

Miss A-Pao; or, Perseverance Rewarded

By P'u Sung-ling

In the province of Kuang-si there lived a scholar of some reputation, named Sun Tzū-ch'u. He was born with six fingers, and such a simple fellow was he that he readily believed any nonsense he was told. Very shy with the fair sex, the sight of a woman was enough to send him flying in the opposite direction; and once when he was inveigled into a room where there were some young ladies, he blushed down to his neck and the perspiration dripped off him like falling pearls. His companions laughed heartily at his discomfiture, and told fine stories of what a noodle he looked, so that he got the nickname of Silly Sun.

In the town where our hero resided, there was a rich trader whose wealth equalled that of any prince or nobleman, and whose connections were all highly aristocratic.¹ He had a daughter, A-pao, of great beauty, for whom he was, seeking a husband; and the young men of position in the neighbourhood were vying with each other to obtain her hand, but none of them met with the father's approval. Now Silly Sun had recently lost his wife; and some one in joke persuaded him to try his luck and send in an application. Sun, who had no idea of his own shortcomings, proceeded at once to follow this advice; but the father, though he knew him to be an accomplished scholar, rejected his suit on the ground of poverty. As the go-between was leaving the house, she chanced to meet A-pao, and related to her the object of her visit. "Tell him," cried A-pao, laughing, "that if he'll cut off his extra finger, I'll marry him." The old woman reported this to Sun, who replied, "That is not very difficult;" and, seizing a chopper, cut the finger clean off. The wound was extremely painful, and he lost so much blood that he nearly died, it being many days before he was about again. He then sought out the go-between, and bade her inform Miss A-pao, which she did; and A-pao was taken rather aback, but she told the old woman to go once more and bid him cut off the "silly" from his reputation. Sun got much excited when he heard this, and denied that he was silly; however, as he was unable to prove it to the young lady herself, he began to think that probably her beauty was over-stated, and that she was giving herself great airs. So he ceased to trouble himself about her until the following spring festival, when it was customary for both men and women to be seen abroad, and the young rips of the place would stroll about in groups and pass their remarks on all and sundry. Sun's friends urged him to join them in their expedition, and one of them asked him with a smile if he did not wish to look out for a suitable mate. Sun knew they were chaffing him, but he thought he should like to see the girl that had made such a fool of him, and was only too pleased to accompany them. They soon perceived a young lady resting herself under a tree, with a throng of young fellows crowding round her, and they immediately determined that she must be A-pao, as in fact they found she was. Possessed of peerless beauty, the ring of her admirers gradually increased, till at last she rose up to go. The excitement among the young men was intense; they criticised her face and discussed her feet, Sun only remaining silent; and when they had passed on to something else, there they saw Sun rooted like an imbecile to the same spot. As he made no answer when

¹ There is nothing in China like an aristocracy of birth. Any man may raise himself from the lowest level to the highest; and as long as he and his family keep themselves there, they may be considered aristocratic. Wealth has nothing to do with the question; official rank and literary tastes, separate or combined, these constitute a man's title to the esteem of his fellows. Trade is looked upon as ignoble and debasing; and friendly intercourse between merchants and officials, the two great social divisions, is so rare as to be almost unknown.

spoken to, they dragged him along with them, saying, "Has your spirit run away after A-pao?" He made no reply to this either; but they thought nothing of that, knowing his usual strangeness of manner, so by dint of pushing and pulling they managed to get him home. There he, threw, himself on the bed and did not get up again for the rest of the day, lying in a state of unconsciousness just as if he were drunk. He did not wake when called; and his people, thinking that his spirit had fled, went about in the fields calling out to it to return.⁵ However, he showed no signs of improvement; and when they shook him, and asked him what was the matter, he only answered in a sleepy kind of voice, "I am at A-pao's house;" but to further questions he would not make any reply, and left his family in a state of keen suspense~

Now when Silly Sun had seen the young lady get up to go, he could not bear to part with her, and found himself first following and then walking along by her side without any one saying anything to him. Thus he went back with her to her home, and there he remained for three days, longing to run home and get something to eat, but unfortunately not knowing the way. By that time Sun had hardly a breath left in him; and his friends, fearing that he was going to die, sent to beg of the rich trader that he would allow a search to be made for Sun's spirit in his house. The trader laughed and said, "He wasn't in the habit of coming here, so he could hardly have left his spirit behind him;" but he yielded to the entreaties of Sun's family, and permitted the search to be made. Thereupon a magician proceeded to the house, taking with him an old suit of Sun's clothes and some grass matting; and when Miss A-pao heard the reason for which he had come, she simplified matters very much by leading the magician straight to her own room. The magician summoned the spirit in due form, and went back towards Sun's house. By the time he had reached the door, Sun groaned and recovered consciousness; and he was then able to describe all the articles of toilette and furniture in A-pao's room without making a single mistake. A-pao was amazed when the story was repeated to her, and could not help feeling kindly towards him on account of the depth of his passion. Sun himself, when he got well enough to leave his bed, would often sit in a state of abstraction as if he had lost his wits; and he was for ever scheming to try and have another glimpse at A-pao.

One day he heard that she intended to worship at the Shui-yüeh temple on the 8th of the fourth moon, that day being the Wash-Buddha festival; and he set off early in the morning to wait for her at the roadside. He was nearly blind with straining his eyes, and the sun was already past noontide before the young lady arrived; but when she saw from her carriage a gentleman standing there, she drew aside the screen and had a good stare at him. Sun followed her in a great state of excitement, upon which she bade one of her maids to go and ask his name. Sun told her who he was, his perturbation all the time increasing; and when the carriage drove on he returned home. Again he became very ill, and lay on his bed unconscious, without taking any food, occasionally calling on A-pao by name, at the same time abusing his spirit for not having been able to follow her as before. Just at this juncture a parrot that had been long with the family died; and a child, playing with the body, laid it upon the bed. Sun then reflected that if he was only a parrot one flap of his wings would bring him into the presence of A-pao; and while occupied with these thoughts, lo! the dead body moved and the parrot flew away. It flew straight to A-pao's room, at which he was delighted; and catching it, tied a string to its leg, and fed it upon hempseed. "Dear sister," cried the bird, "do not tie me by the leg: I am Sun Tzii-ch'u." In great alarm A-pao untied the string, but the parrot did not fly away. "Alas!" said she, "your love has engraved itself upon my heart; but now you are no longer a man, how shall we ever be united together?" "To be near your dear self," replied the parrot, "is all I care about." The parrot then refused to take food from any one else, and kept close to Miss A-pao wherever she went, day and

night alike. At the expiration of three days, A-pao, who had grown very fond of her parrot, secretly sent some one to ask how Mr. Sun was; but he had already been dead three days, though the part over his heart had not grown cold. "Oh! come to life again as a man," cried the young lady, "and I swear to be yours forever." "You are surely not in earnest," said the parrot, "are you?" Miss A-pao declared she was, and the parrot, cocking its head aside, remained some time as if absorbed in thought. By-and-by A-pao took off her shoes to bind her feet a little tighter;² and the parrot, making a rapid grab at one, flew off with it in its beak. She called loudly after it to come back, but in a moment it was out of sight; so she next sent a servant to inquire if there was any news of Mr. Sun, and then learnt that he had come round again, the parrot having flown in with an embroidered shoe and dropped down dead on the ground. Also, that directly he regained consciousness-he asked for the shoe, of which his people knew nothing; at which moment her servant had arrived, and demanded to know from him where it was. "It was given to me by Miss A-pao as a pledge of faith," replied Sun; "I beg you will tell her I have not forgotten her promise." A-pao was greatly astonished at this, and instructed her maid to divulge the whole affair to her mother, who, when she had made some inquiries, observed that Sun was well known as a clever fellow, but was desperately poor, "and to get such a son-in-law after all our trouble would give our aristocratic friends the laugh against us."⁷ However, A-pro pleaded that with the shoe there as a proof against her, she would not marry anybody else; and, ultimately, her father and mother gave their consent. This was immediately announced to Mr. Sun, whose illness rapidly disappeared in consequence. A-pao's father would have had Sun come and live with them; but the young lady objected, on the score that a son-in-law should not remain long at a time with the family of his wife, and that as he was poor he would lower himself still more by doing so. "I -have accepted him," added she, "and I shall gladly reside in his humble cottage, and share his poor fare without complaint." The marriage was then celebrated, and bride and bridegroom met as if for the first time in their lives. The dowry A-pro brought with her somewhat raised their pecuniary position, and gave them a certain amount of comfort; but Sun himself stuck only to his books, and knew nothing about managing affairs in general. Luckily his wife was clever in that respect, and did not bother him with such things; so much so that by the end of three years they were comparatively well off, when Sun suddenly fell ill and died. Mrs. Sun was inconsolable, and refused either to sleep or take nourishment, being deaf to all entreaties on the subject; and before long, taking advantage of the night, she hanged herself. Her maid, hearing a noise, ran in and cut her down just in time: but she still steadily refused all food. Three days passed away, and the friends and relatives of Sun came to attend his funeral, when suddenly they heard a sigh proceeding forth from the coffin. The coffin was then opened and they found that Sun had come to life again. He told them that he had been before the Great Judge, who, as a reward for his upright and honourable life, had conferred upon him an official appointment. "At this moment," said Sun, "it was reported that my wife was close at hand,³ but the Judge, referring to the register, observed that her time had not yet come. They told him she had taken no food for three days; and then the Judge, looking at me, said that as a recompense for her wifely virtues she should be permitted to return to life. Thereupon he gave orders to his attendants to put to the horses and see us safely back." From that hour Sun gradually improved, and the next year went up for his Master's degree. All his old companions chaffed him exceedingly before the examination, and gave him seven themes on out-of-the-way subjects, telling him privately that

² This process must be regularly gone through night and morning, otherwise the bandages become loose, and the gait of the walker unsteady.

³ Being nearly dead from hanging.

they had been surreptitiously obtained from the examiners. Sun believed them as usual, and worked at them day and night until he was perfect, his comrades all the time enjoying a good laugh against him. However, when the day came it was found that the examiners, fearing lest the themes they had chosen in an ordinary way should have been dishonestly made public, took a set of fresh ones quite out of the common run—in fact, on the very subjects Sun's companions had given to him. Consequently, he came out at the head of the list; and the next year, after taking his Doctor's degree, he was entered among the Han-lin Academicians. The Emperor, too, happening to hear of his curious adventures, sent for him and made him repeat his story; subsequently, summoning A-pao and making her some very costly presents.