

The Reward of a Benevolent Life

Chinese Folk-Lore Tales

Chinese

Advanced
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On the banks of a river flowing through the prefecture of Tingchow, there stood a certain city of about ten thousand inhabitants. Among this mass of people there was a very fair sprinkling of well-to-do men, and perhaps half-a-dozen or so who might have been accounted really wealthy.

Amongst these latter was one particular individual named Chung, who had acquired the reputation of being exceedingly large-hearted and benevolently inclined to all those in distress. Anyone who was in want had but to appeal to Chung, and his immediate necessities would at once be relieved without any tedious investigation into the merits of his case. As may be inferred from this, Chung was an easy-going, good-natured man, who was more inclined to look kindly upon his fellow-men than to criticise them harshly for their follies or their crimes. Such a man has always been popular in this land of China.

Now the whole soul of Chung was centred upon his only son Keng. At the time when our story opens, this young fellow was growing up to manhood, and had proved himself to be possessed of no mean ability, for on the various occasions on which he had sat for examination before the Literary Chancellor, his papers had been of a very high order of merit.

The rumours of Chung's generosity had travelled further than he had ever dreamed of. Several reports of the noble deeds that he was constantly performing had reached the Immortals in the Western Heaven, and as these are profoundly concerned in the doings of mankind, steps were taken that Chung should not go unrewarded.

One day a fairy in the disguise of a bonze called upon him. He had always had a sincere liking for men of this class. He admired their devotion, and he was moved by their self-sacrifice in giving up home and kindred to spend their lives in the service of the gods and for the good of humanity.

No sooner, therefore, had the priest entered within his doors, than he received him with the greatest politeness and cordiality. The same evening he prepared a great dinner, to which a number of distinguished guests were invited, and a time of high festivity and rejoicing was prolonged into the early hours of the morning.

Next day Chung said to his guest, "I presume you have come round collecting for your temple. I need not assure you that I shall be most delighted to subscribe to anything that has to do with the uplifting of my fellow-men. My donation is ready whenever you wish to accept it."

The bonze, with a smile which lit up the whole of his countenance, replied that he had not come for the purpose of collecting subscriptions.

"I have come," he said, "to warn you about a far more important matter which affects you and your family. Before very long a great flood will take place in this district, and will sweep everything before it. It will be so sudden that men will not be able to take measures to preserve either their lives or their property—so instantaneous will be the rush of the mighty streams, like ocean floods, from the mountains you can see in the West. My advice to you is to commence at once the construction of boats to carry you and your most precious effects away. When the news first comes that the waters are rising, have them anchored in the creek that flows close by your doors; and when the crisis arrives, delay not a moment, but hurry on board and fly for your lives."

"But when will that be?" asked Chung anxiously.

"I may not tell you the precise day or hour," replied the bonze; "but when the eyes of the stone lions in the East

Street of the city shed tears of blood, betake yourselves with all haste to the boats, and leave this doomed place behind you.”

“But may I not tell the people of this approaching calamity?” asked Chung, whose tender heart was deeply wrung with distress at the idea of so many being overwhelmed in the coming flood.

“You can please yourself about that,” answered the priest, “but no one will believe you. The people of this region are depraved and wicked, and your belief in my words will only cause them to laugh and jeer at you for your credulity.”

“But shall I and my family escape with our lives?” finally enquired Chung.

“Yes, you will all escape,” was the reply, “and in due time you will return to your home and your future life will be prosperous. But there is one thing,” he continued, “about which I must entreat you to be exceedingly careful. As you are being carried down the stream by the great flood, be sure to rescue every living thing that you meet in distress upon the waters. You will not fail to be rewarded for so doing, as the creatures you save will repay you a thousandfold for any services you may render them. There is one thing more that I would solemnly warn you against. You will come across a man floating helplessly on the swiftly flowing tide. Have nothing to do with him. Leave him to his fate. If you try to save him, you will only bring sorrow upon your home.”

As the priest was departing, Chung tried to press into his hand a considerable present of money, but he refused to accept it. He did not want money from him, he said. The gods had heard of his great love for men, and they had sent him to warn him so that he might escape the doom which would overtake his fellow-citizens.

After his departure Chung at once called the boat-builders who had their yards along the bank of the stream, and ordered ten large boats to be built with all possible speed. The news of this spread through the town, and when the reasons were asked and the reply was given that the boats were in anticipation of a mighty flood that would ere long devastate the entire region, everyone screamed with laughter; but Chung let them laugh.

For weeks and months he sent an old man to East Street to see if the eyes of the stone lions there had overflowed with bloody tears.

One day two pig-butchers enquired of this man how it was that every day he appeared and looked into the eyes of the lions. He explained that Chung had sent him, for a prophecy had come from the gods that when the eyes of the lions shed blood, the flood which was to destroy the city would be already madly rushing on its way.

On hearing this, these two butchers determined to play a practical joke. Next day, in readiness for the coming of the old man, they smeared the stone eyes with pigs' blood. No sooner had Chung's messenger caught sight of this than, with terror in his eyes, he fled along the streets to tell his master the dreadful news. By this time everything had been prepared, and Chung was only waiting for the appointed sign. The most valuable of his goods had already been packed in some of the boats, and now his wife and son and household servants all hurried down to the water's edge and embarked; and remembering the injunction of the priest that there should be no delay, Chung at once ordered the anchors to be raised, and the boatmen, as if for dear life, made for the larger stream outside.

Hardly had the vessels begun to move when the sun, which had been blazing in the sky, became clouded over. Soon a terrific storm of wind tore with the force of a hurricane across the land. By-and-by great drops of rain, the harbingers of the deluge which was to inundate the country, fell in heavy splashes. Ere long it seemed as though the great fountains in the heavens had burst out, for the floods came pouring down in one incessant torrent. The sides of the mountains became covered with ten thousand rills, which joined their forces lower down, and developed into veritable cataracts, rushing with fearful and noisy tumult to the plain below.

Before many hours had passed, the streams everywhere overflowed their banks, and ran riot amongst the villages, and flowed like a sea against the city. There was no resisting this watery foe, and before night fell vast multitudes had been drowned in the seething floods from which there was no escape.

Meanwhile, carried swiftly along by the swollen current, Chung's little fleet sped safely down the stream, drawing further and further away from the doomed city.

The river had risen many feet since they had started on their voyage, and as they were passing by a high peak, which had been undermined by the rush of waters hurling themselves against its base, the boats were put into great danger by the whirl and commotion of the foam-flecked river. Just as they escaped from being submerged, the party noticed a small monkey struggling in the water, and at once picked it up and took it on

board.

Further on they passed a large branch of a tree, on which there was a crow's nest, with one young one in it. This, also, remembering the solemn injunction of the priest, they carefully took up and saved.

As they were rushing madly on down the tawny, swollen river, they were all struck with sudden excitement by seeing something struggling in the boiling waters. Looking at this object more attentively as they drew nearer to it, they perceived that it was a man, who seemed to be in great peril of his life.

Chung's tender heart was filled with sympathy, and he at once gave orders for the boatmen to go and rescue him. His wife, however, reminded him of the warning of the priest not to save any man on the river, as he would inevitably turn out to be an enemy, who would in time work his rescuer great wrong.

Chung replied that at such a time, when a human being was in extreme danger of being drowned, personal interests ought not to be considered at all. He had faithfully obeyed the command of the priest in saving animal life, but how much more valuable was a man than any of the lower orders of creation? "Whatever may happen," he said, "I cannot let this man drown before my eyes," and as the boat just then came alongside the swimmer, he was hauled into it and delivered from his peril.

After a few days, when the storm had abated and the river had gone down to its natural flow, Chung returned with his family to his home. To his immense surprise, he found that his house had not been damaged in the least. The gods who had saved his life had used their supernatural powers to preserve even his property from the ruin and devastation that had fallen upon the inhabitants of the city and of the surrounding plain.

Shortly after they had settled down again, Chung enquired of Lo-yung, the man whom he had saved from the flood, whether he would not like to return to his family and his home.

"I have no family left," he answered with a sad look on his face. "All the members of it were drowned in the great flood from which you delivered me. What little property we had was washed away by the wild rush of the streams that overflowed our farm. Let me stay with you," he begged, "and give me the opportunity, by the devoted service of my life, to repay you in some slight degree for what you have done in saving my life."

As he uttered these words his tears began to flow, and his features showed every sign of profound emotion.

Always full of tenderness and compassion, Chung was profoundly moved by the tears and sobs of Lo-yung, and hastened to assure him that he need be under no concern with regard to his future. "You have lost all your relatives, it is true, but from to-day I shall recognize you as my son. I adopt you into my family and I give you my name."

Six months after this important matter had been settled, the city was placarded with proclamations from its Chief Mandarin. In these he informed the people that he had received a most urgent Edict from the Emperor stating that an official seal, which was in constant use in high transactions of the State, had in a most mysterious manner disappeared and could not be found. He was therefore directed to inform the people that whoever informed His Majesty where the seal was, so that it could be recovered, would receive a considerable reward and would also be made a high mandarin in the palace of the Emperor.

That very night, whilst Chung was sleeping, a fairy appeared to him in a dream. "The gods have sent me," he said, "to give you one more proof of the high regard in which they hold you for your devotion to your fellow-men. The Emperor has lost a valuable seal which he is most anxious to recover, and he has promised large and liberal rewards to the man who shows him where it may be found. I want to tell you where the seal is. It lies at the bottom of the crystal well in the grounds behind the palace. It was accidentally dropped in there by the Empress-Dowager, who has forgotten all about the circumstance, but who will recollect it the moment she is reminded of it. I want you to send your own son to the capital to claim the reward by telling where the seal is."

When Chung awoke in the morning, he told his wife the wonderful news of what had happened to him during the night, and began to make preparations for his son to start for the capital without delay, in order to secure the honours promised by the Emperor. His wife, however, was by no means reconciled to the idea of parting with her son, and strongly opposed his going.

"Why are you so set upon the honours of this life that you are willing to be separated from your only child, whom perhaps you may never be able to see again?" she asked her husband, with tears in her eyes. "You are a rich man, you are beloved of the gods, you have everything that money can buy in this flowery kingdom. Why not then be contented and cease to long after the dignities which the State can confer, but which can never give you any real happiness?"

Just at that moment Lo-yung came in, and hearing the wonderful story, and seeing the distress of the mother,

he volunteered to take the place of her son and go to the capital in his stead.

“I have never yet had the chance,” he said, “of showing my gratitude to my benefactor for having saved my life, and for the many favours he has showered upon me. I shall be glad to undertake this journey. I shall have an audience with His Majesty and will reveal to him the place where the seal lies hidden, and I shall then insist that all the honours he may be prepared to bestow on me shall be transferred to your son, to whom of right they naturally belong.”

It was accordingly arranged that Lo-yung should take the place of Chung’s son, and preparations were at once made for his journey to the capital. As he was saying good-bye to his benefactor, the latter whispered in his ear: “If you succeed in your enterprise and the Emperor makes you one of his royal officers, do not let ingratitude ever enter your heart, so that you may be tempted to forget us here, who will be thinking about you all the time you are away.”

“Nothing of the kind can ever happen,” exclaimed Lo-yung impetuously. “My gratitude to you is too firmly embedded within my heart ever to be uprooted from it.”

On his arrival at the capital, he at once sought an interview with the Prime Minister, who, on hearing that a man wished to see him about a state matter of urgent importance, immediately admitted him to his presence. Lo-yung at once explained that he had come to reveal the place where the lost seal at that moment lay concealed. “I am perfectly ready to tell all I know about it,” he said, “but if possible I should prefer to make it known to the Emperor himself in person.”

“That can quickly be arranged,” eagerly replied the Prime Minister, “for His Majesty is so anxious to obtain information about the seal, that he is prepared at any hour of the day or night to give an audience to anyone who can ease his mind on the subject.”

In a few minutes a eunuch from the palace commanded the Prime Minister to come without delay to the Audience Hall and wait upon the Emperor. He was also to bring with him the person who said that he had an important communication to lay before the Throne.

When they arrived they found there not only the King, but also the Empress-Dowager, waiting to receive them. In obedience to a hasty command, Lo-yung told in a few words where the seal was, and how it happened to be

there. As he went on with the story the face of the Empress lit up with wonder, whilst a pleasing smile overspread it, as she recognized the truth of what Lo-yung was saying.

“But tell me,” said the Emperor, “how you get all your information and how it is that you have such an intimate acquaintance with what is going on in my palace?”

Lo-yung then described how the Immortals in the Western Heaven, deeply moved by the loving character of Chung, and wishing to reward him and bring honour to his family, had sent a fairy, who appeared to him in a dream and told him the secret of the seal.

“Your home,” said the Emperor, “must indeed be celebrated for benevolent and loving deeds to men, since even the fairies come down from the far-off Heaven to express their approbation. In accordance with my royal promise, I now appoint you to a high official position that will enrich you for life, for I consider that it will be for the welfare of my kingdom to have a man from a home, which the gods delight to honour, to assist me in the management of my public affairs.”

From the moment when the royal favour was bestowed on Lo-yung, it seemed as though every particle of gratitude and every kindly remembrance of Chung had vanished completely out of his heart. He cut himself off from the home he had left only a few days ago, as completely as though it had never existed.

Weeks and months went by, but no news came from him, and the heart of Chung was wrung with anguish, for he knew that Lo-yung's unnatural conduct would in the end bring retribution upon Lo-yung himself.

At last he determined to send his son, Keng, to the capital to find out what had really become of Lo-yung. Attended by one of his household servants, the young man reached his journey's end in a few days. On enquiring at his inn about Lo-yung, he was informed that he was a mandarin of great distinction in the city, and was under the special protection of the Emperor, whose favourite he was.

Hearing this joyful news, Keng, followed by his servant, at once hastened to the residence of Lo-yung, and was lucky enough to meet him as he rode out on horseback from his magnificent yamen, attended by a long retinue of officers and attendants.

Running up to the side of his horse, Keng cried out joyfully, “Ah! my brother, what a joy to meet you once more!

How glad I am to see you!”

To his astonishment, Lo-yung, with a frown upon his face, angrily exclaimed; “You common fellow, what do you mean by calling me your brother? I have no brother. You are an impostor, and you must be severely punished for daring to claim kinship with me.”

Calling some of the lictors in his train, he ordered them to beat Keng, and then cast him into prison, and to give strict injunctions to the jailer to treat him as a dangerous criminal. Wounded and bleeding from the severe scourging he had received, and in a terrible state of exhaustion, poor Keng was dragged to the prison, where he was thrown into the deepest dungeon, and left to recover as best he might from the shock he had sustained.

His condition was indeed a pitiable one. Those who could have helped and comforted him were far away. He could expect no alleviation of his sorrows from the jailer, for the heart of the latter had naturally become hardened by having to deal with the criminal classes. Besides he had received precise orders from the great mandarin, that this particular prisoner was to be treated as a danger to society. Even if he had been inclined to deal mercifully with him, he dared not disobey such definite and stringent commands as he had received from his superior.

The prison fare was only just enough to keep body and soul together. Keng had no money with which to bribe the jailer to give him a more generous diet, and there was no one to guarantee that any extra expenses which might be incurred would ever be refunded to him.

And then a miracle was wrought, and once more the fairies interfered, this time to save the life of the only son of the man whose fame for tenderness and compassion had reached the far-off Western Heaven.

One morning, as Keng lay weary and half-starved on the blackened heap of straw that served him as a bed in the corner of the prison, a monkey climbed up and clung to the narrow gratings through which the light penetrated into his room. In one of its hands it held a piece of pork which it kept offering to Keng. Very much surprised, he got up to take it, when to his delight he discovered that the monkey was the identical one which had been picked up by his father on the day of the great flood.

The same thing was repeated for several days in succession, and when the jailer asked for some explanation of

these extraordinary proceedings, Keng gave him a detailed account of their wonderful deliverance by the fairies, the picking up of the monkey, and the rescue of Lo-yung, now the great mandarin, who was keeping him confined in prison. "Ah!" muttered the jailer under his breath, "the lower animals know how to show gratitude, but men do not."

A few days after this another messenger of the gods came to give his aid to Keng. A number of crows gathered on a roof which overlooked the narrow slits through which the prisoner could catch a glimpse of the blue sky. One of them flew on to the ledge outside, and Keng immediately recognized it as the one which had been saved from the floating branch in the turbid river. He was overjoyed to see this bird, and besought the jailer to allow him to write a letter to his father, telling him of his pitiful condition. This request was granted, and the document was tied to the leg of the crow, which flew away on its long flight to Chung with its important news.

Chung was greatly distressed when he read the letter that his son had written in prison, and with all the speed he could command, he travelled post haste to the capital. When he arrived there he made various attempts to obtain an interview with Lo-yung, but all in vain. The mandarin had not sense enough to see that the threads of fate were slowly winding themselves around him, and would soon entangle him to his destruction.

Very unwillingly, therefore, because he still loved Lo-yung and would have saved him if possible, Chung entered an accusation against him before Fau-Kung, the famous criminal judge.

The result of the investigation was the condemnation of Lo-yung, whose execution speedily followed, whilst Keng was promoted to the very position that had been occupied by the man who had tried to work his ruin.

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