

The Widow Ho

Chinese Folk-Lore Tales

Chinese

Advanced
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One day in the early dawn, a distinguished mandarin was leaving the temple of the City God. It was his duty to visit this temple on the first and fifteenth of the moon, whilst the city was still asleep, to offer incense and adoration to the stern-looking figure enshrined within.

This mandarin was Shih-Kung, and a juster or more upright official did not exist in all the fair provinces of the Empire. Wherever his name was mentioned it was received with the profoundest reverence and respect; for the Chinese people have never lost their ideal of Tien-Li, or Divine Righteousness. This ideal is still deeply embedded in the hearts of high and low, rich and poor; and the homage of all classes, even of the most depraved is gladly offered to any man who conspicuously displays this heavenly virtue.

As Shih-Kung was being carried along in his sedan chair, with his numerous retinue following closely behind him, he happened to notice a young woman walking in the road in front of him, and began to wonder what it was that had brought her out at such an unusually early hour. She was dressed in the very deepest mourning, and so after a little more thought he concluded that she was a widow who was on her way to the grave of her late husband to make the usual offerings to his spirit.

All at once a sudden, furious whirlwind screamed about the woman and seemed determined to spend its force upon her; but beyond her nothing was touched by it. Not a leaf on the trees near by was moved, and not a particle of dust on the road, except just where she stood, was in the least agitated by the fierce tempest that for the moment raged around her.

As Shih-Kung gazed at this strange occurrence, the woman's outer skirt was blown up in the air, and he saw that underneath was another garment of a rich crimson hue. He then knew at once that there was something radically wrong, for no woman of ordinary virtuous character would ever dare to wear such a glaring colour, while she pretended to be in deep mourning. There was something suspicious, too, in the sudden tornado that blew with such terrific violence round the woman only. It was not an accident that brought it there. It was clearly the angry protest of some spirit who had been foully misused, and who was determined that the wrongdoer should not escape the penalty for the evil she had committed.

Calling two of his runners to him, Shih-Kung ordered them to follow the woman and to see where she was going and what she did there, and then to report to him immediately.

The two detectives obeyed his instructions to the very letter, and found that she went to a cemetery which lay on the hillside at the outskirts of the town. She had brought with her a goodly supply of gold and silver paper-money, such as is usually offered to the dead to enable them to purchase food and other necessaries in the Land of Shadows, She was preparing to set these on fire in order that they might reach the spirit for whom they were intended, when, much to the amazement of the runners, another tornado came with the same violence as before, and scattered the paper in all directions so that not a single piece was left to offer to the dead.

All this was duly reported to Shih-Kung, who at once sent a dispatch to the county magistrate, commanding him to investigate the case thoroughly, and giving him all the particulars of the extraordinary occurrences which had been witnessed.

This inferior mandarin was greatly puzzled as to how he should act in the matter. No complaint had reached him from anyone concerning the woman, and he had not a particle of evidence on which to proceed against her. In these circumstances, he determined to make an appeal to the City God to reveal to him a mystery that was beyond his powers to unravel. Accordingly, close upon the hour of midnight, he repaired to the temple of

this famous idol and lay down to sleep, believing that, if he did so, he would be granted some revelation which would deliver him from his difficulties.

During the early hours of the morning, close upon the break of day, a vision seemed to pass clearly before the mandarin's eyes.

He saw the grim god come out of his shrine and appear beyond the yellow curtains which hide his features from the unholy gaze of the crowds that every day flock to his temple. Immediately in front of him floated in the air the coffin of a full-grown man, which gradually settled on the table just below the altar, on which are placed the brazen bowls containing the ashes of the countless incense-sticks burned before the god to gain his favour.

After the lapse of but a moment the sleeping magistrate saw a man step up out of the surrounding darkness and take his stand at the head of the coffin.

There was something very familiar in the appearance of this mysterious individual who stood there so solemnly, and the mandarin felt that he had seen him before. Suddenly he recognized him as the Coroner of his own district, with whom he had often acted and whose reports were frequently submitted to him in cases where murder was suspected. He was so amazed by this discovery that he woke with a start, when the whole scene at once vanished from his gaze, and he could see nothing but the idol in its shrine, surrounded by the tawdry untidy articles that make up the furnishing of a temple.

By this time the dawn was sending its pale, silver light into the great, gloomy building ; so the magistrate arose and hurried back to his yamen with a lightened heart, for the god had revealed to him that the grim secret which had so far evaded him lay in the coffin of the dead, and was to be solved there and there only. His course now seemed easy, and it was with a mind full of relief that he entered his home.

He at once issued a warrant for the arrest of the widow, and at the same time sent officers to bring the coffin that contained the body of her husband from its burying-place.

When the widow appeared before the mandarin, she denied that she knew anything of the cause of her husband's death. He had come home drunk one night, she declared, and had fallen senseless on the ground. After a great deal of difficulty, she had managed to lift him up on to the bed, where he lay in a drunken

slumber, just as men under the influence of liquor often do, so that she was not in the least anxious or disturbed about him. During the night she fell asleep as she watched by his side, and when she woke up she found to her horror that he was dead.

“That is all that can be said about the case,” she concluded, “and if you now order an examination of the body, it simply means that you have suspicions about me, for no other person was with him but myself when he died. I protest therefore against the body being examined. If, however, you are determined to do so, I warn you that if you find no signs of violence on it, you expose yourself according to the laws of China to the punishment of death.”

“I am quite prepared to take the responsibility,” replied the mandarin, “and I have already ordered the Coroner to open the coffin and to make a careful examination of the body.”

This was accordingly done, but no trace of injury, not even the slightest bruise, could be discovered on any part of the dead man’s body.

The county magistrate was greatly distressed at this result of the enquiry, and hastened to Shih-Kung in order to obtain his advice as to what steps he should now take to escape the punishment of death which he had incurred by his action. The Viceroy agreed that the matter had indeed assumed a most serious aspect. “But you need not be anxious,” he added, “about what you have done. You have only acted by my orders, and therefore I assume all responsibility for the proceedings which you have adopted to discover the murderer.”

Late in the afternoon, as the sun began to disappear behind the mountains of the west, Shih-Kung slipped out by a side door of his yamen, dressed as a peddler of cloth, and with pieces of various kinds of material resting on his shoulders. His disguise was so perfect that no one, as he passed down the street, dreamed of suspecting that instead of being a wandering draper, he was in reality the Governor-General of the Province, who was trying to obtain evidence of a murder that had recently been committed in his own capital.

Travelling on down one street after another, Shih-Kung came at last to the outskirts of the town, where the dwellings were more scattered and the population was less dense. By this time it was growing dark, so when he came to a house that stood quite apart by itself, he knocked at the door. An elderly woman with a pleasant face and a motherly look about her asked him in a kind and gentle voice what he wanted.

“I have taken the liberty,” he replied, “of coming to your house to see whether you would not kindly allow me to lodge with you for the night. I am a stranger in this region,” he continued, “and have travelled far from my home to sell my cloth. The night is fast falling, and I know not where to spend it, and so I beg of you to take me in. I do not want charity, for I am quite able to pay you liberally for any trouble I may cause you; and to-morrow morning, as early as you may desire, I shall proceed on my wanderings, and you will be relieved of me.”

“My good man,” she replied, “I am perfectly willing that you should lodge here for the night, only I am afraid you may have to endure some annoyance from the conduct of my son when he returns home later in the evening.”

“My business leads me into all kinds of company,” he assured her, “and I meet people with a great variety of dispositions, but I generally manage to get on with them all. It may be so with your son.”

With a good-natured smile, the old lady then showed him into a little room just off the one which was used as a sitting room. Shih-Kung was very tired, so he threw himself down, just as he was, on a trestle bed that stood in the corner, and began to think over his plans for solving the mystery of the murder. By-and-by he fell fast asleep.

About midnight he woke up at the sound of voices in the next room, and heard the mother saying:—“I want you to be very careful how you treat the peddler, and not to use any of your coarse language to him. Although he looks only a common man, I am sure he is a gentleman, for he has a refined way with him that shows he must have come from no mean family. I did not really want to take him in, as I knew you might object; but the poor man was very tired, and it was getting dark, and he declared he had no place to go to, so that at last I consented to let him stay. It is only for the night, and to-morrow at break of day he says he must be on his travels again.”

“I do most strongly dislike having a strange man in the house,” replied a voice which Shih-Kung concluded was

the son's; "and I shall go and have a look at him in order to satisfy myself about him."

Taking a lantern in his hand, he came close up to where Shih-Kung was lying, and flashing the light upon his face, looked down anxiously at him for a few moments. Apparently he was satisfied, for he cried out in a voice that could easily be heard in the other room: "All right, mother, I am content. The man has a good face, and I do not think I have anything to fear from him. Let him remain."

Shih-Kung now considered that it was time for him to act. He stretched himself and yawned as though he were just waking out of sleep, and then, sitting up on the edge of the bed, he looked into the young man's face and asked him who he was.

"Oh!" he replied in a friendly way, "I am the son of the old lady who gave you permission to stay here for the night. For certain reasons, I am not at all anxious to have strangers about the house, and at first I very much objected to have you here. But now that I have had a good look at you, my objections have all vanished. I pride myself upon being a good judge of character, and I may tell you that I have taken a fancy to you. But come away with me into the next room, for I am going to have a little supper, and as my mother tells me that you fell asleep without having had anything to eat, I have no doubt you will be glad to join me."

As they sat talking over the meal, they became very friendly and confidential with each other, and the sam-shu that the son kept drinking from a tiny cup, into which it was poured from a steaming kettle, had the effect of loosening his tongue and causing him to speak more freely than he would otherwise have done.

From his long experience of the shady classes of society, Shih-Kung very soon discovered what kind of a man his companion was, and felt that here was a mine from which he might draw valuable information to help him in reaching the facts he wished to discover.

Looking across the table at the son, whose face was by this time flushed with the spirit he had been drinking, and with a hasty glance around the room, as though he were afraid that some one might overhear him, he said in a low voice, "I want to tell you a great secret. You have opened your heart a good deal to me, and now I am going to do the same with you. I am not really a peddler of cloth, as I have pretended to be. I have been simply using that business to disguise my real occupation, which I do not want anyone to know."

"And what, may I ask, may be the trade in which you are engaged, and of which you seem to be so ashamed

that you dare not openly confess it?" asked the son.

"Well, I am what I call a benevolent thief," replied Shih-Kung.

"A benevolent thief!" exclaimed the other in astonishment. "I have never heard of such a thing before, and I should very much like to know what is meant by it."

"I must tell you," explained the guest, "that I am not a common thief who takes the property of others for his own benefit. I never steal for myself. My practice is to find out where men have made money unjustly, and then by certain means at my command I deprive them of some of their unlawful gains and distribute them amongst the people they have wronged. In this way I have been the means of bringing suitable punishment on the heads of the guilty, and at the same time of relieving the necessities of those who have suffered at their hands."

"I am astonished at what you tell me," replied the son, "though I do not believe all you say about not taking a share in the plunder you get. But now that you have opened your heart to me, I shall repay your confidence by telling you what I am. I am a real thief, and I support my mother, who does not suspect the truth, and keep the home together, simply by what I steal from others."

He then proceeded to give an account of some of the adventures he had met with in the course of his expeditions by night to rooms and houses which, as he always found out beforehand by careful spying, contained valuables that could be easily carried away.

While he was relating these stories, Shih-Kung's eyes gleamed with delight, for he saw that the man had fallen into the trap which had been laid for him, and felt confident that before the night was over he would be in possession of some clue to the mystery he was endeavouring to solve. He was disgusted with the sordid details of the criminal life of which the man before him seemed to be proud; yet with wonderful patience this mandarin, with his large powers of mind, and with a genius for statesmanship which had made him famous throughout the Empire, sat for hours enduring the wretched talk of this common thief. But his reward came in due time.

“By the way,” exclaimed this man whose business it was to break into homes when the small hours of the morning found their inmates wrapped in slumber, “some time ago I had a most remarkable experience, and as you have shown yourself such a good fellow, I will tell you about it, if you do not think it too late to do so.”

“I shall be most delighted to hear you relate it,” said his guest. “I have been greatly entertained by your vivid way of describing the adventures through which you have passed. You deserve to be classed amongst the great heroes of old, who have made their names famous by their deeds of daring. Go on, I pray you, and tell me the particulars of this unusual experience.”

“Well,” proceeded the man, “I had very carefully planned to pay a visit to a certain house just outside the walls of the city. It was an easy one to get in to without any danger of being observed, for it was in a quiet street, where passers-by are very few after dark. It was a gloomy place after sunset, for the high walls that looked down upon it threw deep and heavy shadows, which faint-hearted people declare are really unhappy and restless ghosts prowling about to harass and distress the unwary.

“It was a little after midnight, when with stealthy footsteps I crept along the narrow streets, keeping as much as I could under cover of the houses, where the darkness lay deepest. Every home was hushed in slumber. The only things that really troubled me were the dogs, which, with an intelligence far greater than that of their masters, suspected me of some evil purpose, and barked at me and made wild snaps at my legs. I managed, however, to evade them and finally to arrive at the house I intended to rob.

“When I got close up to it, I was surprised to find a light burning inside. There was another thing, too, that I could not understand, and this was that a little side door by which I had planned to enter had not been bolted, but had been left ajar so that any prowling robber could easily gain admittance through it. Taking off my shoes, I walked on tiptoe along the stone-paved courtyard in the direction of the room where the light was burning, and hiding myself just outside the window, I could observe everything without being seen myself.

” I saw a woman of about thirty sitting alone by a table. She was evidently annoyed about something, for a frown rested on her face, and her eyes now and again flashed with suppressed anger, as though she had suffered some great wrong and wished to avenge it. I was just beginning to wonder when I should be able to attend to my own particular business, when I heard the side door slam, and the heavy staggering footsteps of a

person under the influence of sam-shu sounded in the dark.

” I drew back a little further from the window. A man approached the room where the woman was sitting ; lurching heavily, he sent the door open with a bang, fell down on the floor, and lay there perfectly insensible. He was a little insignificant fellow, whilst his wife was a vigorous, strapping woman. Looking at him with a world of contempt in her eyes, she came and picked him up and laid him on a bed that stood in the corner of the room.

” She then went back to her seat, but there was an evil look in the glances that she kept casting at her wretched husband. I was wondering to myself what was to be the end of this curious scene, when I saw her get up and go to a kind of wardrobe and take out a needle some two or three inches in length. She then undid her husband’s dress, and seizing a mallet that lay on the table, she drove the needle deep down into his navel until it had entirely vanished in the flesh and not a trace of it was to be seen.

” The drunken man screamed as though in great agony, tossed convulsively on the bed, and then lay still and moved no more.

” I was so paralyzed with fear lest I should be implicated in this murder, that I dashed out of the house with all the speed I could command in the dark, and without stopping my flight for a single moment, I reached my home, terrified beyond measure at the awful scene that I had just witnessed.

” The only amusing part about the whole business was the inquest which was held the other day upon the body of the dead husband. I was present, and laughed in my sleeve at the whole proceedings. There was the Coroner, with solemn face, going through all the regular rules of examining the body for some proof that the man had been murdered. Then there was the county magistrate, questioning and threatening the woman as to the part she had played in the tragedy. And then, too, there was the wife, with sobs and sighs, and with tears running down her face, calling Heaven to witness that she had had nothing to do with the death of her husband. It was a splendid farce, carried out with wonderful acting by the wife, for there was not a flaw in her evidence, and no sign on the body to convict her of her crime.

” A few words from me would have settled the question in a moment, and the county magistrate, who seemed dreadfully distressed because of the responsibility he had incurred in the eyes of the law by holding an

examination of the body without sufficient evidence to warrant him in so doing, would have had his heart lightened of the load that was weighing it down if I could only have had the opportunity of whispering a single sentence into his ear.”

“It is your duty,” interposed his guest, “to proceed to-morrow morning to the mandarin’s yamen, and tell your story to the county magistrate, so that a great wrong may not go unpunished.”

“That I can never do,” promptly replied the man. “What do you think would happen were I to do what you suggest? I am a thief. I get my living by thieving. I was in the house on the night of the murder for the purpose of robbery. That would all come out when I give my evidence. After I had proved the murder, what would become of me? I should be cast into prison, and I might have to lie there for years, for who would ever bail out a thief? And then my poor mother would starve, for she has to depend on me entirely for her living, and she would be compelled to go on the streets and beg for charity from door to door. No, it is impossible for me ever to interfere in this case.”

Shih-Kung recognized the difficulty in which the man was placed, and yet without his evidence it would be impossible to convict the woman of the crime she had committed. He accordingly thought out a plan which he felt would remove the obstacles that stood in the way of securing him as a witness.

Turning to the man, he said, “I have had a very pleasant evening with you, and I thank you for your courtesy and hospitality. I feel my heart moved with a desire for a deeper friendship than mere words can ever express, and so I propose that you and I become sworn brothers, so that whatever may befall us in the future we shall stand by each other to the very death.”

The young man looked up with astonishment at this unexpected proposal, but the sudden flash in his eyes and the smile that overspread his countenance showed that it was very pleasing to him.

“I shall be delighted to agree,” he quickly replied, “but when shall we have an opportunity of appearing in the temple, and of registering our vow in the presence of the god?”

“There is no need to go to any temple,” Shih-Kung replied. “Your family idol, which sits over there enshrined before us, will be quite sufficient for our purpose. Give me a pen and paper, and I will write out the articles of our brotherhood and present them to the god.”

In a few minutes the document was written out according to the minute rules laid down by the law which binds two men in a sworn brotherhood. By the most solemn oaths Shih-Kung and this thief agreed to assist each other in any extremity in which either might be placed in the future. Any call from one to the other must be instantly responded to. No danger and no peril to life or limb must be allowed to deter either of them when the cry for help or deliverance was heard. Each was to regard the interests of the other as identical with his own, and as long as life lasted, the obligation to succour in every time of need could never be relaxed or annulled.

To prove that this solemn engagement was no mere passing whim of the moment, it had to be read in the hearing of the household god, who happened to be the Goddess of Mercy. She would then be an everlasting witness of the transaction, and with the invisible forces at her command would visit pains and penalties on the one who broke his oath. Standing in front of her shrine, Shih-Kung read out the articles of agreement, word by word, in a slow and measured tone suited to the solemnity of the occasion. He then lighted the paper at the lamp, and both men gazed at it until nothing was left but ashes, when each of them knew that the Goddess had received the document and had placed it in her archives in the far-off Western Heaven as a record of the vows made in her presence in those early hours of the morning.

When they sat down again, Shih-Kung looked with a strong and masterful gaze at his newly-created brother and said to him:—“You and I are now sworn brothers, and of course we must be frank with each other. I do not wish to deceive you any longer, so I must tell you that I am neither a peddler of cloth, nor a benevolent thief in the sense in which you understood the term. I am in fact Shih-Kung, the Viceroy of this Province.”

No sooner did the man hear the name of this great mandarin, who was a profound source of terror to the criminals and evil-doers within his jurisdiction, than he fell on his knees before him in the most abject fright, and repeatedly knocking his head on the ground, besought him to have mercy on him.

Raising him up gently with his hand, Shih-Kung told him to lay aside all his fears. “You are my brother now,” he said, “and we have just sworn in the presence of the Goddess to defend each other with our lives. I shall

certainly perform my part of the oath. From this moment your fortune is made; and as for your mother, who received me with such gracious courtesy, it shall be my privilege to provide for her as long as she lives.”

Emboldened by these words of the great statesman, the young man appeared at the second inquest, which Shih-Kung ordered to be held, and gave such testimony that the guilt of the wretched wife was clearly established, and due punishment meted out to her.

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