The Mad Goose and the Tiger Forest

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Hu-lin was a little slave girl. She had been sold by her father when she was scarcely more than a baby, and had lived for five years with a number of other children in a wretched houseboat. Her cruel master treated her very badly. He made her go out upon the street, with the other girls he had bought, to beg for a living. This kind of life was especially hard for Hu-lin. She longed to play in the fields, above which the huge kites were sailing in the air like giant birds. She liked to see the crows and magpies flying hither and thither. It was great fun to watch them build their stick nests in the tall poplars. But if her master ever caught her idling her time away in this manner he beat her most cruelly and gave her nothing to eat for a whole day. In fact he was so wicked and cruel that all the children called him Black Heart.

Early one morning when Hu-lin was feeling very sad about the way she was treated, she resolved to run away, but, alas! she had not gone more than a hundred yards from the houseboat when she saw Black Heart following her. He caught her, scolded her most dreadfully, and gave her such a beating that she felt too faint to stir.

For several hours she lay on the ground without moving a muscle, moaning as if her heart would break. "Ah! if only someone would save me!" she thought, "how good I would be all the rest of my days!"

Now, not far from the river there lived an old man in a tumble-down shanty. The only companion he had was a goose that watched the gate for him at night and screamed out loudly if any stranger dared to prowl about the place. Hu-lin and this goose were close friends, and the slave girl often stopped to chat with the wise fowl as she was passing the old man's cottage. In this way she had learned that the bird's owner was a miser who kept a great deal of money hidden in his yard. Ch'ang, the goose, had an unusually long neck, and was thus able to pry into most of his master's affairs. As the fowl had no member of his own family to talk with, he told all he knew to Hu-lin.

On the very morning when Black Heart gave Hu-lin a beating for trying to run away, Ch'ang made a startling discovery. His lord and master was not really an old miser, but a young man in disguise. Ch'ang, feeling hungry, had slipped into the house at daybreak to see if any scraps had been left from the last evening's meal. The bedroom door had blown open in the night, and there lay a young man sound asleep, instead of the greybeard whom the gander called his master. Then, before his very eyes, the youth changed suddenly into his former shape and was an old man again.

In his excitement, forgetting all about his empty stomach, the terror-stricken goose rushed out into the yard to think over the mystery, but the longer he puzzled, the more strange it all seemed. Then he thought of Hu-lin, and wished that she would come by, that he might ask her opinion. He had a high regard for the slave girl's knowledge and believed that she would understand fully what had taken place.

Ch'ang went to the gate. As usual, it was locked, and there was nothing for him to do but wait for his master to rise. Two hours later the miser walked out into the yard. He seemed in good spirits, and he gave Ch'ang more to eat than usual. After taking his morning smoke on the street in front of the house, he strolled around it leaving the front gate ajar.

This was precisely what the gander had been expecting. Slipping quietly into the road, he turned towards the river where he could see the houseboats lined up at the wharf. On the sand near by lay a well-known form.

"Hu-lin," he called as he drew near, "wake up, for I have something to tell you."

"I am not asleep," she answered, turning her tear-stained face towards her friend.

"Why, what's the matter? You've been crying again. Has old Black Heart been beating you?"

"Hush! he's taking a nap in the boat. Don't let him hear you."

"It's not likely he would understand goose-talk if he did," replied Ch'ang, smiling. "However, I suppose it's always best to be on the safe side, so I'll whisper what I have to say."

Putting his bill close to her ear, he told Hu-lin of his recent discovery, and ended by asking her to tell him what it all meant.

The child forgot her own misery at hearing his wonderful story. "Are you quite sure there was not some friend of the miser's spending the night with him?" she asked gravely.

"Yes, yes, perfectly sure, for he has no friends," replied the gander. "Besides, I was in the house just before he locked up for the night, and I saw neither hair nor hide of any other person."

"Then he must be a fairy in disguise!" announced Hu-lin wisely.

"A fairy! what's that?" questioned Ch'ang, more and more excited.

"Why, you old goose, don't you know what a fairy is?" And Hu-lin laughed outright. By this time she had forgotten her own troubles and was becoming more and more amused at what she had heard. "Hark!" she said in a low tone, and speaking very slowly, "a fairy is----" Here she lowered her voice to a whisper.

The gander nodded violently as she went on with her explanation, and when she had finished, was speechless with amazement, for a few moments. "Well," he said finally, "if my master is that kind of man, suppose you slip away quietly and come with me, for, if a fairy is what you say he is, he can save you from all your troubles and make me happy for the rest of my days."

"I wonder if I dare?" she answered, looking round fearfully towards the houseboat, from the open scuttle of which came the sound of deep snoring.

"Yes, yes, of course!" coaxed Ch'ang. "He gave you such a beating that he won't be afraid of your taking to your heels again very soon."

Hurriedly they went to the miser's compound. Hu-lin's heart was beating fast as she tried to decide what to say when she should actually stand before the fairy. The gate was still partly open and the two friends entered boldly.

"Come this way," said Ch'ang. "He must be in the back-yard digging in his garden."

But when they reached the vegetable patch there was no one to be seen.

"This is very strange," whispered the gander. "I don't understand it, for I have never known him to grow tired of work so early. Surely he cannot have gone in to rest."

Led by her friend, Hu-lin entered the house on tiptoe. The door of the miser's bedroom stood wide open, and they saw that there was no one either in that room or any other room of the miserable cottage.

"Come! let's see what kind of bed he sleeps on," said Hu-lin, filled with curiosity. "I have never been in a fairy's room. It must be different from other people's rooms."

"No, no! just a plain brick bed, like all the rest," answered Ch'ang, as they crossed the threshold.

"Does he have a fire in cold weather?" asked Hu-lin, stooping to examine the small fire hole in the bricks.

"Oh, yes, a hot fire every night, and even in spring when other people have stopped having fires, the brick bed is hot every night."

"Well, that's rather strange for a miser, don't you think?" said the girl. "It costs more to keep a fire going than it does to feed a man."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Ch'ang, pruning his feathers. "I hadn't thought of that. It is strange, very. Hu-lin, you're a wise child. Where did you learn so much?"

At that moment the gander turned pale at hearing the gate slam loudly and the bar thrown into place.

"Good gracious! what ever shall we do?" asked Hu-lin. "What will he say if he finds us here?"

"No telling," said the other, trembling, "but, my dear little friend, we are certainly caught, for we can't get away without his seeing us."

"Yes, and I've already had one beating to-day! And such a hard one that I don't believe I could live through another," sighed the child, as the tears began to flow.

"There, there, little girl, don't worry! Let's hide in this dark corner behind the baskets," suggested the gander, just as the master's step was heard at the front door.

Soon the frightened companions were crouching on the ground, trying to hide. Much to their relief, however, the miser did not go into his bedroom, and they soon heard him hard at work in the garden. All that day the two remained in their hiding place, afraid to show themselves outside the door.

"I can't imagine what he would say if he found out that his watch-goose had brought a stranger into the house," said Ch'ang.

"Perhaps he would think we were trying to steal some of the money he has hidden away," she answered, laughing, for as Hu-lin became used to her cramped quarters she grew less frightened. At any rate she was not nearly so much afraid of the miser as she had thought she was. "Besides," she reflected, "he can't be so bad as old Black Heart."

Thus the day wore on and darkness fell over the land. By this time girl and goose were fast asleep in one corner of the miser's room and knew nothing more of what was happening.

When the first light of a new day filtered through the paper-covered window above the miser's bed, Hu-lin awoke with a start, and at first she could not think where she was. Ch'ang was staring at her with wide-open frightened eyes that seemed to be asking, "What can it all mean? It is more than my goose brain can think out."

For on the bed, instead of the miser, there lay a young man whose hair was a black as a raven's wing. A faint smile lightened up his handsome face, as if he was enjoying some delightful dream. A cry of wonder escaped Hu-lin's lips before she could hold it back. The sleeper's eyes opened instantly and were fixed upon her. The girl was so frightened that she could not move, and the gander trembled violently as he saw the change that had come over his master.

The young man was even more surprised than his guests, and for two minutes he was speechless. "What does this mean?" he asked, finally, looking at Ch'ang. "What are you doing in my bedroom and who is this child who seems so frightened?"

"Forgive me, kind sir, but what have you done to my master?" asked the gander, giving question for question.

"Am I not your master, you mad creature?" said the man, laughing. "You are more stupid than ever this morning."

"My master was old and ugly, but you are still young and handsome," replied Ch'ang in a tone of flattery.

"What," shouted the other, "you say I am still young?"

"Why, yes. Ask Hu-lin, if you don't believe me."

The man turned towards the little girl.

"Yes, indeed you are, sir," she replied in answer to his look. "Never have I seen a man so beautiful."

"At last! at last!" he cried, laughing joyfully, "I am free, free, free from all my troubles, but how it has come about is more than I can say!"

For a few minutes he stood in a deep study, snapping his long fingers as if trying to solve some hard problem. At last a smile lighted up his face. "Ch'ang," he asked, "what was it you called your guest when you spoke of her a minute ago?"

"I am Hu-lin," said the child simply, "Hu-lin, the slave girl."

He clapped his hands. "That's right! That's right!" he cried. "I see it all now; it is as plain as day." Then, noticing the look of wonder on her face, "It is to you that I owe my freedom from a wicked fairy, and if you like, I'll tell you the story of my misfortune."

"Pray do, kind sir," she replied eagerly. "I told Ch'ang that you were a fairy, and I should like to know if I was right."

"Well, you see," he began, "my father is a rich man who lives in a distant county. When I was a boy he gave me everything I wished. I was so humoured and petted from earliest childhood that at last I began to think there was nothing at all in the world I could not have for the asking, and nothing that I must not do if I wished to.

"My teacher often scolded me for having such notions. He told me there was a proverb: 'Men die for gain, birds perish to get food.' He thought such men were very foolish. He told me that money would go a long way towards making a man happy, but he always ended by saying that the gods were more powerful than men. He said I must always be careful not to make the evil spirits angry. Sometimes I laughed in his face, telling him that I was rich and could buy the favour of gods and fairies. The good man would shake his head, saying, 'Take care, my boy, or you will be sorry for these rash speeches.'"

"One day, after he had been giving me a long lecture of this sort, we were walking in the garden of my father's compound. I was even more daring than usual and told him that I cared nothing for the rules other people followed. 'You say,' said I, 'that this well here in my father's yard is ruled by a spirit, and that if I were to anger him by jumping over it, he would be vexed and give me trouble.' 'Yes,' said he, 'that is exactly what I said, and I repeat it. Beware, young man, beware of idle boasting and of breaking the law.' 'What do I care for a spirit that lives on my father's land?' I answered with a sneer. 'I don't believe there is a spirit in this well. If there is, it is only another of my father's slaves.'

"So saying, and before my tutor could stop me, I leaped across the mouth of the well. No sooner had I touched the ground than I felt a strange shrinking of my body. My strength left me in the twinkling of an eye, my bones shortened, my skin grew yellow and wrinkled. I looked at my pigtail and found that the hair had suddenly grown thin and white. In every way I had been changed completely into an old man.

"My teacher stared at me in amazement, and when I asked him what it all meant my voice was as shrill as that of early childhood. 'Alas! my dear pupil,' he replied, 'now you will believe what I told you. The spirit of the well is angry at your wicked conduct and has punished you. You have been told a hundred times that it is wrong to leap over a well; yet you did this very thing,' 'But is there nothing that can be done,' I cried; 'is there no way of restoring my lost youth?' He looked at me sadly and shook his head.

"When my father learned of my sad condition he was terribly upset. He did everything that could be done to find some way for me to regain my youth. He had incense burned at a dozen temples and he himself offered up prayers to various gods. I was his only son, and he could not be happy without me. At last, when everything else had been done, my worthy teacher thought of asking a fortune-teller who had become famous in the city. After inquiring about everything that had led up to my sad plight, the wise man said that the spirit of the well, as a punishment, had changed me into a miser. He said that only when I was sleeping would I be in my natural state, and even then if any one chanced to enter my room or catch a glimpse of my face, I would be at once changed back into a greybeard."

"I saw you yesterday morning," shouted the gander. "You were young and handsome, and then before my very eyes you were changed back into an old man!"

"To continue my story," said the young man, "the fortune-teller at last announced that there was only one chance for my recovery and that a very small one. If at any time, while I was in my rightful shape, that is, as you see me now, a mad goose should come in, leading a tiger-forest out of slavery, the charm would be broken, and the evil spirit would no longer have control over me. When the fortune-teller's answer was brought to my father, he gave up hope, and so did I, for no one understood the meaning of such a senseless riddle.

"That night I left my native city, resolved not to disgrace my people any longer by living with them. I came to this place, bought this house with some money my father had given me, and at once began living the life of a miser. Nothing satisfied my greed for money. Everything must be turned into cash. For five years I have been storing away money, and, at the same time, starving myself, body and soul.

"Soon after my arrival here, remembering the fortune-teller's riddle, I decided that I would keep a goose to serve as night watch-man instead of a dog. In this way I made a start at working out the riddle."

"But I am not a mad goose," hissed the gander angrily. "If it had not been for me you would still be a wrinkled miser."

"Quite right, dear Ch'ang, quite right," said the young man soothingly; "you were not mad; so I gave you the name *Ch'ang*, which means mad, and thus made a mad goose of you."

"Oh, I see," said Hu-lin and Ch'ang together. "How clever!"

"So, you see, I had part of my cure here in my back-yard all the time; but though I thought as hard as I could, I could think of no way of securing that Ch'ang should lead a tiger-forest into my room while I was sleeping. The thing seemed absurd, and I soon gave up trying to study it out. To-day by accident it has really come to pass."

"So I am the tiger-forest, am I?" laughed Hu-lin.

"Yes, indeed, you are, my dear child, a pretty little tiger-forest, for *Hu* means *tiger*, and *lin* is surely good Chinese for a *grove of trees*. Then, too, you told me you were a slave girl. Hence, Ch'ang led you out of slavery."

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Hu-lin, forgetting her own poverty, "so glad that you don't have to be a horrible old miser any longer."

Just at that moment there was a loud banging on the front gate.

"Who can be knocking in that fashion?" asked the young man in astonishment.

"Alas! it must be Black Heart, my master," said Hu-lin, beginning to cry.

"Don't be frightened," said the youth, soothingly stroking the child's head. "You have saved me, and I shall certainly do as much for you. If this Mr. Black Heart doesn't agree to a fair proposal he shall have a black eye to remember his visit by."

It did not take long for the grateful young man to buy Hu-lin's liberty, especially as he offered as much for her freedom as her master had expected to get when she was fourteen or fifteen years of age.

When Hu-lin was told of the bargain she was wild with delight. She bowed low before her new master and then, kneeling, touched her head nine times on the floor. Rising, she cried out, "Oh, how happy I am, for now I shall be yours for ever and ever and ever, and good old Ch'ang shall be my playmate."

"Yes, indeed," he assured her, "and when you are a little older I shall make you my wife. At present you will go with me to my father's house and become my little betrothed."

"And I shall never again have to beg for crusts on the street?" she asked him, her eyes full of wonder.

"No! never!" he answered, laughing, "and you need never fear another beating."

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