

Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1952

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"He eats the wind; he chews the sunrise."



THERE was a woman of Hangchow who had a singular adventure. Her name was Lin Mie. Some would have considered her poor but she believed she

was rich, glorying in the love of her husband Lin Wong. She had been married ten years but she was still childless. In China

Heading by Joseph Eberle

this is considered tragedy indeed. Her husband had longed for a son but he had not taken a secondary wife. Not always does a woman of China live little better than a slave existence, under the thumb of her mother-in-law. On the contrary, history records many instances of women completely dominating men, for example the love of the King of Wu for Hsi Shih, and Ming Huang's adoration of Yang Kwei-fei who permitted herself to be hanged to save her Emperor. This happened twelve hundred years ago but it is still lamented by poets as "the everlasting wrong." Usually the love which a Chinese has for his wife is something precious which he keeps within the walls of his garden. Truly written are the words, "A woman's hair draws more than a team of oxen."

One day when Lin Mie had been working long hours in the fields, she stopped for a moment to rest beneath a willow tree. A misty rain was falling, the soft, gentle rain of China that is unlike any other rain the world over. The air was fragrantly cool, and very silent, as though all nature were poised on tip-toe. Lin Mie was so very tired. Her arms ached and she folded them in her lap. Whether she slept or not she did not know but suddenly she realized that she was holding a sleeping child in her arms, a very little boy, about three years old. His hair was jet black, his nose was well-formed, his complexion was so pale he might not have been a Chinese at all. He was so handsome, like the child about whom she had always dreamed. Then he opened his eyes, they were blue, as blue as the early evening sky. This frightened her, for a person with blue eyes in China is usually blind. The child smiled and the radiance of his smile put the sun to shame.

"Mama," he said, and snuggled up to her.

"Who are you, little one?" she asked gently.

"I'm your boy," said he, "and you haven't given me a name. Besides I'm hungry. I haven't had morning rice."

So she took him into the house and cooked rice for him. As he ate she clasped her hands on the table before her. Was it only her

imagination? Her hands were pale and delicately beautiful, not a trace of toil did they show. Even the nails were pointed and unbroken.

The boy said, "The rice is good."

"Rice is life," she said, "and life is good."

They named the boy Lin Mu, or rather the mother did, for Lin Wong showed a strange reluctance to call the boy his son, though he was happy that the little one had chosen to live with them. The name was very appropriate for Mu meant tree and by coincidence the family name, Lin, meant forest. And the mother thought, "My boy is indeed like a young tree, slim and strong enough to stand against a typhoon." Her happiness was complete, her eyes were large with wonder that such good fortune had befallen her.

One night as she made ready for sleep, there was a gorgeous bed where the old mattress had formerly been on the bare floor. And the sheets were of silk, petal soft. On the teakwood chair beside the bed was a sleeping-robe of caressive softness. She undressed and put on the silk robe and slipped between the fragrant sheets. She was so happy she wondered if this were all a dream and she would soon awaken to stern reality. Then her little boy crept into her arms, "Let me stay with you until papa comes," he whispered.

LIN WONG sat smoking before the door until his pipe was exhausted. He retired in the dark. When his body came in contact with the silken sheets, he disliked them immensely, for they were as slippery, he thought, as snake's skin. He was irked by the softness of the bed. After a sleepless hour, he tried the floor and slept at once.

During the following days, the mother seemed to grow younger and slenderer. But little change was to be noticed in the father, Lin Wong.

"How I wish that I could have a water-buffalo to do my plowing," he said. He thought seldom of his bodily comfort but constantly of his fields of millet, rice and turnips. They were a source of pleasure to him, as important as his heart or his lungs.

Toward noon little Mu said to his father, "Here is a unicorn. He can help you plow better than a water-buffalo. See, he is very gentle."

Lin Wong gazed astounded at the unicorn. He remembered all the mythical tales he had heard about that marvelous beast, that it springs from the Central Regions; that it has superior integrity and appears to virtuous people; that the mid-part of its cry is like a monastery bell; that it is the horned beast *par excellence*.

The unicorn had a white horselike body, covered with scales and a crested back; its hoofs were cloven. It had a long, bushy tail. Its head was akin to that of a dragon. From the center of its forehead grew a single horn. Despite its ferocious appearance, it was as docile as a small dog, following little Lin Mu wherever he walked.

In the days that followed the unicorn proved to be as good at drawing a plow as any water-buffalo. The gentleness of the huge animal was beyond belief. Sometimes Lin Wong wondered how it existed, for he never saw it eating or drinking, yet his son assured him the animal wanted nothing.

"He eats the wind," he said. "He chews the sunrise."

News of the presence of the unicorn on the farm of Lin Wong spread throughout the province, and though he did not know it Lin Wong had become famous. For does not the unicorn appear only to virtuous monarchs. Perhaps Lin Wong was a prince in disguise. Fabulous were the stories circulated about him. And at last they came to the ears of a notorious bandit, Loo Tak, who called himself a war lord. He was angered. Why should a simple farmer become so renowned? What had he done to merit it? Far better for him, Loo Tak, to own the unicorn. What man in the province was stronger than he? Although he was only of medium height, he had a giant's strength because he had four huge bodyguards. Now Loo Tak was no more than a festering blight on the face of China. Never had he owned anything that he did not first steal. Force, power, corruption were his gods. He lived ruthlessly, caring not how

many people he ruined or despoiled. He had never known the devotion of a good woman. He had great wealth when applied to money and jewels and material things, but mentally he was a beggar. By everyone he was hated but feared. Not even his own bodyguard trusted him. However, he believed he was invincible. What he wanted he took, nor did he hesitate to slay. What idiot would stand up against him? So he decided that he would capture the unicorn. So sure was he of success that he took with him only one bodyguard.

SO HE went to the farm of Lin Wong. Nobody stood in his way but a very little boy. He stooped to cuff the boy and fell flat on his face. That was ignominy indeed. He couldn't understand it. What had happened? He was angered beyond words and his anger was against the child who was smiling. Again he lunged with his fist. This time he hit the earth with such force he was breathless. He was losing face before his bodyguard. Suddenly he decided to swallow his anger for now the unicorn was coming gently toward him. The little boy slowly approached the animal and stood so close that his body touched the animal.

The bandit smiled. His mission would be as easy as seizing a playful kitten. Despite its size the unicorn was absolutely docile. Loo Tak was without fear as he attempted to grasp the fantastic white animal. It was the last thing he ever did, for the unicorn impaled him on its horn and then tossed him so high that most of his bones were broken as he crashed to the earth. The unicorn stamped him into the soil until not a trace of the mighty war lord remained. Then the boy and the unicorn went back into the field again. The bodyguard fled. He had learned a bitter lesson. It is unwise to attempt to steal a unicorn.

Neither Lin Wong nor his wife were aware of the calamity that had overtaken the bandit who had believed himself to be invincible. Too bad that he did not know that even the tiger and the leopard are perpetually anxious lest they encounter a unicorn.

Now in Hangchow, also, lived the Mandarin Lim, an army general and therefore a Mandarin of the First Rank. On his conical-shaped official hat was an opaque ruby and coral button, an inch in diameter, set on the center of his hat like a knob. His girdle clasp was of jade set in rubies, on his breast and back was a square of silk, a foot in diameter, embroidered with the unicorn, the emblem of his high rank.

Lim did not look like a general for he was short and fat but he was tall in dignity and very vain. He had the delusion that he presented an impressive figure as his bearers carried his gaudy chair through the streets and lanes of the town. Before his equipage ran a number of criers, screeching discordantly and clapping cymbals so that all might move aside at the approach of such an illustrious person. How were they to know that Lim was a meek, pudgy little fat man who had never distinguished himself in battle. All his high honors were hereditary. About the only thing outstanding about him was his appetite. He disposed of such huge quantities of food even his servants marveled.

He spent most of each day munching kumquats and lichee nuts which were more delicious to him than even his concubines. He knew little of warfare and had no relish for it. He had never led an army in the field, but that did not prevent him from wearing a large variety of medals. He was pompous and vain even though his accomplishments were infinitesimal. His wealth had come to him from many generations of generals but he could not have been prouder of himself if he had earned it all through his military leadership.

Since the unicorn was his rightful emblem, he reasoned that it would be fitting that he own a unicorn. He did not stop to reason that nobody ever owns a unicorn, for a unicorn is one of the four supernatural creatures of which the dragon, the phoenix and the tortoise are the others. The unicorn is the king of all animals, associated with good government or the awakening of spring.

Little Lin Mu's mother used to think of

him as a young prince, so perhaps the presence of the unicorn was not so extraordinary.

Meanwhile the Mandarin Lim mulled over his problem as he munched luscious tangerines. Unlike the bandit, he had no idea of snatching the unicorn. Money enough had he to buy what he desired. Unwisely he believed that gold can purchase anything. And yet it cannot cause one extra bud to appear on a rose bush, nor can it change the brightness of a single star, nor can it block the course of a typhoon. When a man is starving, he cannot eat gold, nor is the touch of gold half as satisfying as the touch of jade. Too much gold spoils a man's sleep, worrying about being robbed. To drink gold, is to woo death. There are many things gold cannot buy, among which is a gentle white unicorn. But of this the Mandarin Lim was unaware, for despite the fact he had studied at the Hanlin Academy, he had little education. His sluggish mind was incapable of retaining knowledge. How mortified he would have been had he been capable of realizing that in the things that count, he was a beggar. Even his dreams were threadbare, despite the fact that he slept between embroidered sheets on a teak-wood bed.

MEANWHILE the Lin family prospered. The crops of rice, millet and turnips were abundant. The house gradually changed in appearance. Its austerity vanished.

But there was no change in Lin Wong. True, his farming was less arduous and he could smoke a pipe of tobacco without worrying over the cost.

One early evening when Lin Wong sat smoking before his door, there occurred such a commotion as he had never heard before. It was the clash of cymbals, the discordant beating of drums, and the ringing of bells, betokening the approach of the equipage of the Mandarin Lim as, elaborately gowned in full splendor, gaudy yellow and purple silk, embroidered with golden thread, and wearing the squares emblazoned with the unicorn, the emblem of his rank, he sat squeezed into the narrow confines of

his sedan chair, carried by four bearers, perspiring profusely. Before the house of Lin Wong, the discord stopped, and the Mandarin climbed down from his chair with a sigh of relief.

Lin Wong was amazed at the visit of so high an official and his mouth gaped open.

"Do I address Lin Wong?" asked the Mandarin pompously.

"Yes," was the reply but I have done no wrong."

"Be not disturbed, I came as a friend. I have heard that there is a unicorn upon this farm."

"That is true. He draws the plow."

"A menial task indeed."

"But a worthy one."

"Permit me to make known to you that I am the Mandarin Lim, a general whose emblem is the unicorn. Hence my interest."

At that moment a small boy came from in back of the house. He held a gleaming object in his hand. To the Mandarin it seemed to be a gold-piece. He was dismayed. How could he offer Lin Wong gold in exchange for the unicorn if he had so much of it that his little son could play with a gold-piece?

He smiled at the boy and patted his tiny head. Then he attempted to take the gold-piece from the child's hand, but without success. Might as well try to snatch a star from the sky. How could a small one have such strength? Yet he had touched the thing the child was playing with and it was definitely a gold-piece. But now Lin Mu opened his hand and a yellow leaf fell from it to the ground. The Mandarin was amazed. However could he have made such an error? But even as he questioned himself he somehow knew that the leaf only a moment before had been a gold-piece.

It was akin to magic. Nevertheless his determination to purchase the unicorn was in no way lessened. So he said to Lin Wong, "I would like a buy the unicorn."

"The unicorn is not mine to sell, it belongs to my son."

"How is it that the head of the house of

Lin is ruled by so young a boy? It would be well for you to consider my offer, a catty of gold for the noble animal, gold enough to enrich you for the rest of your days. No longer need you toil in the fields."

The temptation was great and Lin Wong could not help mulling over the offer, chewing upon it as though it were a very choice morsel. He had never possessed a gold-piece. Of course, though he thought not of her, he had a beautiful wife who grew younger in appearance every day as the years slipped from her like peach blossoms falling. He had a small son of rare beauty, who when he was with his mother was a veritable chatterbox. A unicorn made his plowing so easy it was almost effortless. And his house had become spacious, luxurious and friendly. Truly he had no need for a catty of gold but it lured him nonetheless. He would be enormously rich, he reasoned, so, at last he accepted the offer of the Mandarin.

BUT now his wife emerged from the house. She held the little boy by the hand and he was chattering as usual as he skipped along beside her. They passed Lin Wong without noticing him and paid no heed whatever to the mighty Mandarin Lim. His pomp was somewhat deflated and he was angry but he did not show it. He watched, even as did Lin Wong, the quiet way they walked down the long old road over which for centuries countless feet had trod, and on into the distance. Now they seemed to be climbing a hill though Lin Wong knew no hill was there. Was it only his imagination or were they fading from view as though their bodies had the texture of gossamer? A gentle breeze swept the countryside like a broom and then they seemed to be one with the sky and the wind and the evening glow. It was a strange sight to behold, but breathtaking too, like a dream's end or a white moth flying. Lin Wong sighed, and his hands shook. Too late, he realized that a man is not wise who attempts to sell a unicorn.