

A CELESTIAL LAUREATE
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To Wong Ho, the merchant, pleasurable immersed in the calculation of an estimated profit on a junk load of birds' nests, sharks' fins, and other seasonable delicacies, there came a distracting interruption occasioned by a wandering poet who had sat down within the shade provided by Wong Ho's ornamental gate in the street outside. As he reclined there he sang ballads of ancient valor, from time to time beating a hollow wooden duck in unison with his voice so that the charitable should have no excuse for missing the entertainment.

Unable any longer to continue his occupation, Wong Ho struck an iron gong.

'Bear courteous greetings to the accomplished musician outside our gate,' he said to the slave who had appeared, 'and convince him — by means of a heavily weighted club, if necessary — that the situation he has taken up is quite unworthy of his incomparable efforts.'

When the slave returned it was with an entire absence of the enthusiasm of one who has succeeded in an enterprise.

'The distinguished mendicant outside disarmed the one who is relating the incident by means of an unworthy stratagem, and then struck him repeatedly on the head with the image of a sonorous wooden duck,'

reported the slave submissively.

Meanwhile, the voice, with its accompaniment, continued to chant of the deeds of bygone heroes.

'In that case,' said Wong Ho coldly, 'entice him into this inadequate chamber by words suggestive of liberal entertainment.'

This device was successful, for very soon the slave returned with the stranger. He was a youth of studious appearance and an engaging openness of manner. Hung about his neck by means of a cord were a variety of poems suitable to most of the contingencies of an ordinary person's existence. The name he bore was Sun, and he was of the house of Kiau.

'Honorable greeting, minstrel,' said Wong Ho with dignified condescension. 'Why do you persist in exercising your illustrious talent outside this person's insignificant abode?'

'Because,' replied Sun modestly, 'the benevolent mandarin who has just spoken had not then invited me inside. Now, however, he will be able to hear to greater advantage the very doubtful qualities of my entertainment.' With these words, Kiau Sun struck the duck so proficiently that it emitted a lifelike call, and prepared to raise his voice in a chant.

'Restrain your undoubted capacity,' exclaimed Wong Ho hastily. 'The inquiry presented itself to you at

an inaccurate angle. Why, to restate it, did you continue before this uninviting hovel when, under the external forms of true politeness, my slave endeavored to remove you hence?

'In the circumstances, this person may have overlooked the delicacy of the message, for, as it is well written, "To the starving, a blow from a skewer of meat is more acceptable than a caress from the hand of a maiden,"' replied Kiau Sun. 'Whereunto remember, thou two-stomached merchant, that although the house in question is yours, the street is mine.'

'By what title?' demanded Wong Ho contemptuously.

'By the same that confers this well-appointed palace upon you,' replied Sun; 'because it is my home.'

'The point is one of some subtlety,' admitted Wong Ho, 'and might be pursued to an extreme delicacy of attenuation if it were argued by those whose profession it is to give a variety of meanings to the same thing. Yet even allowing the contention, it is none the less an unendurable infliction that your voice should disturb my peacefully-conducted enterprise.'

'As yours would have done mine, O concave-witted Wong Ho!'

'That,' retorted the merchant, 'is a disadvantage that you could easily have averted by removing yourself to a more distant spot.'

'The solution is equally applicable to your own case, mandarin,' replied Kiau Sun affably.

'Alas!' exclaimed Wong Ho, with an obvious inside bitterness, 'it is a

mistake to argue with persons of limited intelligence in terms of courtesy. This, doubtless, was the meaning of the philosopher Nhy-hi when he penned the observation: "Death, a woman, and a dumb mute, always have the last word." Why did I have you conducted hither to convince you dispassionately, rather than send an armed guard to force you away by violence?

'Possibly,' suggested the minstrel, 'because my profession is a legally recognized one, and, moreover, under the direct protection of the exalted Mandarin Shen-y-ling.'

'Profession!' retorted Wong Ho, stung by the reference to Shen-y-ling, for that powerful official's attitude was indeed the inner reason why he had not pushed violence to a keener edge against Kiau Sun. 'An abject mendicancy, yielding two hands' grasp of copper cash a day on a stock composed of half a dozen threadbare odes.'

'Compose me half a dozen better, and one hand-count of cash shall be apportioned to you each evening,' suggested Sun.

'A handful of cash for my labor!' exclaimed the indignant Wong Ho. 'Learn, puny wayfarer, that in a single day the profit of my various enterprises exceeds a hundred taels of silver.'

'That is less than the achievement of my occupation,' said Kiau Sun.

'Less!' repeated the merchant incredulously. 'Can you, O boaster, display a single tael?'

'Doubtless, I should be the possessor of thousands if I made use of

the attributes of a merchant — three hands and two faces. But that was not the angle of my meaning. My labors enable men to forget: yours only compel them to remember.'

Thus they continued to strive, each one contending for the preeminence of his own state, regardless of the sage warning: 'In three moments a laborer will remove an obstructing rock, but three moons will pass without two wise men agreeing on the meaning of a vowel.' And, doubtless, they would have persisted in their intellectual entertainment until the great sky-lantern rose and the pangs of hunger compelled them to desist, were it not for the manifestation of a very unusual occurrence.

The Emperor N'ang Wei, then reigning, is now generally regarded as being in no way profound or inspired, but possessing the faculty of being able to turn the differences among his subjects to a profitable account, and other accomplishments useful in a ruler. As he passed along the streets of his capital he heard the voices of two upraised in altercation, and, halting the bearer of his umbrella, he commanded that the persons concerned should be brought before him and state the nature of their dispute.

'The rivalry is an ancient one,' remarked the Emperor when each had made his claim. 'Doubtless, we ourselves could devise a judgment, but in this cycle of progress it is more usual to leave decision to the pronouncement of the populace — and much less exacting to our imperial ingenuity. An edict will, therefore, be published,

stating that at a certain hour Kiau Sun will stand upon the Western Hill of the city and recite one of his incomparable epics, while at the same gong-stroke Wong Ho will take his station on the East Hill, let us say, for the purpose of distributing pieces of silver among any who are able to absent themselves from the competing attraction. It will then be clearly seen which entertainment attracts the greater number.'

'Your mind, O all-wisest, is only comparable to the peacock's tail in its spreading brilliance,' exclaimed Wong Ho, well assured of an easy triumph.

Kiau Sun, however, remained silent, but he observed closely the benignly impartial expression of the Emperor's countenance.

When the indicated time arrived, only two persons could have been observed within the circumference of the Western Hill of the city — a blind mendicant who had lost his way and an extremely round-bodied mandarin who had been abandoned there by his carriers when they heard the terms of the edict. But about the Eastern Hill the throng was so great that for some time after it was unusual to meet a person whose outline had not been permanently altered by the occasion. Even Kiau Sun was present.

On a protected eminence stood N'ang Wei. Near him was Wong Ho, confidently awaiting the moment when the Emperor should declare himself. When, therefore, the all-wisest graciously made a gesture of command, Wong Ho hastened to his side, an unbecoming elation gilding the fullness of his countenance.

'Wong Ho,' said the Illimitable, 'the people are here in gratifying profusion. The moment has thus arrived for you to consummate your triumph over Kiau Sun.'

'Omnipotence?' queried Wong Ho.

'The silver that you were to distribute freely to all who came. Doubtless, you have a retinue of slaves in attendance with weighty sacks of money for the purpose.'

'But that was only in the nature of an imagined condition, Sublime Being, designed to test the nature of their preference,' said Wong Ho, with an incapable feeling of no confidence in the innermost seat of his self-confidence. 'This abject person did not for a breathing space contemplate or provide for so formidable an outlay.'

A shadow of inquiry appeared above the eyebrows of the Sublimest, although his refined imperturbability did not permit him to display any acute emotion.

'It is not entirely a matter of what you contemplated, merchant, but what this multitudinous and, as we now perceive, generally well-armed concourse imagined. Greatly do we fear that when the position has been explained to them, the breathing space remaining, O Wong Ho, will not be in your body. What,' continued the liberal-minded sovereign, turning to one of his attending nobles, 'what was it that happened to Nung-lo who failed to satisfy the lottery ticket-holders in somewhat similar circumstances?'

'The scorpion vat, Serenest,' replied the vassal.

'Ah,' commented the Enlightened One, 'for the moment we

thought that it was the burning sulphur plaster.'

'That was Ching Yen, who lost approval in the inlaid coffin raffle, Benign Head,' prompted the noble.

'True — there is a certain oneness in all these cases. Well, Wong Ho, we are entirely surrounded by an expectant mob, and their attitude, after much patient waiting, is tending toward a clearly-defined climax. By what means is it your intention to extricate us all from the position into which your insatiable vanity has thrust us?'

'Alas, Imperishable Majesty, I am only to have three pieces of silver and a string of brass cash in my sleeve,' confessed Wong Ho tremblingly.

'And that would not go very far — even if flung into the limits of the press,' commented the Emperor. 'We must look elsewhere for deliverance then. Kiau Sun, stand forth and try your means.'

Upon this invitation Sun appeared from the tent in which he had awaited the summons and advanced to the edge of the multitude. With no appearance of fear or concern he stood before them and, bending his energies to the great task imposed on him, he struck the hollow duck so melodiously that the note of expectancy vibrated into the furthest confines of the crowd. Then, modulating his voice in unison, Kiau Sun began to chant.

At first the narration was of times legendary, when dragons and demons moved about the earth in more palpable forms than they usually maintain to-day. A great mist

overspread the Empire and men's minds were vaporous, nor was their purpose keen. Later, deities and well-disposed forces began to exercise their powers. The mist was turned into a benevolent system of rivers and canals, and iron, rice, and the silkworm then appear. Next heroes and champions whose names have been preserved arose. They fought the giants, and an era of literature and peaceful tranquillity set in. After this there was the great invasion from the north, but the people rallied, and by means of a war lasting five years, five moons, and five days the land was freed again. This prefaced the golden age when chess was invented, printed books first made, and the examination system begun.

So far Kiau Sun had only sung of things that men know dimly through a web of time, but the melody of his voice, and the valors of the deeds he told, had held their minds. Now he began skillfully to intertwine among the narration scenes and doings that were near to all — of the coming of spring across the mountains that surround the capital, sunrise on the great lagoon, with the splash of oars and the cormorants in flight, the appearance of the blossom in the peach orchards, the festivals of boats and lanterns, their daily task and the reward each saw beyond. Finally he spoke quite definitely of the homes awaiting their return, the mulberry tree about the gate, the fire then burning on the hearth, the pictures on the walls, the ancestral tablets, and the voices calling each. And as he spoke and made an end of speaking, the people began silently to melt away

until none remained but Kiau Sun, Wong Ho, and the Emperor and his band.

'Kiau Sun,' said the discriminating N'ang Wei, 'in memory of this day the office of Chanter of Congratulatory Odes in the palace ceremonial is conferred on you, with the title of " Leaf-crowned " and the yearly allowance of five hundred taels and a jar of rice wine. And Wong Ho,' he added thoughtfully, 'shall be permitted to endow the post— also in memory of this day.'