

The Man Who Was Changed Into A Crow

By P'u Sung-ling

Mr. Yü Jung was a Hu-nan man. The person who told me his story did not recollect from what department or district he came. His family was very poor; and once, when returning home after failure at the examination, he ran quite out of funds. Being ashamed to beg, and feeling uncomfortably hungry, he turned to rest awhile in the Wu Wang temple, where he poured out all his sorrows at the feet of the God. His prayers over, he was about to lie down in the outer porch, when suddenly a man took him and led him into the presence of Wu Wang; and then, falling on his knees, said, "Your Majesty, there is a vacancy among the black-robcs; the appointment might be bestowed on this man." The King assented, and Yü received a suit of black clothes; and when he had put these on he was changed into a crow, and flew away. Outside he saw a number of fellow-crows collected together, and immediately joined them, settling with them on the masts of the boats, and imitating them in catching and eating the meat or cakes which the passengers and boatmen on board threw up to them in the air. In a little while he was no longer hungry, and, soaring aloft, alighted on the top of a tree, quite satisfied with his change of condition. Two or three days passed, and the King, now pitying his solitary state, provided him with a very elegant mate, whose name was Chu-ch'ing, and who took every opportunity of warning him wJien he exposed himself too much in search of food. However, he did not pay much attention to this, and one day a soldier shot him in the breast with a cross-bow; but luckily Chu-ch'ing got away with him in her beak, and he was not captured. This enraged the other crows very much, and with their wings they flapped the water into such big waves that all the boats were upset. Chu-ch'ing now procured food and fed her husband; but his wound was a severe one, and by the end of the day he was dead—at which moment he waked, as it were, from a dream, and found himself lying in the temple.

The people of the place had found Mr. Yü to all appearance dead; and not knowing how he had come by his death, and finding that his body was not quite cold, had set some one to watch him. They now learnt what had happened to him, and, making up a purse between them, sent him away home. Three years afterwards he was passing by the same spot, and went in to worship at the temple; also preparing a quantity of food, and inviting the crows to come down and eat it. He then prayed, saying, "If Chu-ch'ing is among you, let her remain." When the crows had eaten the food they all flew away; and by-and-by Yü returned, having succeeded in obtaining his master's degree. Again he visited Wu Wang's temple, and sacrificed a sheep as a feast for the crows; and again he prayed as on the previous occasion. That night he slept on the lake, and, just as the candles were lighted and he had sat down, suddenly there was a noise as of birds settling, and lo! a beautiful young lady about twenty years of age stood before him. "Have you been quite well since we parted?" asked she; to which Yu replied that he should like to know whom he had the honour of addressing. "Don't you remember Chu-ch'ing?" said the young lady; and then Yü was overjoyed, and inquired how she had come. "I am now," replied Chu-ch'ing, "a spirit of the Han river, and seldom gc back to my old home; but in consequence of what you did on two occasions, I have come to see you once more. They then sat talking together like husband and wife reunited after long absence, and Yü proposed that she should return with him on his way south. Chu-ch'ing, however, said she must go west again, and upon this point they could not come to any agreement. Next morning, when Vu waked up, he found himself in a lofty room with two large

candles burning brightly, and no longer in his own boat. In utter amazement he arose and asked where he was. "At Han-yang," replied Chu-ch'ing; "my home is your home; why need you go south?" By-and-by, when it got lighter, in came a number of serving women with wine, which they placed on a low table on the top of a broad couch; and then husband and wife sat down to drink together. "Where are all my servants?" asked Yü; and when he heard they were still on the boat, he said he was afraid the boat people would not be able to wait. "Never mind," replied Chu-ch'ing; "I have plenty of money, and I'll help you to make it up to them." Yü therefore remained with her, feasting and enjoying himself, and forgetting all about going home. As for the boatmen, when they waked up and found themselves at Han-yang, they were greatly astonished; and, seeing that the servants could find no trace of their missing master, they wished to go about their own business. They were unable, however, to undo the cable, and so they all remained there together for more than a couple of months, by the end of which time Mr. Yü became anxious to return home, and said to Chu-ch'ing, "If I stay here, my family connections will be completely severed. Besides, as we are husband and wife, it is only right that you should pay a visit to my home." "That," replied Chu-ch'ing, "I cannot do; and even were I able to go, you have a wife there already, and where would you put me? It is better for me to stop where I am, and thus you will have a second family." Vu said she would be so far off that he could not always be dropping in; whereupon Chu-ch'ing produced a black suit, and replied, "Here are your old clothes. Whenever you want to see me, put these on and come, and on your arrival I will take them off for you." She then prepared a parting feast for her husband, at which he got very tipsy; and when he waked up he was on board his boat again, and at his old anchorage on the lake. The boatmen and his servants were all there, and they looked at one another in mutual amazement; and when they asked Yü where he had been, he hardly knew what to say. By the side of his pillow he discovered a bundle in which were some new clothes Chu-ch'ing had given him, shoes, stockings, &c.; and folded up with them was the suit of black. In addition to these he found an embroidered belt for tying round the waist, which was stuffed full of gold. He now started on his way south, and, when he reached the end of his journey, dismissed the boatmen with a handsome present.

After being at home for some months, his thoughts reverted to Hen-yang; and, taking out the black clothes, he put them on, when wings immediately grew from his ribs, and with a flap he was gone. In about four hours he arrived at Han-yang, and, wheeling round and round in the air, espied below him a solitary islet, on which stood a house, and there he proceeded to alight. A maid-servant had already seen him coming, and cried out, "Here's master!" and in a few moments out came Chu-ch'ing, and bade the attendants take off Mr. Yü's feathers. They were not long in setting him free, and then, hand in hand, he and Chu-ch'ing went into the house together. "You have come at a happy moment," said his wife, as they sat down to tell each other all the news; and in three days' time she gave birth to a boy, whom they called Han-ch'an, which means "born on the Han river." Three days after the event all the river-nymphs came to congratulate them, and brought many handsome presents. They were a charming band, not one being over thirty years of age; and, going into the bedroom and approaching the bed, each one pressed her thumb on the baby's nose, saying, "Long life to thee, little one!" Yü asked who they all were, and Chu-ch'ing told him they belonged to the same family of spirits as herself; "And the two last of all," said she, "dressed in pale lilac, are the nymphs who gave away their girdles at Hankow."

* A few months passed away, and then Chu-ch'ing sent her husband back in a boat to his old home. No sails or oars were used, but the boat sped along of itself; and at the end of the river journey there were men waiting with horses to convey him to his own door. After this he went

backwards and forwards very frequently; and in time Han-ch'an grew up to be a fine boy, the apple of his father's eye. Unhappily his first wife had no children, and she was extremely anxious to see Han-ch'an; so Vu communicated this to Chu-ch'ing, who at once packed up a box and sent him back with his father, on the understanding that he was to return in three months. However, the other wife became quite as fond of him as if he had been her own child, and ten months passed without her being able to bear the thought of parting with him. But one day Han-ch'an was taken violently ill, and died; upon which Vu's wife was overwhelmed with grief, and wished to die too. Vu then set off for Han-yang, to carry the tidings to Chu-ch'ing; and when he arrived, lo! there was Han-ch'an, with his shoes and socks off, lying on the bed. He was greatly rejoiced at this, and asked Chu-ch'ing what it all meant. "Why," replied she, "the term agreed upon by us had long expired, and, as I wanted my boy, I sent for him." Yü then told her how much his other wife loved Han-ch'an, but Chu-ch'ing said she must wait until there was another child, and then she should have him. Later on Chu-ch'ing had twins, a boy and a girl, the former named Han-shêng and the latter Vü p'ei; whereupon Han-ch'an went back again, with his father, who, finding it inconvenient to be travelling backwards and forwards three or four times in a year, removed with his family to the city of Han-yang. At twelve years of age Han-ch'an took his bachelor's degree; and his mother, thinking there was no girl among mortals good enough for her son, sent for him to come home, that she herself might find a wife for him, which she did in the person of a Miss Chih-niang, who was the daughter of a spirit like herself. Yü's first wife then died, and the three children all went to mourn her loss, Han-ch'an remaining in Hu-nan after the funeral, but the other two returning with their father, and not leaving their mother again.