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Chinese Folk-Lore Tales

J. (John) Macgowan

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CHINESE FOLK-LORE TALES

BY

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I

THE WIDOW HO

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 wrong-doer 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.

[Transcriber's note: pages 3 and 4 missing from source book]

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

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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 re-

ceived 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.

II

KWANG-JUI AND THE GOD OF THE RIVER

China is a land where the great masses of the people have to toil and struggle incessantly in order to obtain even the bare necessities of daily existence. Unnumbered multitudes never enjoy a sufficiency of food, but have to be contented with whatever Heaven may send them; and profoundly thankful they are when they can be sure of two meals a day to stave off the pangs of hunger from themselves and their children.

How many there are who cannot by the severest toil obtain even these two meals is evident from the organized beggar communities, which are to be found in connection with every great city in the Empire, and from the vast numbers of tramps, who wander over the country on the highways and byways with pale and sodden faces and with garments nearly falling to pieces, picking up a scanty livelihood from the benevolent as they pass from village to village.

Whatever may be their inmost thoughts, the Chinese bear their terrible hardships and privations with a splendid heroism, with little complaining, with no widespread outbreaks of robbery, and with no pillaging of rice-shops and public granaries by organized mobs driven mad by hunger.

There is one beautiful feature about the Chinese that has been an important factor in steadying the nation. They are imbued with at least one great ideal, which touches their common life in every direction. Every man in the Empire, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, has a profound respect for what he calls Tien-Li, or Divine

Righteousness. By this the Chinese judge all actions. It is the standard by which Kings and Princes and common people direct their conduct, whether in the highest affairs of state, or in the ordinary engagements of common every-day life.

In addition to this, the minds of the Chinese are filled with romance and poetry, so that to them the invisible world is peopled with fairies and all kinds of spirits, both good and bad, the former relieving in mysterious ways the dull greyness that sorrow and disaster often shed upon the lives of men.

The story of Kwang-Jui is a remarkable evidence of the unbounded faith which the Chinese have in the intervention of these mysterious beings to deliver men from calamities which would otherwise prove fatal to them.

When we first meet with Kwang-Jui, he is living with his widowed mother in a retired part of the country. His father had been dead for some time, and Kwang-Jui was now the only one upon whom the fortunes of the home could be built. He was a very studious lad, and was possessed of remarkable abilities, the result being that he successfully passed the various Imperial Examinations, even the final one in the capital, where the Sovereign himself presided as examiner.

After this last examination, as the men were waiting outside the Hall for the names of those who had satisfied the Emperor to be read out a considerable crowd had collected. Most of these people had come from mere curiosity to see the Imperial Edict, and to discover who the scholar was that stood first on the list. The excitement was intense, and speculation ran rife as to which of the candidates, who had come from almost every province in the Empire, was going to obtain the place of honour which was the dream and the ambition of every scholar in the land.

At last every breath was hushed, and every voice stilled in silence, as one of the high officials of the Palace, attended by an imposing retinue, came out of the great central doors, which had been flung wide open at his approach. In a clear voice he began to read the list. It was headed by the name of Kwang-Jui.

At this precise moment occurred an incident which was destined to change the whole current of Kwang-Jui's career. As he was standing overcome with emotion in consequence of the supreme honour which had been conferred upon him by the Emperor's Edict, a small round ball, beautifully embroidered, was thrown from an upper window of a house across the way, and struck him on the shoulder.

It may here be explained that it was a custom in the early days of the history of China to allow any young maiden who was reluctant to have her husband chosen for her by her parents, to make use of what was called "The throwing of the embroidered ball" in order to discover the man whom the gods intended her to marry. This ball was made of some soft material, wrapped round with a piece of red silk which was covered with variegated figures, worked by the damsel's own hands and emblematic of the love by which the hearts of husband and wife are bound indissolubly to each other. It was firmly believed by every maiden of this romantic type that the man who was struck by the ball from her fair hands was the one whom Heaven had selected as her husband; and no parent would ever dream of refusing to accept a choice made in this way.

Whilst Kwang-Jui was gazing in amused wonder at the symbol which he understood so well, a messenger from the house from which it had been thrown requested him in respectful tones to accompany him to his master, who desired to discuss with him a most important subject.

As Kwang-Jui entered the house, he discovered to his astonishment that it belonged to the Prime Minister, who received him with the utmost cordiality, and after a long conversation declared that he was prepared to submit to the will of the gods, and to accept him as his son-in-law. Kwang-Jui was of course in raptures at the brilliant prospects which were suddenly opening up before him. The day, indeed, was a red-letter one—an omen, he hoped, that fate was preparing to pour down upon him good fortune in the future. In one brief day he had been hailed as the most distinguished scholar in the Empire, and he had also been acknowledged as the son-in-law of the Empire's greatest official, who had the power of placing him in high positions where he could secure not only honours but also wealth sufficient to drive poverty away for ever from his home.

As there was no reason for delay, the hand of the beautiful daughter who had thrown the embroidered ball, and who was delighted that Heaven had chosen for her such a brilliant husband, was bestowed upon him by her parents. Times of great rejoicing succeeded, and when Kwang-Jui thought of the quiet and uninteresting days when he was still unknown to fame, and contrasted them with his present life, it seemed to him as though he were living in fairy-land. His wildest dreams in the past had never conjured up anything so grand as the life he was now leading. In one bound he had leaped from comparative poverty to fame and riches.

After a time, through the influence of his father-in-law, and with the hearty consent of the Emperor, who remembered what a brilliant student he had been, Kwang-Jui was appointed to be Prefect of an important district in the centre of China.

Taking his bride with him, he first of all proceeded to his old home, where his mother was waiting with great anxiety to welcome her now famous son. The old lady felt rather nervous at meeting her new daughter-in-law, seeing that the latter came from a family which was far higher in rank and far more distinguished than any in her own clan. As it was very necessary that Kwang-Jui should take up his office as Prefect without any undue delay, he and his mother and his bride set out in the course of a few days on the long journey to the distant Prefecture, where their lives were destined to be marred by sorrow and disaster.

They had travelled the greater part of the way, and had reached a country market-town that lay on their route, when Kwang-Jui's mother, worn out with the toilsome journey, fell suddenly ill. The doctor who was called in shook his head and pronounced that she was suffering from a very serious complaint, which, whilst not necessarily fatal, would necessitate a complete rest for at least two or three months. Any further travelling must therefore be abandoned for the present, as it might be attended with the most serious consequences to the old lady.

Both husband and wife were greatly distressed at the unlucky accident which placed them in such an awkward position at this wayside inn. They were truly grieved at the serious sickness of their mother, but they were still more puzzled as to what course they

should pursue in these most trying circumstances. The Imperial Rescript appointing Kwang-Jui to his office as Prefect commanded him to take up his post on a certain definite date. To delay until his mother would again be able to endure the fatigues of travel was out of the question, as disobedience to the Emperor's orders would be attended by his grave displeasure. Eventually his mother suggested that he and his wife should go on ahead, and that after taking up the duties of his office he should then delegate them for a time to his subordinates and return to take her home.

This advice Kwang-Jui decided to carry out; though with great reluctance, as he was most unwilling to abandon his mother to the care of strangers. He accordingly made all the arrangements he possibly could for her comfort whilst they were parted from each other; he had servants engaged to attend upon her, and he left sufficient money with her to meet all her expenses during his absence.

With a mind full of consideration for his mother, and wishing to show how anxious he was to give her pleasure, he went out into the market of the town to see if he could buy a certain kind of fish of which she was passionately fond. He had hardly got outside the courtyard of the inn, when he met a fisherman with a very fine specimen of the very fish that he wished to purchase.

As he was discussing the price with the man, a certain something about the fish arrested his attention. There was a peculiar look in its eyes that seemed full of pathos and entreaty. Its gaze was concentrated upon him, so human-like and with such intensity, that he instinctively felt it was pleading with him to do something to deliver it from a great disaster. This made him look at it more carefully, and to his astonishment the liquid eyes of the fish were still fixed upon him with a passionate regard that made him quiver with excitement.

"Fisherman," he said, "I want to buy this fish, and here is the price that you ask for it. I have but one stipulation to make, and that is that you take it to the river from which you caught it, and set it free to swim away wherever it pleases. Remember that if you fail to carry out this part of the bargain, great sorrow will come upon you and your home."