

The Great Bell

A Chinese Wonder Book

Chinese

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The mighty Yung-lo sat on the great throne surrounded by a hundred attendants. He was sad, for he could think of no wonderful thing to do for his country. He flirted his silken fan nervously and snapped his long finger-nails in the impatience of despair.

“Woe is me!” he cried at last, his sorrow getting the better of his usual calmness. “I have picked up the great capital and moved it from the South to Peking and have built here a mighty city. I have surrounded my city with a wall, even thicker and greater than the famous wall of China. I have constructed in this city scores of temples and palaces. I have had the wise men and scholars compile a great book of wisdom, made up of 23,000 volumes, the largest and most wonderful collection of learning ever gathered together by the hands of men. I have built watch-towers, bridges, and giant monuments, and now, alas! as I approach the end of my days as ruler of the Middle Kingdom there is nothing more to be done for my people. Better far that I should even now close my tired eyes for ever and mount up on high to be the guest of the dragon, than live on in idleness, giving to my children an example of uselessness and sloth.”

“But, your Majesty,” began one of Yung-lo’s most faithful courtiers, named Ming-lin, falling upon his knees and knocking his head three times on the ground, “if you would only deign to listen to your humble slave, I would dare to suggest a great gift for which the many people of Peking, your children, would rise up and bless

you both now and in future generations.”

“Only tell me of such a gift and I will not only grant it to the imperial city, but as a sign of thanksgiving to you for your sage counsel I will bestow upon you the royal peacock feather.”

“It is not for one of my small virtues,” replied the delighted official, “to wear the feather when others so much wiser are denied it, but if it please your Majesty, remember that in the northern district of the city there has been erected a bell-tower which as yet remains empty. The people of the city need a giant bell to sound out the fleeting hours of the day, that they may be urged on to perform their labours and not be idle. The water-clock already marks the hours, but there is no bell to proclaim them to the populace.”

“A good suggestion in sooth,” answered the Emperor, smiling, “and yet who is there among us that has skill enough in bell-craft to do the task you propose? I am told that to cast a bell worthy of our imperial city requires the genius of a poet and the skill of an astronomer.”

“True, most mighty one, and yet permit me to say that Kwan-yu, who so skilfully moulded the imperial cannon, can also cast a giant bell. He alone of all your subjects is worthy of the task, for he alone can do it justice.”

Now, the official who proposed the name of Kwan-yu to the Emperor had two objects in so doing. He wished to quiet the grief of Yung-lo, who was mourning because he had nothing left to do for his people, and, at the same time, to raise Kwan-yu to high rank, for Kwan-yu’s only daughter had for several years been betrothed to Ming-lin’s only son, and it would be a great stroke of luck for Ming-lin if his daughter-in-law’s father should come under direct favour of the Emperor.

“Depend upon it, Kwan-yu can do the work better than any other man within the length and breadth of your empire,” continued Ming-lin, again bowing low three times.

“Then summon Kwan-yu at once to my presence, that I may confer with him about this important business.”

In great glee Ming-lin arose and backed himself away from the golden throne, for it would have been very improper for him to turn his coat-tails on the Son of Heaven.

But it was with no little fear that Kwan-yu undertook the casting of the great bell.

“Can a carpenter make shoes?” he had protested, when Ming-lin had broken the Emperor’s message to him.

“Yes,” replied the other quickly, “if they be like those worn by the little island dwarfs, and, therefore, made of wood. Bells and cannon are cast from similar material. You ought easily to adapt yourself to this new work.”

Now when Kwan-yu’s daughter found out what he was about to undertake, she was filled with a great fear.

“Oh, honoured father,” she cried, “think well before you give this promise. As a cannon-maker you are successful, but who can say about the other task? And if you fail, the Great One’s wrath will fall heavily upon you.”

“Just hear the girl,” interrupted the ambitious mother. “What do you know about success and failure? You’d better stick to the subject of cooking and baby-clothes, for you will soon be married. As for your father, pray let him attend to his own business. It is unseemly for a girl to meddle in her father’s affairs.”

And so poor Ko-ai—for that was the maiden’s name—was silenced, and went back to her fancy-work with a big tear stealing down her fair cheek, for she loved her father dearly and there had come into her heart a strange terror at thought of his possible danger.

Meanwhile, Kwan-yu was summoned to the Forbidden City, which is in the centre of Peking, and in which stands the Imperial palace. There he received his instructions from the Son of Heaven.

“And remember,” said Yung-lo in conclusion, “this bell must be so great that the sound of it will ring out to a distance of thirty-three miles on every hand. To this end, you should add in proper proportions gold and brass, for they give depth and strength to everything with which they mingle. Furthermore, in order that this giant may not be lacking in the quality of sweetness, you must add silver in due proportion, while the sayings of the sages must be graven on its sides.”

Now when Kwan-yu had really received his commission from the Emperor he searched the bookstalls of the city to find if possible some ancient descriptions of the best methods used in bell-casting. Also he offered generous wages to all who had ever had experience in the great work for which he was preparing. Soon his

great foundry was alive with labourers; huge fires were burning; great piles of gold, silver and other metals were lying here and there, ready to be weighed.

Whenever Kwan-yu went out to a public tea-house all of his friends plied him with questions about the great bell.

“Will it be the largest in the world?”

“Oh, no,” he would reply, “that is not necessary, but it must be the sweetest-toned, for we Chinese strive not for size, but for purity; not for greatness, but for virtue.”

“When will it be finished?”

“Only the gods can tell, for I have had little experience, and perhaps I shall fail to mix the metals properly.”

Every few days the Son of Heaven himself would send an imperial messenger to ask similar questions, for a king is likely to be just as curious as his subjects, but Kwan-yu would always modestly reply that he could not be certain; it was very doubtful when the bell would be ready.

At last, however, after consulting an astrologer, Kwan-yu appointed a day for the casting, and then there came another courtier robed in splendid garments, saying that at the proper hour the Great One himself would for the first time cross Kwan-yu's threshold—would come to see the casting of the bell he had ordered for his people. On hearing this, Kwan-yu was sore afraid, for he felt that somehow, in spite of all his reading, in spite of all the advice he had received from well-wishers, there was something lacking in the mixture of the boiling metals that would soon be poured into the giant mould.

In short, Kwan-yu was about to discover an important truth that this great world has been thousands of years in learning—namely, that mere reading and advice cannot produce skill, that true skill can come only from years of experience and practice. On the brink of despair, he sent a servant with money to the temple, to pray to the gods for success in his venture. Truly, despair and prayer rhyme in every language.

Ko-ai, his daughter, was also afraid when she saw the cloud on her father's brow, for she it was, you remember, who had tried to prevent him from undertaking the Emperor's commission. She also went to the temple, in company with a faithful old servant, and prayed to heaven.

The great day dawned. The Emperor and his courtiers were assembled, the former sitting on a platform built for the occasion. Three attendants waved beautiful hand-painted fans about his imperial brow, for the room was very warm, and a huge block of ice lay melting in a bowl of carved brass, cooling the hot air before it should blow upon the head of the Son of Heaven.

Kwan-yu's wife and daughter stood in a corner at the back of the room, peering anxiously towards the cauldron of molten liquid, for well they knew that Kwan-yu's future rank and power depended on the success of this enterprise. Around the walls stood Kwan-yu's friends, and at the windows groups of excited servants strained their necks, trying to catch a glimpse of royalty, and for once afraid to chatter. Kwan-yu himself was hurrying hither and thither, now giving a final order, now gazing anxiously at the empty mould, and again glancing towards the throne to see if his imperial master was showing signs of impatience.

At last all was ready; everyone was waiting breathlessly for the sign from Yung-lo which should start the flowing of the metal. A slight bow of the head, a lifting of the finger! The glowing liquid, hissing with delight at being freed even for a moment from its prison, ran forward faster and faster along the channel that led into the great earthen bed.

The bell-maker covered his eyes with his fan, afraid to look at the swiftly-flowing stream. Were all his hopes to be suddenly dashed by the failure of the metals to mix and harden properly? A heavy sigh escaped him as at last he looked up at the thing he had created. Something had indeed gone wrong; he knew in the flash of an eye that misfortune had overtaken him.

Yes! sure enough, when at last the earthen casting had been broken, even the smallest child could see that the giant bell, instead of being a thing of beauty was a sorry mass of metals that would not blend.

"Alas!" said Yung-lo, "here is indeed a mighty failure, but even in this disappointment I see an object lesson well worthy of consideration, for behold! in yonder elements are all the materials of which this country is made up. There are gold and silver and the baser metals. United in the proper manner they would make a bell so

wonderfully beautiful and so pure of tone that the very spirits of the Western heavens would pause to look and listen. But divided they form a thing that is hideous to eye and ear. Oh, my China! how many wars are there from time to time among the different sections, weakening the country and making it poor! If only all these peoples, great and small, the gold and silver and the baser elements, would unite, then would this land be really worthy of the name of the Middle Kingdom!”

The courtiers all applauded this speech of the great Yung-lo, but Kwan-yu remained on the ground where he had thrown himself at the feet of his sovereign. Still bowing his head and moaning, he cried out:

“Ah! your Majesty! I urged you not to appoint me, and now indeed you see my unfitness. Take my life, I beg you, as a punishment for my failure.”

“Rise, Kwan-yu,” said the great Prince. “I would be a mean master indeed if I did not grant you another trial. Rise up and see that your next casting profits by the lesson of this failure.”

So Kwan-yu arose, for when the King speaks, all men must listen. The next day he began his task once more, but still his heart was heavy, for he knew not the reason of his failure and was therefore unable to correct his error. For many months he laboured night and day. Hardly a word would he speak to his wife, and when his daughter tried to tempt him with a dish of sunflower seed that she had parched herself, he would reward her with a sad smile, but would by no means laugh with her and joke as had formerly been his custom. On the first and fifteenth day of every moon he went himself to the temple and implored the gods to grant him their friendly assistance, while Ko-ai added her prayers to his, burning incense and weeping before the grinning idols.

Again the great Yung-lo was seated on the platform in Kwan-yu’s foundry, and again his courtiers hovered round him, but this time, as it was winter, they did not flirt the silken fans. The Great One was certain that this casting would be successful. He had been lenient with Kwan-yu on the first occasion, and now at last he and the great city were to profit by that mercy.

Again he gave the signal; once more every neck was craned to see the flowing of the metal. But, alas! when the casing was removed it was seen that the new bell was no better than the first. It was, in fact, a dreadful failure, cracked and ugly, for the gold and silver and the baser elements had again refused to blend into a united whole.

With a bitter cry which touched the hearts of all those present, the unhappy Kwan-yu fell upon the floor. This time he did not bow before his master, for at the sight of the miserable conglomeration of useless metals his courage failed him, and he fainted. When at last he came to, the first sight that met his eyes was the scowling face of Yung-lo. Then he heard, as in a dream, the stern voice of the Son of Heaven:

“Unhappy Kwan-yu, can it be that you, upon whom I have ever heaped my favours, have twice betrayed the trust? The first time, I was sorry for you and willing to forget, but now that sorrow has turned into anger—yea, the anger of heaven itself is upon you. Now, I bid you mark well my words. A third chance you shall have to cast the bell, but if on that third attempt you fail—then by order of the Vermilion Pencil both you and Ming-lin, who recommended you, shall pay the penalty.”

For a long time after the Emperor had departed, Kwan-yu lay on the floor surrounded by his attendants, but chief of all those who tried to restore him was his faithful daughter. For a whole week he wavered between life and death, and then at last there came a turn in his favour. Once more he regained his health, once more he began his preparations.

Yet all the time he was about his work his heart was heavy, for he felt that he would soon journey into the dark forest, the region of the great yellow spring, the place from which no pilgrim ever returns. Ko-ai, too, felt more than ever that her father was in the presence of a great danger.

“Surely,” she said one day to her mother, “a raven must have flown over his head. He is like the proverb of the blind man on the blind horse coming at midnight to a deep ditch. Oh, how can he cross over?”

Willingly would this dutiful daughter have done anything to save her loved one. Night and day she racked her brains for some plan, but all to no avail.

On the day before the third casting, as Ko-ai was sitting in front of her brass mirror braiding her long black hair, suddenly a little bird flew in at the window and perched upon her head. Immediately the startled maiden

seemed to hear a voice as if some good fairy were whispering in her ear:

“Do not hesitate. You must go and consult the famous juggler who even now is visiting the city. Sell your jade-stones and other jewels, for this man of wisdom will not listen unless his attention is attracted by huge sums of money.”

The feathered messenger flew out of her room, but Ko-ai had heard enough to make her happy. She despatched a trusted servant to sell her jade and her jewels, charging him on no account to tell her mother. Then, with a great sum of money in her possession she sought out the magician who was said to be wiser than the sages in knowledge of life and death.

“Tell me,” she implored, as the greybeard summoned her to his presence, “tell me how I can save my father, for the Emperor has ordered his death if he fails a third time in the casting of the bell.”

The astrologer, after plying her with questions, put on his tortoise-shell glasses and searched long in his book of knowledge. He also examined closely the signs of the heavens, consulting the mystic tables over and over again. Finally, he turned toward Ko-ai, who all the time had been awaiting his answer with impatience.

“Nothing could be plainer than the reason of your father’s failure, for when a man seeks to do the impossible, he can expect Fate to give him no other answer. Gold cannot unite with silver, nor brass with iron, unless the blood of a maiden is mingled with the molten metals, but the girl who gives up her life to bring about the fusion must be pure and good.”

With a sigh of despair Ko-ai heard the astrologer’s answer. She loved the world and all its beauties; she loved her birds, her companions, her father; she had expected to marry soon, and then there would have been children to love and cherish. But now all these dreams of happiness must be forgotten. There was no other maiden to give up her life for Kwan-yu. She, Ko-ai, loved her father and must make the sacrifice for his sake.

And so the day arrived for the third trial, and a third time Yung-lo took his place in Kwan-yu’s factory, surrounded by his courtiers. There was a look of stern expectancy on his face. Twice he had excused his underling for failure. Now there could be no thought of mercy. If the bell did not come from its cast perfect in tone and fair to look upon, Kwan-yu must be punished with the severest punishment that could be meted out to man—even death itself. That was why there was a look of stern expectancy on Yung-lo’s face, for he really

loved Kwan-yu and did not wish to send him to his death.

As for Kwan-yu himself, he had long ago given up all thought of success, for nothing had happened since his second failure to make him any surer this time of success. He had settled up his business affairs, arranging for a goodly sum to go to his beloved daughter; he had bought the coffin in which his own body would be laid away and had stored it in one of the principal rooms of his dwelling; he had even engaged the priests and musicians who should chant his funeral dirge, and, last but not least, he had arranged with the man who would have charge of chopping off his head, that one fold of skin should be left uncut, as this would bring him better luck on his entry into the spiritual world than if the head were severed entirely from the body.

And so we may say that Kwan-yu was prepared to die. In fact, on the night before the final casting he had a dream in which he saw himself kneeling before the headsman and cautioning him not to forget the binding agreement the latter had entered into.

Of all those present in the great foundry, perhaps the devoted Ko-ai was the least excited. Unnoticed, she had slipped along the wall from the spot where she had been standing with her mother and had planted herself directly opposite the huge tank in which the molten, seething liquid bubbled, awaiting the signal when it should be set free. Ko-ai gazed at the Emperor, watching intently for the well-known signal. When at last she saw his head move forward she sprang with a wild leap into the boiling liquid, at the same time crying in her clear, sweet voice:

“For thee, dear father! It is the only way!”

The molten white metal received the lovely girl into its ardent embrace, received her, and swallowed her up completely, as in a tomb of liquid fire.

And Kwan-yu—what of Kwan-yu, the frantic father? Mad with grief at the sight of his loved one giving up her life, a sacrifice to save him, he had sprung forward to hold her back from her terrible death, but had succeeded only in catching one of her tiny jewelled slippers as she sank out of sight for ever—a dainty, silken slipper, to remind him always of her wonderful sacrifice. In his wild grief as he clasped this pitiful little memento to his heart he would himself have leaped in and followed her to her death, if his servants had not restrained him until the Emperor had repeated his signal and the liquid had been poured into the cast. As the sad eyes of all

those present peered into the molten river of metals rushing to its earthen bed, they saw not a single sign remaining of the departed Ko-ai.

This, then, my children, is the time-worn legend of the great bell of Peking, a tale that has been repeated a million times by poets, story-tellers and devoted mothers, for you must know that on this third casting, when the earthen mould was removed, there stood revealed the most beautiful bell that eye had ever looked upon, and when it was swung up into the bell-tower there was immense rejoicing among the people. The silver and the gold and the iron and the brass, held together by the blood of the virgin, had blended perfectly, and the clear voice of the monster bell rang out over the great city, sounding a deeper, richer melody than that of any other bell within the limits of the Middle Kingdom, or, for that matter, of all the world. And, strange to say, even yet the deep-voiced colossus seems to cry out the name of the maiden who gave herself a living sacrifice, “Ko-ai! Ko-ai! Ko-ai!” so that all the people may remember her deed of virtue ten thousand years ago. And between the mellow peals of music there often seems to come a plaintive whisper that may be heard only by those standing near, “Hsieh! hsieh”—the Chinese word for slipper. “Alas!” say all who hear it, “Ko-ai is crying for her slipper. Poor little Ko-ai!”

And now, my dear children, this tale is almost finished, but there is still one thing you must by no means fail to remember. By order of the Emperor, the face of the great bell was graven with precious sayings from the classics, that even in its moments of silence the bell might teach lessons of virtue to the people.

“Behold,” said Yung-lo, as he stood beside the grief-stricken father, “amongst all yonder texts of wisdom, the priceless sayings of our honoured sages, there is none that can teach to my children so sweet a lesson of filial love and devotion as that one last act of your devoted daughter. For though she died to save you, her deed will still be sung and extolled by my people when you are passed away, yea, even when the bell itself has crumbled into ruins.”

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