

The Disembodied Friend

By P'u Sung-ling

Mr. Ch'ên, M.A., of Shun-t'ien Fu, when a boy of sixteen, went to school at a Buddhist temple. There were a great many scholars besides himself, and, among others, one named Ch'u, who said he came from Shantung. This Ch'u was a very bard-working fellow; he never seemed to be idle, and actually slept in the schoolroom, not going home at all. Ch'ên became much attached to him, and one day asked him why he never went away. "Well, you see," replied Ch'u, "my people are very poor, and can hardly afford to pay for my schooling; but, by dint of working half the night, two of my days are equal to three of anybody else's." Thereupon Ch'ên said he would bring his own bed to the school, and that they would sleep there together; to which Ch'u replied that the teaching they got wasn't worth much, and that they would do better by putting themselves under a certain old scholar named Lü. This they were easily able to do, as the arrangement at the temple was monthly, and at the end of each month any one was free to go or to come. So off they went to this Mr. Lü, a man of considerable literary attainments, who had found himself in Shun-t'ien Pu without a cash in his pocket, and was accordingly obliged to take pupils. He was delighted at getting two additions to his number; and Ch'u showing himself an apt scholar, the two soon became very great friends, sleeping in the same room and eating at the same table. At the end of the month Ch'u asked for leave of absence, and, to the astonishment of all, ten days elapsed without anything being heard of him. It then chanced that Ch'ên went to the T'ien-ning temple, and there he saw Ch'u under one of the verandahs, occupied in cutting wood for lucifer-matches.¹ The latter was much disconcerted by the arrival of Ch'ên, who asked him why he had given up his studies; so the latter took him aside, and explained that he was so poor as to be obliged to work half a month to scrape together funds enough for his next month's schooling. "You come along back with me;" cried Ch'ên, on hearing this, "I will arrange for the payment," which Ch'u immediately consented to do on condition that Ch'ên would keep the whole thing a profound secret. Now Ch'ên's father was a wealthy tradesman, and from his till Ch'ên abstracted money wherewith to pay for Ch'u; and by-and-by, when his father found him out, he confessed why he had done so. Thereupon Ch'ên's father called him a fool, and would not let him resume his studies; at which Ch'u was much hurt, and would have left the school too, but that old Mr. Lü discovered what had taken place, and gave him the money to return to Ch'ên's father, keeping him still at the school, and treating him quite like his own son. So Ch'ên studied no more, but whenever he met Ch'u he always asked him to join in some refreshment at a restaurant, Ch'u invariably refusing, but yielding at length to his entreaties, being himself loth to break off their old acquaintanceship.

Thus two years passed away, when Ch'ên's father died, and Ch'ên went back to his books under the guidance of old Mr. Lü, who was very glad to see such determination. Of course Ch'ên was now far behind Ch'u; and in about six months Lü's son arrived, having begged his way in

¹ These consist simply of thin slips of wood dipped in brimstone, and resemble those used in England as late as the first quarter of the nineteenth century. They are said to have been invented by the people of Hang-chou, the capital of Chekiang; but it is quite possible that the hint may have first reached China from the West. They were called *yin kuang*, "bring light" (*lucifer*), *fa chu*, "give forth illumination," and other names. Lucifer matches are now generally spoken of as *tzu lai huo*, "self-come fire," and are almost universally employed, except in remote parts where the flint and steel still hold sway.

search of his father, so Mr. Lu gave up his school and returned home with purse which his pupils had made up for him, Ch'u adding nothing thereto but his tears. At parting, Mr. Lü advised Ch'ên to take Ch'u as his tutor, and this he did, establishing him comfortably in the house with him. The examination was very shortly to commence, and Ch'ên felt convinced that he should not get through; but Ch'u said he thought he should be able to manage the matter for him, On the appointed day he introduced Ch'ên to a gentleman who he said was a cousin of his, named Liu, and asked Ch'ên to accompany this cousin, which Ch'ên was just proceeding to do when Ch'u pulled him back from behind,² and he would have fallen down but that the cousin pulled him up again, and then, after having scrutinised his appearance, carried him off to his own house. There being no ladies there, Ch'ên was put into the inner apartments; and a few days afterwards Liu said to him, "A great many people will be at the gardens to-day; let us go and amuse ourselves awhile, and afterwards I will send you home again." He then gave orders that a servant should proceed on ahead with tea and wine, and by-and-by they themselves went, and were soon in the thick of the fête. Crossing over a bridge, they saw beneath an old willow tree a little painted skiff, and were soon on board, engaged in freely passing round the wine. However, finding this a little dull, Liu bade his servant go and see if Miss Li, the famous singing-girl, was at home; and in a few minutes the servant returned bringing Miss Li with him. Ch'ên had met her before, and so they at once exchanged greetings, while Liu begged her to be good enough to favour them with a song. Miss Li, who seemed labouring under a fit of melancholy, forthwith began a funeral dirge; at which Ch'ên was not much pleased, and observed that such a theme was hardly suitable to the occasion. With a forced smile, Miss Li changed her key, and gave them a love-song; whereupon Ch'ên seized her hand, and said, "There's that song of the Huan-sha river,³ which you sang once before; I have read it over several times, but have quite forgotten the words." Then Miss Li began—

Eyes overflowing with tears, she sits gazing into her mirror;
Lilting the bamboo screen, one of her comrades approaches.
She bends her head and seems intent on her bow-like slippers,
And forces her eyebrows to arch themselves into a smile.
With her scarlet sleeve she wipes the tears from her fragrant cheek.
In fear and trembling lest they should guess the thoughts that overwhelm her.

Ch'ên repeated this over several times, until at length the skiff stopped, and they passed through a long verandah, where a great many verses had been inscribed on the walls,⁴ to which Ch'ên at once proceeded to add a stanza of his own. Evening was now coming on, and Liu remarked that the candidates would be just about leaving the examination-hall⁵ so he escorted him back to his own home, and there left him. The room was dark, and there was no one with him; but by-and-by the servants ushered in some one whom at first he took to be Ch'u. However, he soon saw that it was not Ch'u, and in another moment the stranger had fallen against him and knocked him down. "Master's fainted!" cried the servants, as they ran to pick him up; and then

² The whole point of the story hinges on this.

³ Beside which lived Hsi Shih, the famous beauty of the fifth century after Christ.

⁴ The Chinese have precisely the same mania as our Browns, Joneses, and Robinsons, for scribbling and carving their names and compositions all over the available parts of any place of public resort. The literature of inn walls alone would fill many ponderous tomes.

⁵ The examination, which lasts nine days, has been going on all this time.

Ch'ên discovered that the one who had fallen down was really no other than himself.⁶ On getting up, he saw Ch'u standing by his side; and when they had sent away the servants the latter said, "Don't be alarmed: I am nothing more than a disembodied spirit. My time for reappearing on earth⁷ is long overdue, but I could not forget your great kindness to me, and accordingly I have remained under this form in order to assist in the accomplishment of your wishes. The three bouts⁹ are over, and your ambition will be gratified." Ch'ên then inquired if Ch'u could assist him in like manner for his doctor's degree; to which the latter replied, "Alas! the luck descending to you from your ancestors is not equal to that. They were a niggardly lot, and unfit for the posthumous honours you would thus confer on them." Ch'ên next asked him whither he was going; and Ch'u replied that he hoped, through the agency of his cousin, who was a clerk in Purgatory, to be born again in old Mr Lü's family. They then bade each other adieu; and, when morning came, Ch'ên set off to call on Miss Li, the singing-girl; but on reaching, her house he found that she had been dead some days.⁸ He walked on to the gardens, and there he saw traces of verses that had been written on the walls, and evidently rubbed out, so as to be hardly decipherable. In a moment it flashed across him that the verses and their composers belonged to the other world. Towards evening Ch'u reappeared in high spirits, saying that he had succeeded in his design, and had come to wish Ch'ên a long farewell. Holding out his open palms, he requested Ch'ên to write the word *Ch'u* on each; and then, after refusing to take a parting cup, he went away, telling Ch'ên that the examination-list would soon be out, and that they would meet again before long. Ch'ên brushed away his tears and escorted him to the door, where a man, who had been waiting for him, laid his hand on Ch'u's head and pressed it downwards until Chu was perfectly flat. The man then put him in a sack and carried him off on his back. A few days afterwards the list came out, and, to his great joy, Ch'ên found his name among the successful candidates whereupon he immediately started off to visit his old tutor, Mr. Lü. Now Mr. Lü's wife had had no children for ten years, being about fifty years of age, when suddenly she gave birth to a son, who was born with both fists doubled up so that no one could open them. On his arrival Ch'ên begged to see the child, and declared that inside its hands would be found written the word Ch'u. Old Mr. Lu laughed at this; but no sooner had the child set eyes on Ch'ên than both its fists opened spontaneously, and there was the word as Ch'ên had said. The story was soon told, and Ch'ên went home, after making a handsome present to the family; and later on, when Mt. Lu went up for his doctor's degree and stayed at Ch'ên's house, his son was thirteen years old, and had already matriculated as a candidate for literary honours.

⁶ That is, his own body, into which Ch'u's spirit had temporarily passed, his own occupying, meanwhile, the body of his friend.

⁷ That is, for being born again, the sole hope and ambition of a disembodied shade.

⁸ His own spirit in Ch'u's body had met her in a disembodied state.