PU SONGLING

STRANGE TALES FROM MAKE-DO STUDIO

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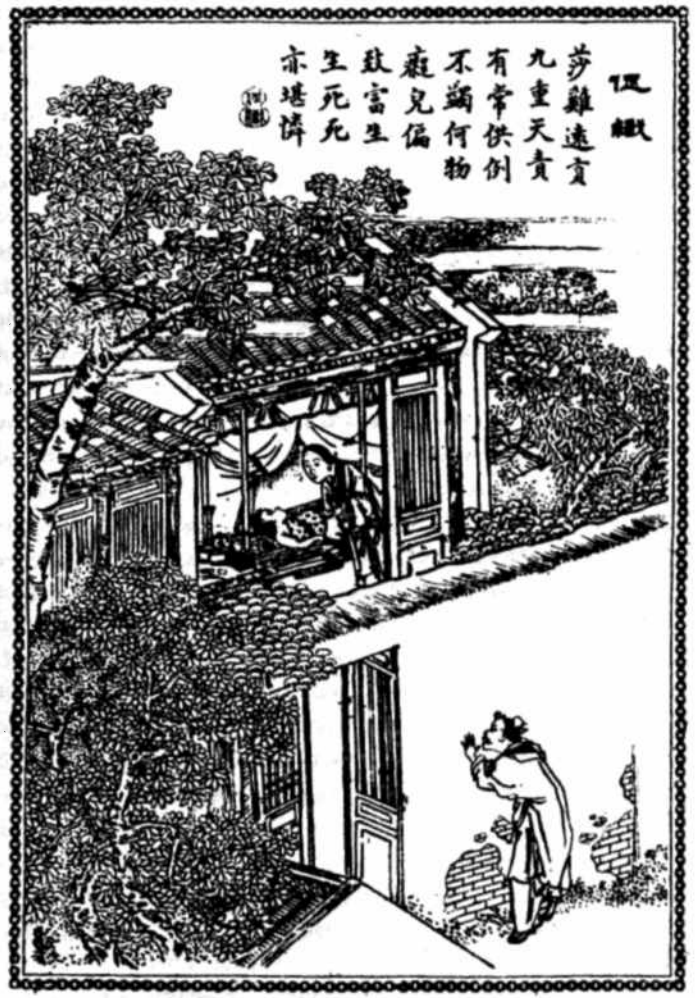
19. THE CRICKET

DURING the Xuande reign period (1426-1435) of the Ming dynasty cricket keeping was a popular amusement in the palace. The insects were levied annually from the populace. Live crickets were not originally a Shaanxi product until a magistrate in Huayin county who was anxious to win favor with his superiors presented one, which was tried in the ring and found to be an outstanding fighter. From then on Huayin County was charged with providing crickets to the court regularly. The magistrate delegated the responsibility to the headman in each ward. Young idlers in the marketplace kept the best of them in cages, forcing prices up by cornering the market. Cunning ward administrators used this as an excuse to impose a head tax on the peasants. For every cricket that was requisitioned, several families were driven into bankruptcy.

In the district there was a man named Cheng Ming, a long unsuccessful candidate for the Bachelor of Letters dagree. The crafty ward administrator, seeing that Cheng was impractical and slow of speech, recommended him for the position of headman. Cheng made numerous futile attempts to free himself from the obligations of this office. Before a year had passed his meager resources were used up. Then came the cricket levy. Cheng did not dare collect money from the households, nor could he fulfil the duty out of his own funds. He was so despondent he wanted to



kill himself.

"What good would killing yourself do?" said his wife. "It would be better to look for a cricket yourself. There is a slight chance you might find one."

This made sense to Cheng. He went out in the mornings and returned at nightfall, bamboo pail and wire cage in hand, poking under stones and opening burrows amid crumbling walls and thick growths of grass. There was nothing he did not try, but it was no use. The few that he did manage to catch were too puny to fit the regulations. The magistrate's deadline was rigorously enforced, and he was given a total of a hundred strokes with a cane over a period of ten days. Blood and puss oozed from his buttocks and, what was worse, he was unable to go looking for the insects at all. He tossed and turned on his bed, his mind filled with thoughts of suicide.

It was then that a hunchbacked shamaness who performed divinations with the help of a spirit-familiar came to the village. Cheng's wife scraped up a sum of money and went to call on her. Smartly dressed young women and white-haired old ladies were milling around the door. Inside the house was a curtained-off sanctum, with an altar standing outside the curtain. Petitioners lit incense in the censer and kowtowed twice, while the shamaness stood to one side looking off into space and pronouncing an invocation for them, her lips contorted with unintelligible mutterings. Everyone stood stiffly listening until shortly a piece of paper, bearing a message that dealt with the petitioner's troubles, was thrown out from within the curtain. The messages were never off by a hair.

Cheng's wife placed her money on the table, lit incense, and kowtowed like those before. After the time it takes to eat a meal passed by, the curtain moved and a slip of paper

was tossed out onto the ground. Picking it up, she saw not words but a drawing depicting a group of buildings, apparently those of a monastery. Behind it at the foot of a hill was a jumble of odd-looking boulders. There, at the edge of a dense bramble thicket, crouched a shiny black cricket. Beside it was a toad that seemed to be on the point of leaping. She spread the drawing out and pored over it, unable to make out its meaning. Still the cricket was just what she had been looking for. She folded the paper up, tucked it away and took it back to show Cheng who, after much reflection, wondered if the picture were not telling him where to hunt for a cricket. Careful scrutiny of the scene in the drawing revealed a close resemblance to the Great Buddha Abbey east of the village.

Cheng dragged himself out of bed, propped himself up with a cane and proceeded, drawing in hand, to the rear of the monastery. The overgrown ruins of an ancient tomb stood before him. Following the edge of the tomb, he saw boulders squatting one on top of the other like fish scales, precisely as in the drawing. He walked slowly through a jungle of weeds, cocking his head to catch the slightest sound and looking for all the world as if he were searching for a needle or a mustard seed. He could no longer maintain the intentness of eyes, ears and mind, but he had not yet seen or heard a cricket. He was still groping about, when suddenly to his great amazement a wart-headed toad leapt from underfoot. He stayed close behind it as it ducked into a dense growth of grass. He stepped gingerly into the grass, spreading the blades apart with his hands to get a better look. There, crouching at the base of a bramble-bush was an insect. He hurriedly grabbed for it, but it ducked into a hole in the stones. He poked at it with a sharp blade of grass, but it would not come out. Finally, by pouring

water from his bucket into the hole, he was able to flush the robust-looking cricket out. He gave chase and caught it. A closer look showed it to have a thick torso, a long tail, a blue-green neck and metallic wings. Great was Cheng's joy as he put it in the cage and returned home.

The whole family rejoiced as if he had found a treasure more precious than the legendary piece of jade to the worth of fifteen cities.[1] They put it in a basin and nourished it on crab meat and chestnuts, going to every extreme to give it the best of care. They planned to keep it until the deadline, when Cheng would use it to discharge his official duty.

But one day Cheng's nine-year-old son, seeing that his father was out, furtively lifted the lid off the basin. The cricket hopped straight out, so quickly that the boy could not grab it. He jumped and caught it in his hand, breaking off a leg and cracking its abdomen. In a few short moments it was dead. The terrified boy ran crying to tell his mother. Her face paled to the hue of ashes at what she heard.

"A bad seed, that's what you are!" she cursed him loudly, "Your day of doom will not be long now! When your father comes home he'll settle accounts with you." The boy ran out sniveling. Cheng soon returned. When his wife told him what had happened, it was as if a heap of freezing snow had been dumped on his head. He called angrily for his son but the boy was nowhere to be seen. Soon afterwards, they found his body in a well. Cheng's rage turned to sorrow. Stricken half-dead with grief, he struck his head on the ground and cried out to heaven. Husband and wife went inside and each turned their sobbing faces toward separate corners. No cooking fire was lit in their thatched hut that night. They had come to their wit's end and could

[1] See "The Rákṣasas and the Ocean Bazaar," Note 4.

only stare dumbly at one another. As the day drew to an end, they prepared to wrap their son in a grass mat for burial. Touching him, they found that he was now breathing haltingly. Joyfully they placed him on the bed. In the middle of the night he regained consciousness, which relieved his parents somewhat, but his breath came in gasps and he had the vacant look of a sleepwalker. Looking at the empty cricket cage was enough to rob them of breath and make their voices die in their throats, but they dared not question their son again. Their eyes did not close for the whole night. When the sun in the east began its course through the heavens they lay down stiffly, brooding sleeplessly.

Suddenly there was a chirping outside their door. They got up in amazement to observe: there was the cricket looking as sound as ever. Jumping for joy, they ran to catch it, but it gave a chirp and hopped rapidly away. Cheng covered it with a cupped hand, but he seemed to have grasped nothing but thin air. As soon as he lifted his hand the cricket leapt swiftly out from under it. He followed it closely, but lost it when it rounded the corner of a wall. As he walked about distractedly, looking all around him, he saw a cricket crouching on the wall. A careful look showed that it was short, small and reddish-black in color —certainly not the one he had been chasing. It was worthless to him because of its small size. He went on walking aimlessly and staring in all directions for the one he had been chasing. All of a sudden the little cricket jumped off the wall and landed on the side of his robe. It was built like a mole cricket, with finely veined wings, a square head and long neck. It impressed him as a good specimen, so he was glad to keep it. His plan was to present it at the yamen, but the thought that it might not meet the

magistrate's expectations made him shudder, so he decided to observe how it would perform in a fight.

A young man known as a busybody in the village was keeping a cricket which he had named Crabshell Blue. He matched it daily with the crickets of other young men, and it was always emerged victorious. He was holding onto it until he could turn a nice profit, but nobody would pay the high price he asked. One day this young man went to Cheng's house for a visit. Seeing the cricket Cheng was keeping, he had to stifle a laugh with his hand. He took out his cricket and put it into the cage. Cheng was discomfited at the sight of its huge build. He dared not pick up the gauntlet, but the young man insisted. It occurred to Cheng that keeping an inferior specimen would be useless anyway, and that he might as well set his cricket against the other for a laugh. Both insects were placed in a fighting basin. The small one crouched motionless, looking as foolish as a wooden chicken.[1] The young man guffawed once more as he used a boar bristle to poke at the cricket's antennae. Still it did not move, provoking the young man into another burst of laughter. He prodded it repeatedly. The insect exploded with rage and ran at its opponent. They attacked one another with flying leaps, rousing themselves to battle with defiant chirps. In an instant the small cricket jumped up, its antennae and tail stiffly erect, and bit down on its opponent's neck. The frightened young man pulled them apart and put an end to the fight. The small cricket drew itself up and chirped proudly, as if it were reporting victory to its master.

Cheng was overjoyed. As he and his guests were admiring the winner, a chicken caught sight of it, ran over and delivered a peck at the small cricket. Cheng stood there numb with dread and cried out in alarm. Luckily the chicken's beak had missed its mark; the cricket leaped a foot and some inches away. The chicken lunged forward and bore down upon it. Before Cheng could come to its rescue, the insect was under the chicken's claws; he turned pale and stamped his feet helplessly. But in the next moment he saw the chicken stretching its neck and fluttering about. Much to his amazed delight upon closer inspection, he found the cricket hanging tenaciously onto the fowl's comb. He picked it up, put it in its cage and presented it to the magistrate the next day.

The magistrate berated Cheng angrily for bringing such a puny cricket, nor was he convinced by Cheng's account of the cricket's extraordinary prowess. The cricket was tried in the ring against others of its kind: all were vanquished. When it was tried against a chicken the outcome confirmed Cheng's story. The magistrate thereupon rewarded him and presented the cricket to the provincial governor. The governor, greatly delighted, presented it to the emperor in a golden cage along with a memorial detailing its abilities.

After the champion was taken into the palace, all sorts of unusual crickets, such as "butterflies," "mantises," "oily beaters" and "silky green foreheads" were tried against it, but none could get the better of it. When it heard the music of lutes and zithers it hopped to the beat, which made people marvel at it all the more. The emperor was so pleased that he called for the provincial governor and gave him thoroughbred horses and satins for clothing. The governor did not forget the source of his good fortune: before long word was going around that the magistrate was an "outstanding" official. The delighted magistrate released

[1] A fable in the *Zhuang-zi*, a work of the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.), describes a superb gamecock as having such a placid exterior that it seemed to be made of wood.

Cheng from his duties as headman and instructed the civil examiner to grant him admission to the district academy.

A little more than a year later Cheng's son regained his faculties, claiming that he had been transformed into an agile, combative cricket and that today his soul had finally re-entered his body. The provincial governor rewarded Cheng generously. Within a few years Cheng possessed 1,500 acres of fields; pavilions and storied buildings in such number that thousands of rafters had been used to roof them over; and sheep and horses numbering in the hundreds. The furs he wore and the horses he rode when he went out could not have been equalled by an aristocratic family.

The Chronicler of the Tales comments: "The emperor may use something once on a whim and give it no more thought, but for the people who carry out his wishes it becomes a fixed article of tribute. With the greed of officials and the cruelty of administrators on top of this, there is no end to hardships which make peasants give up their wives and sell their children. Thus every time the emperor takes a step the lives of the people are affected. There is no room for carelessness. Cheng's case was unique: after being reduced to poverty by the depradations of corrupt officials, a cricket brought him wealth enough to go about flaunting furs and fine horses. Back in the days when he was beaten for failing to fulfill his duties as headman, how could he have foreseen that such a fortune was in store for him? Heaven made the provincial governor and magistrate enjoy the benefits of the cricket's favor as a means of rewarding one man's honesty. When the Taoist master in the old story perfected the elixir and rose to heaven, immortality redounded even to his dogs and chickens. There is much truth in this!"

20. SISTERS SWITCH PLACES

MASTER Mao,[1] the prime minister from Ye county, was born of a humble family. His father often tended cows for other people. At one time the Zhangs, a noble family of the district, had a new family gravesite south of East Mountain. Someone passing by the grounds heard a scolding voice from inside the grave say, "Clear out now, all of you. Don't keep defiling a nobleman's house!" Zhang learned of this and did not give it much credence, but then he had recurring dreams of a voice that warned, "Your family cemetery was intended to be Master Mao's graveyard. Why do you keep using it?" After this the Zhang family's fortunes declined. A retainer urged them to move the body to a more auspicious site. Zhang complied with his suggestion and had the body reburied.

One day the father of the future prime minister was tending cows beside the Zhangs' vacant gravesite when he was caught in a sudden rain and took shelter in the empty vault. Soon the rain became a steady downpour. The crashing torrent of a flash flood poured into the vault and drowned the unfortunate man. The prime minister was still a child at the time. His mother called on Zhang and begged for a few feet of ground in which to bury the boy's father. Zhang was greatly amazed to learn that their family

[1] Mao Ji, first on the pass hit of provincial graduates under the reign of the Ming Emperor Xianzong (1465-1487).