



The Wooden Tablet

A Chinese Wonder Book

Chinese

Intermediate

17 min read

“Yes, my boy, whatever happens, be sure to save that tablet. It is the only thing we have left worth keeping.”

K'ang-p'u's father was just setting out for the city, to be gone all day. He had been telling K'ang-p'u about some work in the little garden, for the boy was a strong and willing helper.

“All right, father, I'll do what you tell me; but suppose the foreign soldiers should come while you are gone? I heard that they were over at T'ang Shu yesterday and burned the village. If they should come here, what must I do?”

Mr. Lin laughed heartily. “Why, there's nothing here for them to burn, if it comes to that!—a mud house, a grass roof, and a pile of ragged bedding. Surely they won't bother my little hut. It's loot they're after—money—or something they can sell.”

“But, father,” persisted the boy, “haven't you forgotten? Surely you wouldn't wish them to burn your father's tablet?”

“Quite right; for the moment I did forget. Yes, yes, my boy, whatever happens be sure to save the tablet. It is the only thing we have worth keeping.”

With that, Mr. Lin went out at the gate, leaving K'ang-p'u standing all alone. The little fellow was scarcely twelve years old. He had a bright, sunny face and a happy heart. Being left by himself did not mean tears and

idleness for him.

He went into the poor little house and stood for a moment looking earnestly at the wooden tablet. It was on a shelf in the one-roomed shanty, an oblong piece of wood about twelve inches high, enclosed in a wooden case. Through the carved screen work in the front, K'ang-p'u could see his grandfather's name written in Chinese characters on the tablet. Ever since babyhood K'ang-p'u had been taught to look at this piece of wood with a feeling of reverence.

"Your grandfather's spirit is inside," his father had said one day. "You must worship his spirit, for he was a good man, far better than your dad. If I had obeyed him in all things, I, his only son, should not now be living in this miserable hut."

"But didn't he live here, too?" asked K'ang-p'u in surprise.

"Oh, no, we lived in a big house over yonder in another village; in a big house with a high stone wall."

The little fellow had gasped with surprise at hearing this, for there was not such a thing as a stone wall in his village, and he felt that his grandfather must have been a rich man. He had not asked any more questions, but from that day on he had been rather afraid of the carved wooden box in which his grandfather's spirit was supposed to live.

So, on this day when his father left him alone, the boy stood looking at the tablet, wondering how a big man's spirit could squeeze into such a small space. He put out his finger cautiously and touched the bottom of the box, then drew back, half-frightened at his own daring. No bad results followed. It seemed just like any other piece of wood. Somewhat puzzled, he walked out of the house into the little garden. His father had told him to re-set some young cabbages. This was work K'ang-p'u had done many times before. First, he gathered a basket of chicken feathers, for his father had told him that a few feathers placed at the roots of the young plant would do more to make it strong and healthy than anything else that could be used.

All day K'ang-p'u worked steadily in the garden. He was just beginning to feel tired, when he heard a woman screaming in the distance. He dropped his basket and rushed to the gate. Down the road at the far side of the village he saw a crowd of women and children running hither and thither, and—yes! there were the soldiers—the dreaded foreign soldiers! They were burning the houses; they were stealing whatever they could find.

Now, most boys would have been frightened—would have taken to their heels without thought of consequences. K'ang-p'u, however, though like other lads afraid of soldiers, was too brave to run without first doing his duty. He decided to stand his ground until he was sure the foreigners were coming his way. Perhaps they would grow tired of their cruel sport and leave the little house unharmed. He watched with wide-open eyes the work of pillage. Alas! these men did not seem to tire of their amusement. One after another the houses were entered and robbed. Women were screaming and children crying. Nearly all the village men were away in a distant market town, for none of them had expected an attack.

Nearer and nearer came the robbers. At last they were next door to K'ang-p'u's hut, and he knew the time had come for him to do his duty. Seizing the basket of chicken feathers, he rushed into the house, snatched the precious tablet from the shelf, and hid it in the bottom of the basket. Then, without stopping to say good-bye to the spot which he had known all his life, he rushed out of the gate and down the narrow street.

"Kill the kid!" shouted a soldier, whom K'ang-p'u nearly ran against in his hurry. "Put down the basket, boy! No stealing here."

"Yes, kill him!" shouted another with a loud laugh; "he'd make a good bit of bacon."

But no one touched him, and K'ang-p'u, still holding tightly to his burden, was soon far out on the winding road among the cornfields. If they should follow, he thought of hiding among the giant cornstalks. His legs were tired now, and he sat down under a stone memorial arch near some crossroads to rest.

Where was he going, and what should he do? These were the questions that filled the boy's whirling little brain. First, he must find out if the soldiers were really destroying all the houses in his village. Perhaps some of them would not be burned and he could return at night to join his father.

After several failures he managed to climb one of the stone pillars and from the arch above he could get a good view of the surrounding country. Over to the west was his village. His heart beat fast when he saw that a great

cloud of smoke was rising from the houses. Clearly, the thieves were making quick work of the place, and soon there would be nothing left but piles of mud, brick, ashes and other rubbish.

Night came on. K'ang-p'u clambered down from his stone perch. He was beginning to feel hungry, and yet he dared not turn back towards home. And besides, would not all the other villagers be hungry, too? He lay down at the foot of the stone monument, placing the basket within reach at one side. Soon he fell fast asleep.

How long he had been sleeping he never knew; but it was not yet day when he awoke with a start and looked round him in the moonlight. Some one had called him distinctly by name. At first, he thought it must have been his father's voice; and then as he grew wider and wider awake he knew this could not be, for the voice sounded like that of an old man. K'ang-p'u looked round in amazement, first at the stone columns, then at the arch above. No one was to be seen. Had he been dreaming?

Just as he lay back to sleep once more, the voice sounded again very faintly, "K'ang-p'u! K'ang-p'u! Why don't you let me out? I can't breathe under all these feathers."

Quick as a flash he knew what was the matter. Burying his hand in the basket, he seized the wooden tablet, drew it from its hiding-place, and stood it up on the stone base. Wonder of wonders! There before his very eyes he saw a tiny fellow, not six inches high, sitting on top of the wooden upright and dangling his legs over the front of the tablet. The dwarf had a long grey beard, and K'ang-p'u, without looking twice, knew that this was the spirit of his dead grandfather come to life and clothed with flesh and blood.

"Ho, ho!" said the small man, laughing, "So you thought you'd bury your old grandfather in feathers, did you? A soft enough grave, but rather smelly."

"But, sir," cried K'ang-p'u, "I had to do it, to save you from the soldiers! They were just about to burn our house and you in it."

"There, there, my boy! Don't be uneasy. I am not scolding you. You did the best you could for your old grandfather. If you had been like most lads, you would have taken to your heels and left me to those sea-devils who were sacking the village. There is no doubt about it: you saved me from a second death much more terrible than the first one."

K'ang-p'u shuddered, for he knew that his grandfather had been killed in battle. He had heard his father tell the story many times.

"Now, what do you propose doing about it?" asked the old man finally, looking straight into the boy's face.

"Doing about it, sir? Why, really, I don't know. I thought that perhaps in the morning the soldiers would be gone and I could carry you back. Surely my father will be looking for me."

"What! Looking for you in the ashes? And what could he do if he did find you? Your house is burned, your chickens carried away and your cabbages trampled underfoot. A sorry home he will return to. You would be just one more mouth to feed. No! that plan will never do. If your father thinks you are dead, he will go off to another province to get work. That would save him from starvation."

"But what am I to do?" wailed poor K'ang-p'u. "I don't want him to leave me all alone!"

"All alone! What! don't you count your old grand-daddy? Surely you are not a very polite youngster, even if you did save me from burning to death."

"Count you?" repeated the boy, surprised. "Why, surely you can't help me to earn a living?"

"Why not, boy? Is this an age when old men are good for nothing?"

"But, sir, you are only the spirit of my grandfather, and spirits cannot work!"

"Ha, ha! just hear the child. Why, look you, I will show you what spirits can do, provided you will do exactly what I tell you."

Of course, K'ang-p'u promised, for he was always obedient; and was not this little man who spoke so strangely, the spirit of his grandfather? And is not every lad in China taught to honour his ancestors?

"Now, listen, my boy. First, let me say that if you had not been kind, brave and filial, I should not take the trouble to help you out of your misfortune. As it is, there is nothing else for me to do. I cast your father off because he was disobedient. He has lived in a dirty hovel ever since. Doubtless, he has been sorry for his misdeeds, for I see that although he was disgraced by being sent away from the family home, he has taught you to honour and love me. Most boys would have snatched up a blanket or a piece of bread before running from the enemy, but you thought only of my tablet. You saved me and went to bed hungry. For this bravery, I shall

give back to you the home of your ancestors.”

“But I can’t live in it,” said K’ang-p’u, full of wonder, “if you will not let my father come back to it. If he goes away he will have a very hard time: he will be lonely without me, and may die; and then I would not be able to take care of his grave, or to burn incense there at the proper season!”

“Quite right, K’ang-p’u. I see you love your father as well as your grandfather’s tablet. Very well; you shall have your way. I daresay your father is sorry by this time that he treated me so badly.”

“Indeed, he must be,” said the boy earnestly, “for I have seen him kneel before your tablet many times and burn incense there on the proper days. I know he is very sorry.”

“Very well; go to sleep again. Let us wait until morning and then I shall see what I can do for you. This moonlight is not bright enough for my old eyes. I shall have to wait for morning.”

As he spoke these last words, the little man began to grow smaller and smaller before the eyes of his grandson, until at last he had altogether disappeared.

At first, K’ang-p’u was too much excited to close his eyes. He remained for a time looking up into the starry sky and wondering if what he had heard would really come true, or whether he could have dreamt the whole story of his grandfather’s coming to life again. Could it really be that the old family property would be given back to his father?

He remembered now that he had once heard his father speak of having lived in a large house on a beautiful compound. It was just before K’ang-p’u’s mother had been carried away by the fever. As she had lain tossing upon the rude stone bed, with none of those comforts which are so necessary for the sick, K’ang-p’u remembered that his father had said to her: “What a shame that we are not living in my father’s house! There you might have had every luxury. It is all my fault; I disobeyed my father.”

Soon after that his mother had died, but K’ang-p’u had remembered those words ever since, and had often wished that he could hear more about this house where his father had spent his boyhood. Could it be possible that they would soon be living in it? No, surely there must be some mistake: the night fairies of his dreams had been deceiving him. With a sigh he closed his eyes and once more fell asleep.

When K’ang-p’u next awoke, the sun was shining full in his face. He looked around him, sleepily rubbing his

eyes and trying to remember all that had happened. Suddenly he thought of the tablet and of his grandfather's appearance at midnight. But, strange to say, the basket had disappeared with all its contents. The tablet was nowhere to be seen, and even the stone arch under which he had gone to sleep had completely vanished. Alas! his grandfather's tablet—how poorly he had guarded it! What terrible thing would happen now that it was gone!

K'ang-p'u stood up and looked round him in trembling surprise. What could have taken place while he was sleeping? At first, he did not know what to do. Fortunately, the path through the corn was still there, and he decided to return to the village and see if he could find any trace of his father. His talk with the old man must have been only an idle dream, and some thief must have carried off the basket. If only the stone arch had not vanished K'ang-p'u would not have been so perplexed.

He hurried along the narrow road, trying to forget the empty stomach which was beginning to cry for food. If the soldiers were still in the village, surely they would not hurt an empty-handed little boy. More than likely they had gone the day before. If he could only find his father! Now he crossed the little brook where the women came to rub their clothes upon the rocks. There was the big mulberry tree where the boys used to gather leaves for their silkworms. Another turn of the road and he would see the village.

When K'ang-p'u passed round the corner and looked for the ruins of the village hovels, an amazing sight met his gaze. There, rising directly before him, was a great stone wall, like those he had seen round the rich people's houses when his father had taken him to the city. The great gate stood wide open, and the keeper, rushing out, exclaimed:

"Ah! the little master has come!"

Completely bewildered, the boy followed the servant through the gateway, passed through several wide courts, and then into a garden where flowers and strangely-twisted trees were growing.

This, then, was the house which his grandfather had promised him—the home of his ancestors. Ah! how beautiful! how beautiful! Many men and women servants bowed low as he passed, saluting with great respect and crying out:

"Yes, it is really the little master! He has come back to his own!"

K'ang-p'u, seeing how well dressed the servants were, felt much ashamed of his own ragged garments, and put

up his hands to hide a torn place. What was his amazement to find that he was no longer clad in soiled, ragged clothes, that he was dressed in the handsomest embroidered silk. From head to foot he was fitted out like the young Prince his father had pointed out to him one day in the city.

Then they entered a magnificent reception-hall on the other side of the garden. K'ang-p'u could not keep back his tears, for there stood his father waiting to meet him.

“My boy! my boy!” cried the father, “you have come back to me. I feared you had been stolen away for ever.”

“Oh, no!” said K'ang-p'u, “you have not lost me, but I have lost the tablet. A thief came and took it last night while I was sleeping.”

“Lost the tablet! A thief! Why, no, my son, you are mistaken! There it is, just before you.”

K'ang-p'u looked, and saw standing on a handsome carved table the very thing he had mourned as lost. As he stared in surprise he almost expected to see the tiny figure swinging its legs over the top, and to hear the high-pitched voice of his grandfather.

“Yes, it is really the lost tablet!” he cried joyfully. “How glad I am it is back in its rightful place once more.”

Then father and son fell upon their knees before the wooden emblem, and bowed reverently nine times to the floor, thanking the spirit for all it had done for them. When they arose their hearts were full of a new happiness.

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