

The Dream Story of Gojiro

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Japanese

Intermediate
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Only a few years ago there was a gentleman in Fukui, Japan, who had a son, a bright lad of twelve, who was very diligent at school and had made astonishing progress in his studies. He was especially quick at learning Chinese characters, of which every Japanese gentleman who wishes to be called educated must know at least two thousand. For, although the Chinese and Japanese are two very different languages, yet the Japanese, Coreans and Chinese use the same letters to write with, just as English, Germans, French and Spaniards all employ one and the same alphabet.

Now Gojiro's father had promised him that when he read through five volumes of the Nihongi, or Ancient History of Japan, he would give him for a present a book of wonderful Chinese stories. Gojiro performed his task, and his father kept his promise. One day on his return from a journey to Kioto, he presented his son with sixteen volumes, all neatly silk-bound, well illustrated with wood-cuts, and printed clearly on thin, silky mulberry paper, from the best wooden blocks. It will be remembered that several volumes of Japanese literature make but one of ours, as they are much lighter and thinner than ours.

Gojiro was so delighted with the wonderful stories of heroes and warriors, travelers and sailors, that he almost felt himself in China. He read far into the night, with the lamp inside of his mosquito curtain; and finally fell asleep, still undressed, but with his head full of all sorts of Chinese wonders.

He dreamed he was far away in China, walking along the banks of the great Yellow River. Everything was very strange. The people talked an entirely different language from his own; had on different clothes; and, instead of the nice shaven head and top-knot of the Japanese, every one wore a long pigtail of hair, that dangled at his heels.

.Even the boats were of a strange form, and on the fishing smacks perched on projecting rails, sat rows of cormorants, each with a ring around his neck. Every few minutes one of them would dive under the water, and after a while come struggling up with a fish in its mouth, so big that the fishermen had to help the bird into the boat. The game was then flung into a basket, and the cormorant was treated to a slice of raw fish, by way of encouragement and to keep the bird from the bad habit of eating the live fish whole. This the ravenous bird would sometimes try to do, even though the ring was put around his neck for the express purpose of preventing him from gulping down a whole fish at once.

It was springtime, and the buds were just bursting into flower. The river was full of fish, especially of carp, ascending to the great rapids or cascades. Here the current ran at a prodigious rate of swiftness, and the waters rippled and boiled and roared with frightful noise. Yet, strange to say, many of the fish were swimming up the stream as if their lives depended on it. They leaped and floundered about; but every one seemed to be tossed back and left exhausted in the river, where they panted and gasped for breath in the eddies at the side. Some were so bruised against the rocks that, after a few spasms, they floated white and stiff, belly up, on the water, dead, and were swept down the stream. Still the shoal leaped and strained every fin, until their scales flashed in the sun like a host of armored warriors in battle. Gojiro, enjoying it as if it were a real conflict of wave and fishes, clapped his hands with delight.

Then Gojiro inquired, by means of writing, of an old white-bearded sage standing by and looking on: "What is the name of this part of the river?"

"We call it Lung Men," said the sage.

"Will you please write the characters for it," said Gojiro, producing his ink-case and brush-pen, with a roll of soft mulberry paper.

The sage wrote the two Chinese characters, meaning "The Gate of the Dragons," or "Dragons' Gate," and turned away to watch a carp that seemed almost up into smooth water.

"Oh! I see," said Gojiro to himself. "That's pronounced Riu Mon in Japanese. I'll go further on and see. There must be some meaning in this fish-climbing." He went forward a few rods, to where the banks trended upward into high bluffs, crowned by towering firs, through the top branches of which fleecy white clouds sailed

slowly along, so near the sky did the tree-tops seem. Down under the cliffs the river ran perfectly smooth, almost like a mirror, and broadened out to the opposite shore. Far back, along the current, he could still see the rapids shelving down. It was crowded at the bottom with leaping fish, whose numbers gradually thinned out toward the center; while near the top, close to the edge of level water, one solitary fish, of powerful fin and tail, breasted the steep stream. Now forward a leap, then a slide backward, sometimes further to the rear than the next leap made up for, then steady progress, then a slip, but every moment nearer, until, clearing foam and ripple and spray at one bound, it passed the edge and swam happily in smooth water.

It was inside the Dragon Gate.

Now came the wonderful change. One of the fleecy white clouds suddenly left the host in the deep blue above, dipped down from the sky, and swirling round and round as if it were a water spout, scratched and frayed the edge of the water like a fisher's troll. The carp saw and darted toward it. In a moment the fish was transformed into a white dragon, and, rising into the cloud, floated off toward Heaven. A streak or two of red fire, a gleam of terrible eyes, and the flash of white scales was all that Gojiro saw. Then he awoke.

"How strange that a poor little carp, a common fish that lives in the river, should become a great white dragon, and soar up into the sky, to live there," thought Gojiro, the next day, as he told his mother of his dream.

"Yes," said she; "and what a lesson for you. See how the carp persevered, leaping over all difficulties, never giving up till it became a dragon. I hope my son will mount over all obstacles, and rise to honor and to high office under the government."

"Oh! oh! now I see!" said Gojiro. "That is what my teacher means when he says the students in Tokio have a saying, 'I'm a fish to day, but I hope to be a dragon to-morrow,' when they go to attend examination; and that's what Papa meant when he said: 'That fish's son, Kofuku, has become a white dragon, while I am yet only a carp.'"

So on the third day of the third month, at the Feast of Flags, Gojiro hoisted the nobori. It was a great fish, made of paper, fifteen feet long and hollow like a bag. It was yellow, with black scales and streaks of gold, and red gills and mouth, in which two strong strings were fastened. It was hoisted up by a rope to the top of a high bamboo pole on the roof of the house. There the breeze caught it, swelled it out round and full of air.

The wind made the fins work, and the tail flap, and the head tug, until it looked just like a carp trying to swim the rapids of the Yellow River—the symbol of ambition and perseverance.

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