

His Father's Ghost

By P'u Sung-ling

A man named T'ien Tz -ch'êng, of Chiang-ning, was crossing the Tung-t'ing lake, when the boat was capsized, and he was drowned. His son, Liang-ssu, who, towards the close of the Ming dynasty, took the highest degree, was then a baby in arms; and his wife, hearing the bad news, swallowed poison forthwith,¹ and left the child to the care of his grandmother. When Liang-ssu grew up, he was appointed magistrate in Hu-pei, where he remained about a year. He was then transferred to Hu-nan, on military service; but, on reaching the Tung-t'ing lake, his feelings overpowered him, and he returned to plead inability as an excuse for not taking up his post. Accordingly, he was degraded to the rank of Assistant-Magistrate, which he at first declined but was finally compelled to accept; and thenceforward gave himself up to roaming about on the lakes and streams of the surrounding country, without paying much attention to his official duties.

One night he had anchored his boat alongside the bank of a river, when suddenly the cadence of a sweetly-played flageolet broke upon his ear; so he strolled along by the light of the moon in the direction of the music, until, after a few minutes' walking, he reached a cottage standing by itself, with a few citron-trees round it, and brilliantly lighted inside. Approaching a window, he peeped in, and saw three persons sitting at a table, engaged in drinking. In the place of honour was a graduate of about thirty years of age; an old man played the host, and at the side sat a much younger man playing on the flageolet. When he had finished, the old man clapped his hands in admiration; but the graduate turned away with a sigh, as if he had not heard a note. "Come now, Mr. Lu," cried the old man, addressing the latter, "kindly favour us with one of your songs, which, I know, must be worth hearing." The graduate then began to sing as follows:—

Over the river the wind blows cold on lonely me:
Each flow'ret trampled under foot, all verdure gone.
At home a thousand *li* away, I cannot be;
So towards the Bridge my spirit nightly wanders on.

The above was given in such melancholy tones that the old man smiled and said, "Mr. Lu, these must be experiences of your own," and, immediately filling a goblet, added, "I can do nothing like that; but if you will let me, I will give you a song to help us on with our wine." He then sang a verse from Li T'ai-po,² and put them all in a lively humour again; after which the young man said he would just go outside and see how high the moon was, which he did, and, observing Liang-ssu outside, clapped his hands, and cried out to his companions, "There is a man at the window, who has seen all we have been doing." He then led Liang-ssu in; whereupon the other two rose, and begged him to be seated, and to join them in their wine. The wine, however, was cold,³ and he therefore, declined; but the young man at once perceived his reason, and proceeded to warm some for him. Liang-ssu now ordered his servant to go and buy some more,

¹ This would be regarded as a very meritorious act by the Chinese.

² The Byron of China.

³ Chinese wine—or, more correctly, *spirits*—is always taken hot; hence the term wine-kettle, which frequently occurs in these pages.

but this his host would not permit him to do. They next inquired Liang-ssu's name, and whence he came, and then the old man said, "Why, then, you are the father and mother of the district in which I live. My name is River: I am an old resident here. This young man is a Mr. Tu, of Kiang-si; and this gentleman," added he, pointing to the graduate, "is Mr. Rushten,"⁴ a fellow-provincial of yours." Mr. Rushten looked, at Liang-ssu in rather a contemptuous way, and without taking much notice of him; whereupon Liang-ssu asked him whereabouts he lived in Chiang-ning, observing that it was strange he himself should never have heard of such an accomplished gentleman. "Alas!" replied Rushten, "it is many a long day since I left my home, and I know nothing even of my own family. Alas, indeed!" These words were uttered in so mournful a tone of voice that the old man broke in with, "Come, come, now! talking like this, instead of drinking when we're all so jolly together; this will never do." He then drained a bumper himself, and said, "I propose a game of forfeits. We'll throw with three dice; and whoever throws so that the spots on one die⁵ equal those on the other two shall give us a verse with a corresponding classical allusion in it." He then threw himself, and turned up an ace, a two, and a three; whereupon he sang the following lines:—

An ace and a deuce on one side, just equal a three on the other:
For Fan a chicken was boiled, though three years had passed, by Chang's mother.⁶
Thus friends love to meet!

Then the young musician threw, and turned up two twos and a four; whereupon he exclaimed, "Don't laugh at the feeble allusion of an unlearned fellow like me:—

Two deuces are equal to a four:
Four men united their valour in the old city,⁷
Thus brothers love to meet!"

Mr. Rushten followed with two aces and a two, and recited these lines:—

Two aces are equal to a two:
Lu-hsiang stretched out his two arms and embraced his father.⁸
Thus father and son love to meet!

Liang then threw, and turned up the same as Mr. Rushten; whereupon he said:—

⁴ This singularly un-Chinese surname is employed to keep up a certain play upon words which exists in the original, and which is important to the *denouement* of the story. "River" is the simple translation of a name actually in use.

⁵ Chinese dice are the exact counterpart of our own, except that the ace and the four are coloured red: the ace because the combination of black and white would be unlucky, and the four because this number once turned up in response to the call of an Emperor of the T'ang dynasty, who particularly wanted a four to win him the *partie*. All letters, despatches, and such documents, have invariably something *red* about them, this being the lucky colour, and to the Chinese emblematic of prosperity and joy.

⁶ Alluding to an ancient story of a promise by a Mr. Fan that he would be at his friend Chang's house that day three years. When the time drew near, Chang's mother ridiculed the notion of a man keeping a three years' appointment; but, acceding to her son's instances, she prepared a boiled chicken, which was barely ready when Fan arrived to eat of it.

⁷ Alluding to the celebrated oath of confederation sworn in the peach garden between Kuan Yü, or Kuan Ti, Chang Fei, Liu Pei, who subsequently proclaimed himself Emperor, A.D. 221, and Chu-ko Liang, his celebrated minister, to whose sage counsels most of the success of the undertaking was due.

⁸ Alluding to the story of a young man who went in search of his missing father.

Two aces are equal to a two:
Mao-jung regaled Lin-tsung with, two baskets.⁹
Thus host and guest love to meet!

When the *partie* was over Liang-ssu rose to go, but Mr. Rushten said, "Dear me! why are you in such a hurry; we haven't had a moment to speak of the old place. Please stay: I was just going to ask you a few questions." So Liang-ssu sat down again, and Mr. Rushten proceeded. "I had an old friend," said he, "who was drowned in the Tung-t'ing lake. He bore the same name as yourself; was he a relative?" "He was my father," replied Liang-ssu; "how did you know him?" "We were friends as boys together; and when he was drowned, I recovered and buried his body by the river-side."¹⁰ Liang-ssu here burst into tears, and thanked Mr. Rushten very warmly, begging him to point out his father's grave. "Come again to-morrow," said Mr. Rushten, "and I will show it to you. You could easily find it yourself. It is close by here, and has ten stalks of water-rush growing on it." Liang-ssu now took his leave, and went back to his boat, but he could not sleep for thinking of what Mr. Rushten had told him; and at length, without waiting for the dawn, he set out to look for the grave. To his great astonishment, the house where he had spent the previous evening had disappeared; but hunting about in the direction indicated by Mr. Rushten, he found a grave with ten water rushes growing on it, precisely as Mr. Rushten had described. It then flashed across him that Mr. Rushten's name had a special meaning, and that he had been holding converse with none other than the disembodied spirit of his own father. And, on inquiring of the people of the place, he learnt that twenty years before, a benevolent old gentleman, named Kao, had been in the habit of collecting the bodies of persons found drowned, and burying them in that spot. Liang then opened the grave, and carried off his father's remains to his own home, where his grandmother, to whom he described Mr. Rushten's appearance, confirmed the suspicion he himself had formed. It also turned out that the young musician was a cousin of his, who had been drowned when nineteen years of age; and then he recollected that the boy's father had subsequently gone to Kiang-si, and that his mother had died there, and had been buried at the Bamboo Bridge, to which Mr. Rushten had alluded in his song. But he did not know who the old man was.¹¹

⁹ Lin-tsung saw his host kill a chicken which he thought was destined for himself. However, Mao-jung served up the dainty morsel to his mother, while he and his guest regaled themselves with two baskets of common vegetables. At this instance of filial piety, Lin-tsung had the good sense to be charmed.

¹⁰ The Chinese recognise no act more worthy a virtuous man than that of burying stray bones, covering up exposed coffins, and so forth. By such means the favour of the Gods is most surely obtained, to say nothing of the golden opinions of the living.

¹¹ This is merely our author's way of putting the question of the old man's identity. He was the Spirit of the Waters—his name, it will be recollected, was River—just, in fact, as we say Old Father Thames.