

FOO AND CHING

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THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY





I

IN THE LAND OF THE GORGES

THOUGH SHE WAS ONLY A LITTLE GIRL, Lin Ching knelt on the bank of the deep, rushing Yangtze River, washing some clothes.

The river here was full of rapids and went boiling and dashing past so that it nearly tore the shabby blue garments right out of her hands. She had to hold them very tightly and also be very careful not to slip in herself. She could see great jagged rocks sticking up every here and there in the water, like the jaws of dragons waiting to snatch hungrily at anything which might fall within their reach. Ching

shuddered at the idea and was glad she didn't have to wash clothes very often. Only once in a while did the few poor garments seem actually too dirty to be worn any longer, and, to tell the truth, she wasn't getting them very clean even now. The river was too rough and too cold, for it was filled with melted snow from the mountains. She didn't have any soap either.

By her side were two big wooden buckets on a bamboo pole. When she finished the washing, Ching would also have to carry them, full of water, way up the steep hillside to a tiny hut. The hut was made of mud with a thatched roof and could just be seen around the corner of some jagged, frowning crags.

It took nearly an hour for anyone to climb up there from the river, yet every day all the drinking water and even some water for the vegetables had to be carried up, most of it across Ching's thin little shoulders.

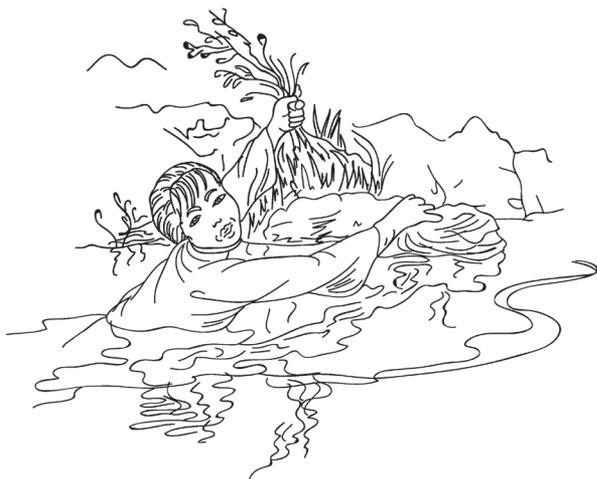
Ching sighed as she thought of it, for today she felt especially tired. She had had nothing to eat since breakfast, and then only a handful of soybeans and a small piece of raw cabbage.

Now it was getting late. The sun had already set behind the high walls of the Yangtze River gorge, and it was full of mysterious mists and shadows. Ching was frightened.

She hastily wrung out the last blue coat and trousers, laying them on the bank, and started to fill her buckets.

She paused, for there was something floating down the river toward her—a black object quite near the bank, which looked like a piece of wood. She strained her eyes to see whether, after all, it were only a dead animal such as sometimes was washed into the rapids, or whether it were really something valuable. Wood was much prized, because in this barren part of China, hardly anything would grow, and trees were very scarce.

It proved to be a piece of driftwood, probably broken from some wreck of a boat. The little girl thought how nice a fire it would make by which to rest that night and to cook some soybeans or a handful of rice for dinner. She must try to get it. So, putting down her buckets, Ching leaned eagerly over the bank and made a grab at it as it passed by. Her feet slipped, and she went splashing into the cold current.



Ching screamed and grabbed at some rocks and weeds which jutted out beside her. She could feel the furious water tugging and pulling at her body and knew she could hold on for only a few minutes. She thought of the river god and called loudly to him to save her, for she couldn't scramble up again by herself.

Just as she felt she couldn't hold on another moment, someone grabbed her arms and pulled her back on shore. Dripping and shivering, she turned around and saw her brother Lin Foo standing there.

"Oh, Foo, the river god must have sent you. In another minute, I would have drowned," she said.

“I was bringing down a sack of soybeans,” answered the thin Chinese boy, “but when I saw you, I let it go, and it fell into the river. See there.” He pointed toward a large brown object which rested a moment against some jagged rocks and then was washed away and sank from sight.

“Oh dear, how the woman will be upset at you losing them!” sighed the shivering Lin Ching.

“I know it,” answered the boy. “For now there will be no cash and nothing to eat for many days. But just the same, I’m glad it isn’t you instead of the bag of beans out there in the terrible river.” He shrugged his shoulders and sat down a safe distance from the edge.

Ching sat down beside him. The night air was chilly, and she was getting very cold.

“How you are shivering!” said the boy. “And your teeth are knocking together. Here, put this on awhile.”

He took off his own blue cotton jacket and put it around her shoulders, hugging himself to keep warm. For now that his chest and shoulders were bare, he was cold too. But a boy should be brave, and so he said nothing about it.



“I dare not go home without the beans,” he said after a while. “When you are more rested, you must go, but pretend you have not seen me.”

“Perhaps I can steal an extra handful of something for your supper,” said his sister. “How often the woman is unkind to us since her husband died! He was more kind to us.”

“Yes, that is true,” answered the boy.

They both sat still, leaning against each other to keep warmer and thinking of the man. He was only a tracker, who helped to haul junks up the river past the rapids. Sailing ships could not go against the rapids by themselves. These trackers wore a sort of harness and pulled on the mighty ropes with all their strength, bending nearly to the ground. They had to work as hard as animals, all for a few “cash,” one of which is worth about one-fifth of a cent in value. The poor trackers had hardly anything to eat, and yet this man had been kind enough to the children, until one day he fell into the river and was drowned. Since then, the woman and the two children had struggled to grow a few beans and to raise a few vegetables for themselves to eat.

“How long have we lived here in the Black Dragon Gorge?” Ching now asked her brother.

“Since the year of the Emperor Tung-Che,” answered Foo, counting five on his fingers.

The Chinese people reckon their years from the time a certain emperor began to reign, and Foo didn’t even know that his great big country was now no longer an empire but a republic with a president at its head.

These children dressed much alike in the blue jackets and trousers of the Chinese laboring class. In the evening light, they looked alike, but the boy was a head taller than his sister. He was older, so he could remember things which had happened as much as five years ago, when she had been only

a baby. Ching liked to listen to his stories, when they had any time to sit still.

“Take back your coat now; I am dry,” she said. “And Foo, tell me about our honorable father’s home before we came to live with the poor tracker and his wife.”

“I cannot remember much of those better days,” answered Foo, “but I know we were never hungry, and we wore warm clothes. There was a garden with flowers and birds that sang. Already I had learned some written characters such as I draw in the dust to show you. I also had learned some manners, though we do not have any time for them here in this hard land.

“I was named Lin Foo and you Lin Ching because our honorable family name is Lin. There was a lady mother who had dainty little bound feet, smaller than my hands were then, when I was five years old.

“Our honorable father was a rich sea captain, and once, returning from a journey, he took us and the lady mother on his junk. It was a long journey, and I was very proud to walk the decks with my father. You, of course, were too young.

“But there came the terrible storm that wrecked our junk, here in these very rapids.”

He paused, shuddering, and both children thought about the many storms they had seen. How the lightning would blaze and the thunder crash and echo from wall to wall down the river gorges. How the winds would tear and whip above the stormy waters while the cold rain poured down. They were glad it was not stormy this night, though by now it was dark. They could just see the gleam of the white foam in the starlight and the outlines of the little sheds where the trackers kept their heavy, coiled ropes for pulling the junks upriver.

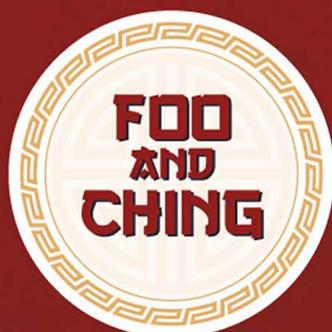
As Foo didn’t go on speaking, Ching finished the story for herself.

“So our honorable father’s junk was wrecked, and everybody drowned but you and me, who were stranded on some rocks, clinging to a bale of silk. But Foo, why do you suppose the poor tracker took us to his home when he found us there?”

“I know not,” answered her brother. “Perhaps he too once belonged to the clan of Lin and felt bound to take care of his relatives. Though he was not educated, he was good, and when I am rich, I shall burn incense to him as well as to my honorable father himself.”

“But of course we shall never be rich,” said Ching gloomily. “And the woman is not good. Since her husband went to his ancestors, she is unkind to us. I think she would be glad enough if one of us were gone. One child would be enough to carry loads and work for her. How hungry I am, Foo, and yet I suppose we do not dare to go back to her now. What shall we do, Foo?”





As young orphans living in a remote Chinese village, Ching and her brother, Foo, escape their cruel caretaker and embark on a perilous journey of survival. When the children are taken into a luxurious home by their father's cousin, they hope for a new beginning. While they both find themselves surrounded by kindness, Ching does not share the same opportunities as her brother. Then, when the honorable grandmother becomes ill, Ching's sweet disposition, loving heart, and eagerness to care for Grandmother A-Mah may prove to be the very qualities that help her win the respect of her new family.

This delightful story, set in mid-1800s China, sweeps readers along on a memorable journey through geography, culture, tradition, kindness, and the bonds of kinship.



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