

Little Chu

By P'u Sung-ling

A man named Li Hua dwelt at Ch'ang-chou. He was very well off, and about fifty years of age, but he had no sons; only one daughter, named Hsiao-hui, a pretty child on whom her parents doted. When she was fourteen she had a severe illness and died, leaving their home desolate and depriving them of their chief pleasure in life. Mr. Li then bought a concubine, and she by-and-by bore him a son, who was perfectly idolised, and called Chu, or the Pearl. This boy grew up to be a fine manly fellow, though so extremely stupid that when five or six years old he didn't know pulse from corn, and could hardly talk plainly. His father, however, loved him dearly, and did not observe his faults.

Now it chanced that a one-eyed priest came to collect alms in the town, and he seemed to know so much about everybody's private affairs that the people all looked upon him as superhuman. He himself declared he had control over life, death, happiness, and misfortune; and consequently no one dared refuse him whatever sum he chose to ask of them. From Li he demanded one hundred ounces of silver, but was offered only ten, which he refused to receive. This sum was increased to thirty ounces, whereupon the priest looked sternly at Li and said, "I must have one hundred; not a fraction less." Li now got angry, and went away without giving him any, the priest, too, rising up in a rage and shouting after him, "I hope you won't repent." Shortly after these events little Chu fell sick, and crawled about the bed scratching the mat, his face being of an ashen paleness. This frightened his father, who hurried off with eighty ounces of silver, and begged the priest to accept them. "A large sum like this is no trifling matter to earn," said the priest, smiling; "but what can a poor recluse like myself do for you?" So Li went home, to find that little Chu was already dead; and this worked him into such a state that he immediately laid a complaint before the magistrate. The priest was accordingly summoned and interrogated; but the magistrate wouldn't accept his defence, and ordered him to be bamboosed. The blows sounded as if falling on leather, upon which the magistrate commanded his lictors to search him; and from about his person they drew forth two wooden men, a small coffin, and *five* small flags. The magistrate here flew into a passion, and made certain mystic signs with his fingers, which when the priest saw he was frightened, and began to excuse himself; but the magistrate would not listen to him, and had him bamboosed to death. Li thanked him for his kindness, and, taking his leave, proceeded home. In the evening, after dusk, he was sitting alone with his wife, when suddenly in popped a little boy, who said, "Pa! why did you hurry on so fast? I couldn't catch you up." Looking at him more closely, they saw that he was about seven or eight years old, and Mr. Li, in some alarm, was on the point of questioning him, when he disappeared, reappearing again like smoke, and, curling round and round, got upon the bed. Li pushed him off, and he fell down without making any sound, crying out, "Pa! why do you do this?" and in a moment he was on the bed again. Li was frightened, and ran away with his wife, the boy calling after them, "Pa! Ma! boo-oo-oo." They went into the next room, bolting the door after them; but there was the little boy at their heels again. Li asked him what he wanted, to which he replied, "I belong to Su-chou; my name is Chan; at six years of age I was left an orphan; my brother and his wife couldn't bear me, so they sent me to live at my maternal grandfather's. One day, when playing outside, a wicked priest killed me by his black art underneath a mulberry-tree, and made of me an evil spirit, dooming me to everlasting devildom

without hope of transmigration. Happily you exposed him; and I would now remain with you as your son." "The paths of men and devils," replied Li, "lie in different directions. How can we remain together?" "Give me only a tiny room," cried the boy, "a bed, a mattress, and a cup of cold gruel every day. I ask for nothing more." So Li agreed, to the great delight of the boy, who slept by himself in another part of the house, coming in the morning and walking in and out like any ordinary person. Hearing Li's concubine crying bitterly, he asked how long little Chu had been dead, and she told him seven days. "It's cold weather now," said he, "and the body can't have decomposed. Have the grave opened, and let me see it; if not too far gone, I can bring him to life again." Li was only too pleased, and went off with the boy; and when they opened the grave they found the body in perfect preservation; but while Li was controlling his emotions, lo! the boy had vanished from his sight. Wondering very much at this, he took little Chu's body home, and had hardly laid it on the bed when he noticed the eyes move. Little Chu then called for some broth, which put him into a perspiration, and then he got up. They were all overjoyed to see him come to life again; and, what is more, he was much brighter and cleverer than before. At night, however, he lay perfectly stiff and rigid, without showing any signs of life; and, as he didn't move when they turned him over and over, they were much frightened, and thought he had died again. But towards daybreak he awaked as if from a dream, and in reply to their questions said that when he was with the wicked priest there was another boy named Ko-tzü;¹ and that the day before, when he had been unable to catch up his father, it was because he had stayed behind to bid adieu to Ko-tzü; that Ko-tzü was now the son of an official in Purgatory named Chiang, and very comfortably settled; and that he had invited him (Chan) to go and play with him that evening, and had sent him back on a white-nosed horse. His mother then asked him if he had seen little Chu in Purgatory, to which he replied, "Little Chu has already been born again. He and our father here had not really the destiny of father and son. Little Chu was merely a man named Yen Tzü-fang, from Chin-ling, who had come to reclaim an old debt." Now Mr. Li had formerly traded to Chin-ling, and actually owed money for goods to a Mr. Yen; but he had died, and no one else knew anything about it, so that he was now greatly alarmed when he heard this story. His mother next asked (the quasi) little Chu if he had seen his sister, Hsiao-hui; and he said he had not, promising to go again and inquire about her. A few days afterwards he told his mother that Hsiao-hui was very happy in Purgatory, being married to a son of one of the Judges; and that she had any quantity of jewels,² and crowds of attendants when she went abroad. "Why doesn't she come home to see her parents?" asked his mother. "Well," replied the boy, "dead people, you know, haven't got any flesh or bones; however, if you can only remind them of something that happened in their past lives, their feelings are at once touched. So yesterday I managed, through Mr. Chiang, to get an interview with Hsiao-hui; and we sat together on a coral couch, and I spoke to her of her father and mother at home, all of which she listened to as if she was asleep. I then remarked, Sister, when you were alive you were very fond of embroidering double-stemmed flowers; and once you cut your finger with the scissors, and the blood ran over the silk, but you brought it into the picture as a crimson cloud. Your mother has that picture still, hanging at the head of her bed, a perpetual souvenir of you. Sister, have you forgotten this?" Then she burst into tears, and promised to ask her husband to let her come and visit you." His mother asked when she would arrive, but he said he could not tell. However, one day he ran in and cried out, "Mother, Hsiao-hui has come, with a splendid equipage and a train of servants; we had better get plenty of wine ready." In a few moments he came in again, saying, "Here is my sister,"

¹ It may be necessary here to remind the reader that Chan's spirit is speaking from Chu's body.

² The *summum bonum* of many a Chinese woman.

at the same time asking her to take, a seat and rest. He then wept; but none of those present saw anything at all. By-and-by he went out and burnt a quantity of paper money³ and made offerings of wine outside the door, returning shortly and saying he had sent away her attendants for a while; also that Hsiao-hui asked if the green coverlet, a small portion of which had been burnt by a candle, was still in existence. "It is," replied her mother, and, going to a box, she at once produced the coverlet. "Hsiao-hui would like a bed made up for her in her old room," said her (quasi) brother; "she wants to rest awhile, and will talk with you again in the morning."

Now their next-door neighbour, named Chao, had a daughter who was formerly a great friend of Hsiao-hui's, and that night she dreamt that Hsiao-hui appeared with a turban on her head and a red mantle over her shoulders, and that they talked and laughed together precisely as in days gone by. "I am now a spirit," said Hsiao-hui, "and my father and mother can no more see me than if I was far separated from them. Dear sister, I would borrow your body, from which to speak to them. You need fear nothing." On the morrow, when Miss Chao met her mother, she fell on the ground before her and remained some time in a state of unconsciousness, at length saying, "Madam, it is many years since we met; your hair has become very white." "The girl's mad," said her mother, in alarm; and, thinking something had gone wrong, proceeded to follow her out of the door. Miss Chao went straight to Li's house, and there with tears embraced Mrs. Li, who did not know what to make of it all. "Yesterday," said Miss Chao, "when I came back, I was unhappily unable to speak with you. Unfilial wretch that I was, to die before you and leave you to mourn my loss. How can I redeem such behaviour?" Her mother thereupon began to understand the scene, and, weeping, said to her, "I have heard that you hold an honourable position, and this is a great comfort to me; but living as you do in the palace of a Judge, how is it you are able to get away?" "My husband," replied she, "is very kind; and his parents treat me with all possible consideration. I experience no harsh treatment at their hands." Here Miss Chao rested her cheek upon her hand, exactly as Hsiao-hui had been wont to do when she was alive; and at that moment in came her brother to say that her attendants were ready to return. "I must go," said she, rising up and weeping bitterly all the time; after which she fell down, and remained some time unconscious as before.

Shortly after these events Mr. Li became dangerously ill, and no medicines were of any avail, so that his son feared they would not be able to save his life. Two devils sat at the head of his bed, one holding an iron staff, the other a nettle-hemp rope four or five feet in length. Day and night his son implored them to go, but they would not move; and Mrs. Li in sorrow began to prepare the funeral clothes.⁴ Towards evening her son entered and cried out, "Strangers and women leave the room I My sister's husband is coming to see his father-in-law." He then clapped his hands, and burst out laughing. "What is the matter?" asked his mother. "I am laughing," answered he, "because when the two devils heard my sister's husband was coming, they both ran under the bed, like terrapins, drawing in their heads." By-and-by, looking at nothing, he began to talk about the weather, and ask his sister's husband how he did, and then he clapped his hands and said, "I begged the two devils to go, but they would not; it's all right now." After this he went out to the door and returned, saying, "My sister's husband has gone. He

³ Chinese silver, called sycee (from the Cantonese *sai see*, "fine silk;" because if pure, it may be drawn out under the application of heat into fine silk threads), is cast in the form of "shoes," weighing from one to one hundred ounces. Paper imitations of these are burnt for the use of the spirits in the world below. The sharp edges of a "shoe" of sycee are caused by the mould containing the molten silver being gently shaken until the metal has set, with a view to secure uniform fineness throughout the lump.

⁴ Death is regarded as a summons from the authorities of Purgatory; lictors are sent to arrest the doomed man, armed with a written warrant similar to those issued on earth from a magistrate's *yamên*.

took away the two devils tied to his horse. My father ought to get better now. Besides, Hsiao-hui's husband said he would speak to the Judge, and obtain a hundred years' lease of life both for you and my father." The whole family rejoiced exceedingly at this, and when night came Mr. Li was better, and in a few days quite well again. A tutor was engaged for (the quasi) little Chu, who showed himself an apt pupil, and at eighteen years of age took his bachelor's degree. He could also see things of the other world; and when any one in the village was ill, he pointed out where the devils were, and burnt them out with fire, so that everybody got well. However, before long he himself became very ill, and his flesh turned green and purple, whereupon he said, "The devils afflict me thus because I let out their secrets. Henceforth I shall never divulge them again."