

Why the Dog Hates the Cat

From A Chinese Wonderbook

By Norman Hinsdale Pitman

Illustrated by Li Chu-T'ang

"What we shall eat tomorrow, I haven't the slightest idea!" said Widow Wang to her eldest son, as he started out one morning in search of work.

"Oh, the gods will provide. I'll find a few pennies somewhere," replied the boy, trying to speak cheerfully, although in his heart he also had no idea in which direction to turn.

The winter had been a hard one: extreme cold, deep snow, and violent winds. The Wang house had suffered greatly. The roof had fallen in, weighed down by heavy snow. Then a hurricane had blown a wall over, and Ming-li, the son, up all night and exposed to a bitter cold wind, had caught pneumonia. Long days of illness followed, with the spending of extra money for medicine. All their scant savings had soon melted away, and at the shop where Ming-li had once worked his place was filled by another. When at last he arose from his sick-bed he was too weak for hard labor and there seemed to be no work in the neighboring villages for him to do. Night after night he came home, trying not to be discouraged, but in his heart feeling the deep pangs of sorrow at the sight of his mother suffering for food and clothing.

"Bless his good heart!" said the poor widow after he had gone. "No mother ever had a better boy. I hope he is right in saying the gods will provide. It has been getting so much worse these past few weeks

that it seems now as if my stomach were as empty as a the ocean. Why, even the rats have deserted our cottage, and there's nothing left for poor Tabby Cat, while old Blackfoot the Dog is nearly dead from starvation."

When the old woman referred to the sorrows of her pets, her remarks were answered by a pitiful mewling and woebegone barking from the corner where the two hungry creatures were curled up together trying to keep warm.

Just then there was a loud knocking at the gate. When the widow Wang called out, "Come in!" she was surprised to see an old bald-headed monk standing in the doorway. "Sorry, but we have nothing," she went on, feeling sure the visitor had come in search of food. "We have fed on scraps these two weeks—on scraps and scrapings—and now we are living on the memories of what we used to have. Our cat was so fat then she couldn't climb to the roof. Now look at her. You can hardly see her, she's so thin. No, I'm sorry we can't help you, friend, but you see how it is."

"I didn't come for food," cried the monk, looking at her kindly, "but only to see what I could do to help you. The gods have listened long to the prayers of your devoted son. They have seen how faithfully he has served you ever since his illness, and now, when he is worn out and unable to work, they have decided to reward him. You likewise have been a good mother and shall receive the gift I am now bringing."

"What do you mean?" faltered Mrs. Wang, hardly believing her ears. "Have you come here to laugh at our troubles?"

“By no means. Here in my hand I hold a tiny golden beetle which you will find has a magic power greater than any you ever dreamed of. I will leave this precious thing with you.”

“Yes, it will sell for a good sum,” murmured the widow, looking closely at the beetle, “and will give us rice for several days. Thanks, good monk, for your kindness.”

“But you must by no means sell this golden beetle, for it has the power to fill your stomachs as long as you live.”

The widow stared in open-mouthed wonder at the monk’s surprising words.

“Yes, you must not doubt me, but listen carefully to what I tell you. Whenever you wish food, you have only to place this beetle in a kettle of boiling water, saying over and over again the names of what you want to eat. In three minutes, take off the lid, and there will be your dinner, smoking hot, and cooked more perfectly than any food you have ever eaten.”

“May I try it now?” she asked eagerly.

“As soon as I am gone.”

When the door was shut, the old woman hurriedly kindled a fire, boiled some water, and then dropped in the golden beetle, repeating these words again and again:

“Dumplings, dumplings, come to me,
I am thin as thin can be.
Dumplings, dumplings, smoking hot,
Dumplings, dumplings, fill the pot.”

Would those three minutes never pass? Could the monk have told the truth? Her old head was nearly wild with excitement as clouds of steam rose from the kettle. Off came the lid! She could wait no longer. Wonder of wonders! There before her unbelieving eyes was a pot, full to the brim of pork dumplings, dancing up and down in the bubbling water, the best, the most delicious dumplings she had ever tasted. She ate and ate till there was no room left in her greedy stomach, and then she gave the cat and the dog a feast that left them full to bursting!

“Good fortune has come at last,” whispered Blackfoot, the dog, to Tabby, the cat, as they lay down to sun themselves outside.

Mrs. Wang fairly danced for joy at the thought of her son's return and of how she would be able to feed him.

“Poor boy, how surprised he will be at our fortune—and it's all on account of his goodness to his old mother.”

When Ming-li came, with a dark cloud overhanging his head, the widow saw plainly that disappointment was written there.

“Come, come, lad!” she cried cheerily, “clear up your face and smile, for the gods have been good to us and I shall soon show you how richly we have been rewarded.” So saying, she dropped the golden beetle into the boiling water and stirred up the fire.

Thinking his mother had gone stark mad, Ming-li stared solemnly at her. Blackfoot licked his hand comfortingly, as if to say, "Cheer up, master, fortune has turned in our favor." Tabby leaped upon a bench, purring like a sawmill.

Ming-li did not have long to wait. Almost in the twinkling of an eye he heard his mother crying out,

"Sit down at the table, son, and eat these dumplings while they are smoking hot."

Could he have heard correctly? Did his ears deceive him? No, there on the table was a huge platter full of the delicious pork dumplings he liked better than anything else in all the world, except, of course, his mother.

"Eat and ask no questions," said the Widow Wang. "When you are satisfied I will tell you everything."

Very soon the young man's chopsticks were twinkling like a little star in the song. He ate long and happily, while his good mother watched him, her heart overflowing with joy at seeing him at last able to satisfy his hunger. But still the old woman could hardly wait for him to finish, she was so anxious to tell him her wonderful secret.

"Here, son!" she cried at last, as he began to pause between mouthfuls, "look at my treasure!" And she held out to him the golden beetle. "This little thing comes with a secret worth thousands to us."

Ming-li fingered the trinket idly, still doubting his senses, and waiting impatiently for the secret of his delicious dinner. "But, mother, what has this beetle to do with the dumplings, these wonderful pork dumplings, the finest I ever ate?"

"Beetle indeed! Listen and you shall hear a tale that will open your eyes."

She then told him what had happened, and ended by setting all of the left-over dumplings upon the floor for Blackfoot and Tabby, a thing her son had never seen her do before, for they had been miserably poor and had had to save every scrap for the next meal.

Now began a long period of perfect happiness. Mother, son, dog and cat—all enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content. All manner of new foods such as they had never tasted were called forth from the pot by the wonderful little beetle. Bird-nest soup, shark's fins, and a hundred other delicacies were theirs for the asking, and soon Ming-li regained all his strength, but, I fear, at the same time grew somewhat lazy, for it was no longer necessary for him to work. As for the two animals, they became fat and sleek and their hair grew long and glossy.

But alas! The little family became so proud of their good fortune that they began to ask friends and relatives to dinner in order to show off their good meals. One day a Mr. and Mrs. Chu came from a distant village. They were much surprised at seeing the high style in which the Wangs lived. They had expected a beggar's meal, but went away with full stomachs.

“It's the best stuff I ever ate,” said Mr. Chu, as they entered their own tumble-down house.

“Yes, and I know where it came from,” exclaimed his wife. “I saw Widow Wang take a little gold toy out of the pot and hide it in a cupboard. It must be some sort of charm, for I heard her mumbling to herself about pork and dumplings just as she was stirring up the fire.”

“A charm, eh? Why is it that other people have all the luck? It looks as if we were doomed forever to be poor.”

“Why not borrow Mrs. Wang's charm for a few days until we can add a little meat to our own bones? Of course, we'll return it sooner or later.”

“Doubtless they keep very close watch over it. When would you find them away from home, now that they don't have to work any more? As their house only contains one room, and that no bigger than ours, it would be difficult to borrow this golden trinket.”

“Luck is surely with us,” cried Mrs. Chu, clapping her hands. “The Wangs are going out to the fair today. I overheard Mrs. Wang tell her son that he must not forget. I will slip back then and borrow the little charm from the box in which she hid it.”

“Aren't you afraid of Blackfoot?”

“Pooh! he's so fat he can do nothing but roll. If the widow comes back suddenly, I'll tell her I came to look for my big hair-pin, that I lost it while I was at dinner.”

“All right, go ahead, only of course we must remember we're borrowing the thing, not stealing it, for the Wangs have always been good friends to us, and then, too, we have just dined with them.”

So skillfully did this crafty woman carry out her plans that within an hour she was back in her own house, happily showing the beetle to her husband. Not a soul had seen her enter the Wang house. The dog had made no noise, and the cat had only blinked her surprise at seeing a stranger and had gone to sleep again on the floor.

Great was the yelling and weeping when, on returning from the fair, hungry for a hot meal, the widow found her treasure missing. She went back to the little box in the cupboard ten times before she could believe it was empty, and the room looked as if a cyclone had struck it, so long and carefully did the mother and son hunt for the lost beetle.

Then came days of hunger that were all the harder to bear since the recent time of good food. Oh, if they had only not got used to such delicious food! How hard it was to go back to scraps and scrapings!

But if the widow and her son were sad over the loss of the good meals, the two pets were even more so. They were reduced to hunger and had to go out every day to the streets in search of stray bones and garbage that decent dogs and cats turned up their noses at.

One day, after this period of hunger had been going on for some time, Tabby began suddenly to jump about in great excitement.

“Whatever is the matter with you?” growled Blackfoot. “Are you mad from hunger, or have you caught another flea?”

“I was just thinking, and now I know the cause of all our trouble.”

“Do you indeed?” asked Blackfoot, surprised.

“Yes, I do indeed. Are you willing to help me bring good fortune back to our family?”

“Of course I am. Don't be silly,” barked the dog, wagging his tail joyfully at the thought of another good dinner.

“All right. Here is the plan. There has been a thief in the house who has stolen the widow's golden beetle. You remember all our big dinners that came from the pot? Well, every day I saw the widow take a little golden beetle out of the black box and put it into the pot. One day she held it up before me, saying, 'Look, kitty, there is the cause of all our happiness. Don't you wish it was yours?' Then she laughed and put it back into the box that stays in the cupboard.”

“Is that true?” questioned Blackfoot. “Why didn't you say something about it before?”

“You remember the day Mr. and Mrs. Chu were here, and how Mrs. Chu returned in the afternoon after the widow and Ming-li had gone to the fair? I saw her, out of the tail of my eye, go to that very black box and take out the golden beetle. I thought it curious, but never dreamed she was a thief. I was wrong! She took the beetle, and if I am not mistaken, she and her husband are now enjoying the feasts that belong to us.”

“What do you suggest?” said Blackfoot. “I am with you through thick and thin.”

“Let's go to the Chu house and make off with the beetle.”

“I wish I were a cat!” moaned Blackfoot. “If we go there I couldn't get inside, they will keep their gates well locked. If I were like you I could scale the wall. It is the first time in all my life I ever envied a cat.”

“We will go together,” continued the cat. “I will ride on your back when we are fording the river, and you can protect me from strange animals. When we get to the Chu house, I will climb over the wall and manage the rest of the business myself. Only you must wait outside to help me to get home with the prize.”

No sooner arranged than done. The companions set out that very night on their adventure. They crossed the river as the cat had suggested, and Blackfoot really enjoyed the swim, for, as he said, it took him back to his puppyhood, while the cat did not get a single drop of water on her face. It was midnight when they reached the Chu house.

“Just wait till I return,” purred Tabby in Blackfoot's ear.

With a mighty spring she reached the top of the mud wall, and then jumped down to the inside court. Once inside, Tabby made straight for the kitchen. Slinking along the wall in a shadow, she scanned for any glint of gold. There! A crack between two bricks glowed oddly. Tabby pushed on the loose brick, it clattered noisily to the floor and she froze. Silence. Peering into the space where the brick had been, Tabby caught site of the golden beetle.

Two minutes later, she was back on the other side of the wall, beside Blackfoot, the golden beetle in her mouth.

The two adventurers reached the river just as the sun was rising above the eastern hills. When they reached the cottage the door was shut, the Widow Wang and Ming-li still sleeping a fitful, hungry sleep.

“They have given up,” whispered the cat, “I will go inside and make them happy.”

So saying, she sprang lightly through the window, which, alas! was too small and too far from the ground for the faithful dog to enter.

“Here I am, Mrs. Wang,” meowed Tabby, brushing against the sleeping widow “and here is the treasure you are weeping for. I have rescued it and brought it back to you.”

The widow, wild with joy at sight of the beetle, seized the cat in her scrawny arms and hugged Tabby tightly to her bosom.

“Breakfast, son, breakfast! Wake up! Fortune has come again. We are saved from starvation!”

Soon a steaming hot meal was ready, and you may well imagine how the old woman and her son, heaping praises upon Tabby, filled the cat’s platter with good things, but never a word did they say of the faithful dog, Blackfoot, who remained outside sniffing the fragrant odors and waiting in sad wonder, for all this time the cunning cat had said nothing of Blackfoot's part in the rescue of the golden beetle.

At last, when breakfast was over, slipping away from the others, Tabby jumped out through the window.

“Oh, my dear Blackfoot,” she began laughingly, “you should have been inside to see what a feast they gave me! The widow was so delighted at my bringing back her treasure that she could not give me enough to eat, nor say enough kind things about me. Too bad, old fellow, that you are hungry. You'd better run out into the street and hunt up a bone.”

Maddened by the trick of his companion, the enraged dog sprang after the cat who took off like lightning, laughing down the alley.

Rushing out into the street, Blackfoot barked the entire story of Tabby’s treachery to other dogs, at the same time advising that all self-respecting dogs should from that time onwards should never befriend a cat.

And that is why the descendants of old Blackfoot, whether in China or in the countries of the West, have waged continual war upon the children and grandchildren of Tabby.