

The Faithless Widow¹

By P'u Sung-ling

Mr. Niu was a Kiangsi man who traded in piece goods. He married a wife from the Chêng family, by whom he had two children, a boy and a girl. When thirty-three years of age he fell ill and died, his son Chung being then only twelve and his little girl eight or nine. His wife did not remain faithful to his memory, but, selling off all the property, pocketed the proceeds and married another man, leaving her two children almost in a state of destitution with their aunt, Niu's sister-in-law, an old lady of sixty, who had lived with them previously, and had now nowhere to seek a shelter. A few years later this aunt died, and the family fortunes began to sink even lower than before; Chung, however, was now grown up, and determined to carry on his father's trade, only he had no capital to start with. His sister marrying a rich trader named Mao, she begged her husband to lend Chung ten ounces of silver, which he did, and Chung immediately started for Nanking. On the road he fell in with some bandits, who robbed him of all he had, and consequently he was unable to return; but one day when he was at a pawnshop he noticed that the master of the shop was wonderfully like his late father, and on going out and making inquiries he found that this pawnbroker bore precisely the same names. In great astonishment, he forthwith proceeded to frequent the place with no other object than to watch this man, who, on the other hand, took no notice of Chung; and by the end of three days, having satisfied himself that he really saw his own father, and yet not daring to disclose his own identity, he made application through one of the assistants, on the score of being himself a Kiangsi man, to be employed in the shop. Accordingly, an indenture was drawn up; and when the master noticed Chung's name and place of residence he started, and asked him whence he came. With tears in his eyes Chung addressed him by his father's name, and then the pawnbroker became lost in a deep reverie, by-and-by asking Chung how his mother was. Now Chung did not like to allude to his father's death, and turned the question by saying, "My father went away on business six years ago, and never came back; my mother married again and left us, and had it not been for my aunt our corpses would long ago have been cast out in the kennel." Then the pawnbroker was much moved, and cried out, "I am your father!" seizing his son's hand and leading him within to see his step-mother. This lady was about twenty two, and, having no children of her own, was delighted with Chung, and prepared a banquet for him in the inner apartments. Mr. Niu himself was, however, somewhat melancholy, and wished to return to his old home; but his wife, fearing that there would be no one to manage the business, persuaded him to remain; so he taught his son the trade, and in three months was able to leave it all to him. He then prepared for his journey, whereupon Chung informed his step-mother that his father was really dead, to which she replied in great consternation that she knew him only as a trader to the place, and that six years previously he had married her, which proved conclusively that he

¹ Unless under exceptional circumstances, it is not considered creditable in China for widows to marry again. It may here be mentioned that the honorary tablets conferred from time to time by His Imperial Majesty upon virtuous widows are only given to women who, widowed before the age of thirty, have remained in that state for a period of thirty years. The meaning of this is obvious: temptations are supposed to be fewer and less dangerous after thirty, which is the equivalent of forty with us; and it is wholly improbable that thirty years of virtuous life, at which period the widow would be at least fifty, would be followed by any act that might cast a stain upon the tablet thus bestowed.

couldn't be dead. He then recounted the whole story, which was a perfect mystery to both of them; and twenty-four hours afterwards he walked his father, leading a woman whose hair was all dishevelled. Chung looked at her, and saw that she was his own mother; and Niu took her by the ear and began to revile her, saying, "Why did you desert my children?" to which the wretched woman made no reply. He then bit her across the neck, at which she screamed to Chung for assistance, and he, not being able to bear the sight, stepped in between them. His father was more than ever enraged at this, when, lo! Chung's mother had disappeared. While they were still lost in astonishment at this strange scene, Mr. Niu's colour changed; in another moment his empty clothes had dropped upon the ground, and he himself became a black vapour and also vanished from their sight. The step-mother and son were much overcome; they took Niu's clothes and buried them, and after that Chung continued his father's business, and soon amassed great wealth. On returning to his native place he found that his mother had actually died on the very day of the above occurrence, and that his father had been seen by the whole family.