thirty-eight, though no one took her to be much more than twenty.