



The Man Who Would Not Scold

A Chinese Wonder Book

Chinese

Easy

16 min read

Old Wang lived in a village near Nanking. He cared for nothing in the world but to eat good food and plenty of it. Now, though this Wang was by no means a poor man, it made him very sad to spend money, and so people called him in sport, the Miser King, for Wang is the Chinese word for king. His greatest pleasure was to eat at some one else's table when he knew that the food would cost him nothing, and you may be sure that at such times he always licked his chopsticks clean. But when he was spending his own money, he tightened his belt and drank a great deal of water, eating very little but scraps such as his friends would have thrown to the dogs. Thus people laughed at him and said:

“When Wang an invitation gets,

He chews and chews until he sweats,

But, when his own food he must eat.

The tears flow down and wet his feet.”

One day while Wang was lying half asleep on the bank of a stream that flowed near his house he began to feel

hungry. He had been in that spot all day without tasting anything. At last he saw a flock of ducks swimming in the river. He knew that they belonged to a rich man named Lin who lived in the village. They were fat ducks, so plump and tempting that it made him hungry to look at them. "Oh, for a boiled duck!" he said to himself with a sigh. "Why is it that the gods have not given me a taste of duck during the past year? What have I done to be thus denied?"

Then the thought flashed into his mind: "Here am I asking why the gods have not given me ducks to eat. Who knows but that they have sent this flock thinking I would have sense enough to grab one? Friend Lin, many thanks for your kindness. I think I shall accept your offer and take one of these fowls for my dinner." Of course Mr. Lin was nowhere near to hear old Wang thanking him.

By this time the flock had come to shore. The miser picked himself up lazily from the ground, and, after tiring himself out, he at last managed to pick one of the ducks up, too. He took it home joyfully, hiding it under his ragged garment. Once in his own yard, he lost no time in killing and preparing it for dinner. He ate it, laughing to himself all the time at his own slyness, and wondering what his friend Lin would think if he chanced to count his ducks that night. "No doubt he will believe it was a giant hawk that carried off that bird," he said, chuckling. "My word! but didn't I do a great trick? I think I will repeat the dose to-morrow. The first duck is well lodged in my stomach, and I am ready to take an oath that all the others will find a bed in the same boarding-house before many weeks are past. It would be a pity to leave the first one to pine away in lonely grief. I could never be so cruel."

So old Wang went to bed happy. For several hours he snored away noisily, dreaming that a certain rich man had promised him good food all the rest of his life, and that he would never be forced to do another stroke of work. At midnight, however, he was wakened from his sleep by an unpleasant itching. His whole body seemed to be on fire, and the pain was more than he could bear. He got up and paced the floor. There was no oil in the house for his lamp, and he had to wait until morning to see what was the matter. At early dawn he stepped outside his shanty. Lo, and behold! he found little red spots all over his body. Before his very eyes he saw tiny duck feathers sprouting from these spots. As the morning went by, the feathers grew larger and larger, until his whole body was covered with them from head to foot. Only his face and hands were free of the strange growth.

With a cry of horror, Wang began to pull the feathers out by handfuls, flinging them in the dirt and stamping on them. "The gods have fooled me!" he yelled. "They made me take the duck and eat it, and now they are

punishing me for stealing.” But the faster he jerked the feathers out, the faster they grew in again, longer and more glossy than before. Then, too, the pain was so great that he could scarcely keep from rolling on the ground. At last completely worn out by his useless labour, and moaning with despair, he took to his bed. “Am I to be changed into a bird?” he groaned. “May the gods have mercy on me!”

He tossed about on his bed: he could not sleep; his heart was sick with fear. Finally he fell into a troubled sleep, and, sleeping, had a dream. A fairy came to his bedside; it was Fairy Old Boy, the friend of the people. “Ah, my poor Wang,” said the fairy, “all this trouble you have brought upon yourself by your shiftless, lazy habits. When others work, why do you lie down and sleep your time away? Why don’t you get up and shake your lazy legs? There is no place in the world for such a man as you except the pig-sty.”

“I know you are telling the truth,” wailed Wang, “but how, oh, how can I ever work with all these feathers sticking out of me? They will kill me! They will kill me!”

“Hear the man!” laughed Old Boy. “Now, if you were a hopeful, happy fellow, you would say, ‘What a stroke of luck! No need to buy garments. The gods have given me a suit of clothes that will never wear out.’ You are a pretty fellow to be complaining, aren’t you?”

After joking in this way for a little while, the good fairy changed his tone of voice and said, “Now, Wang, are you really sorry for the way you have lived, sorry for your years of idleness, sorry because you disgraced your old Father and Mother? I hear your parents died of hunger because you would not help them.”

Wang, seeing that Old Boy knew all about his past life, and, feeling his pain growing worse and worse every minute, cried out at last: “Yes! Yes! I will do anything you say. Only, I pray you, free me of these feathers!”

“I wouldn’t have your feathers,” said Old Boy, “and I cannot free you of them. You will have to do the whole thing yourself. What you need is to hear a good scolding. Go and get Mr. Lin, the owner of the stolen duck, to scold freely. The harder he scolds, the sooner will your feathers drop out.”

Now, of course, some readers will laugh and say, “But this was only a silly dream, and meant nothing.” Mr. Wang, however, did not think in this way. He woke up very happy. He would go to Mr. Lin, confess everything and take the scolding. Then he would be free of his feathers and would go to work. Truly he had led a lazy life. What the good Fairy Old Boy had said about his father and mother had hurt him very badly, for he knew that every word was true. From this day on, he would not be lazy; he would take a wife and become the father of a

family.

Miser Wang meant all right when he started out from his shanty. From his little hoard of money he took enough cash to pay Mr. Lin for the stolen duck. He would do everything the fairy had told him and even more. But this doing more was just where he got into trouble. As he walked along the road jingling the string of cash, and thinking that he must soon give it up to his neighbour, he grew very sad. He loved every copper of his money and he disliked to part with it. After all, Old Boy had not told him he must confess to the owner of the duck; he had said he must go to Lin and get Lin to give a good scolding.

“Old Boy did not say that Lin must scold me,” thought the miser. “All that I need do is to get him to scold, and then my feathers will drop off and I shall be happy. Why not tell him that old Sen stole his duck, and get him to give Sen a scolding? That will surely do just as well, and I shall save my money as well as my face. Besides, if I tell Lin that I am a thief, perhaps he will send for a policeman and they will haul me off to prison. Surely going to jail would be as bad as wearing feathers. Ha, ha! This will be a good joke on Sen, Lin, and the whole lot of them. I shall fool Fairy Old Boy too. Really he had no right to speak of my father and mother in the way he did. After all, they died of fever, and I was no doctor to cure them. How could he say it was my fault?”

The longer Wang talked to himself, the surer he became that it was useless to tell Lin that he had stolen the duck. By the time he had reached the duck man’s house he had fully made up his mind to deceive him. Mr. Lin invited him to come in and sit down. He was a plain-spoken, honest kind of man, this Lin. Everybody liked him, for he never spoke ill of any man and he always had something good to say of his neighbours.

“Well, what’s your business, friend Wang? You have come out bright and early, and it’s a long walk from your place to mine.”

“Oh, I had something important I wanted to talk to you about,” began Wang slyly. “That’s a fine flock of ducks you have over in the meadow.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Lin smiling, “a fine flock indeed.” But he said nothing of the stolen fowl.

“How many have you?” questioned Wang more boldly.

“I counted them yesterday morning and there were fifteen.”

“But did you count them again last night?”

“Yes, I did,” answered Lin slowly.

“And there were only fourteen then?”

“Quite right, friend Wang, one of them was missing; but one duck is of little importance. Why do you speak of it?”

“What, no importance! losing a duck? How can you say so? A duck’s a duck, isn’t it, and surely you would like to know how you lost it?”

“A hawk most likely.”

“No, it wasn’t a hawk, but if you would go and look in old Sen’s duck yard, you would likely find feathers.”

“Nothing more natural, I am sure, in a duck yard.”

“Yes, but your duck’s feathers,” persisted Wang.

“What! you think old Sen is a thief, do you, and that he has been stealing from me?”

“Exactly! you have it now.”

“Well, well, that is too bad! I am sorry the old fellow is having such a hard time. He is a good worker and deserves better luck. I should willingly have given him the duck if he had only asked for it. Too bad that he had to steal it.”

Wang waited to see how Mr. Lin planned to punish the thief, feeling sure that the least he could do, would be to go and give him a good scolding.

But nothing of the kind happened. Instead of growing angry, Mr. Lin seemed to be sorry for Sen, sorry that he was poor, sorry that he was willing to steal.

“Aren’t you even going to give him a scolding?” asked Wang in disgust. “Better go to his house with me and give him a good raking over the coals.”

“What use, what use? Hurt a neighbour’s feelings just for a duck? That would be foolish indeed.”

By this time the Miser King had begun to feel an itching all over his body. The feathers had begun hurting again, and he was frightened once more. He became excited and threw himself on the floor in front of Mr. Lin.

“Hey! what’s the matter, man?” cried Lin, thinking Wang was in a fit. “What’s the matter? Are you ill?”

“Yes, very ill,” wailed Wang. “Mr. Lin, I’m a bad man, and I may as well own it at once and be done with it. There is no use trying to dodge the truth or hide a fault. I stole your duck last night, and to-day I came sneaking over here and tried to put the thing off on old Sen.”

“Yes, I knew it,” answered Lin. “I saw you carrying the duck off under your garment. Why did you come to see me at all if you thought I did not know you were guilty?”

“Only wait, and I’ll tell you everything,” said Wang, bowing still lower. “After I had boiled your duck and eaten it, I went to bed. Pretty soon I felt an itching all over my body. I could not sleep and in the morning I found that I had a thick growth of duck’s feathers from head to foot. The more I pulled them out, the thicker they grew in. I could hardly keep from screaming. I took to my bed, and after I had tossed about for hours a fairy came and told me that I could never get rid of my trouble unless I got you to give me a thorough scolding. Here is the money for your duck. Now for the love of mercy, scold, and do it quickly, for I can’t stand the pain much longer.”

Wang was grovelling in the dirt at Lin’s feet, but Lin answered him only with a loud laugh which finally burst into a roar. “Duck feathers! ha! ha! ha! and all over your body? Why, that’s too good a story to believe! You’ll be wanting to live in the water next. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Scold me! scold me!” begged Wang, “for the love of the gods scold me!”

But Lin only laughed the louder. “Pray let me see this wonderful growth of feathers first, and then we’ll talk about the scolding.”

Wang willingly opened his garment and showed the doubting Lin that he had been really speaking the truth.

“They must be warm,” said Lin, laughing. “Winter is soon coming and you are not over fond of work. Won’t they save you the trouble of wearing clothing?”

“But they make me itch so I can scarcely stand it! I feel like screaming out, the pain is so great,” and again Wang got down and began to kowtow to the other; that is, he knelt and bumped his forehead against the ground.

“Be calm, my friend, and give me time to think of some good scold-words,” said Lin at last. “I am not in the habit of using strong language, and very seldom lose my temper. Really you must give me time to think of what to say.”

By this time Wang was in such pain that he lost all power over himself. He seized Mr. Lin by the legs crying out, “Scold me! scold me!”

Mr. Lin was now out of patience with his visitor. Besides Wang was holding him so tightly that it really felt as if Lin were being pinched by some gigantic crawfish. Suddenly Lin could hold his tongue no longer: “You lazy hound! you whelp! you turtle! you lazy, good-for-nothing creature! I wish you would hurry up and roll out of this!”

Now, in China, this is very strong language, and, with a cry of joy, Wang leaped from the ground, for he knew that Lin had scolded him. No sooner had the first hasty words been spoken than the feathers began falling from the lazy man’s body, and, at last, the dreadful itching had entirely stopped. On the floor in front of Lin lay a great pile of feathers, and Wang freed from his trouble, pointed to them and said, “Thank you kindly, my dear friend, for the pretty names you have called me. You have saved my life, and, although I have paid for the duck, I wish to add to the bargain by making you a present of these handsome feathers. They will, in a measure, repay you for your splendid set of scold-words. I have learned my lesson well, I hope, and I shall go out from here a better man. Fairy Old Boy told me that I was lazy. You agree with the fairy. From this day, however, you shall see that I can bend my back like a good fellow. Good-bye, and, many thanks for your kindness.”

So saying, with many low bows and polite words, Wang left the duck owner’s house, a happier and a wiser man.