

FOLK TALES
FROM CHINA



STEALING THE RHINOCEROS' PEARLS



Stealing the
Rhinoceros' Pearls

And Other Folk Tales from China
(Ninth Series)

Edited by Fan He and Others

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS BEIJING

First Edition 1985

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ISBN 0-8351-1468-6

Copyright 1985 by Foreign Languages Press

Published by the Foreign Languages Press
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Printed by the Foreign Languages Printing House
19 West Chegongzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation
(Guoji Shudian), P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Butterfly Maiden

(A Dong Story)

To the people of the Dong, butterflies symbolize beauty and happiness.

The blouses, skirts and kerchiefs of the Dong maidens are often embroidered with multi-coloured butterflies; and each spring when the flowers bloom in the warm sunshine and butterflies come flitting round, people say happily, "Butterfly Maiden is here!"

Why do the Dong people have such affection for these insects? Listen patiently now to the story that aged minstrels tell:

Long ago, in the thick forests of the remote border mountains between Hunan, Guangxi and Guizhou provinces, there lived three families of hunters. One was called Lilai, one Dalie and the other Yanglai. The inhabitants of the villages called them familiarly Ah Lidayang.

Not far from where they lived, there was a rich miser named Hapo who not only had seized many fields, but had also laid claim to the mountains and forests. It was he who had forced Ah Lidayang to move from the plain into caves in the mountains.

One day, Hapo said to Ah Lidayang, "You live in my hills and you hunt on my slopes. I order you three families to pay me ten mountain goats a day, not a single head less!"

"But the wild animals are not of your rearing . . ."

Before the last words were even spoken, Hapo shouted loudly. "Men, come here!"

And up rushed a dozen of his henchmen who fell upon Ah Lidayang, trussed them up after a brief struggle and proceeded to beat them with bamboo whips.

Hapo glared at them with bloodshot eyes and yelled, "Miserable wretches, do you still refuse?"

"It's too much! We cannot pay!"

The cruel miser ordered his men to continue beating and soon the three hunters were dead.

Their wives and children wept bitterly. Soon, hunger forced them to go deep into the mountains to hunt, but often it took them several days just to kill a goat or two. Once, the women had just caught a goat and were preparing to cook it for their children, when Hapo's men came and snatched it away from them. From then on, the three families often went hungry and grew so thin they were too weak to go hunting. One by one they starved to death until only one young boy of thirteen was left, sprawling at the mouth of the cave where they had lived. Just then, a coloured butterfly came flying out of the eastern sky. It settled on the boy's lips and fed him sweet nectar. A few days later, the boy had grown up into a strong young Ah Lidayang.

Every day, the young man went into the mountains to hunt, and every day, the butterfly flitted and bobbed by his side. One day when he tried to catch it, it dropped to the ground and turned into a lovely flower. Just then, a mountain goat flashed past him and as he turned to chase it, a clear, soft voice suddenly called from behind: "Young Ah Lidayang!" He looked back and to his amazement, the flower had changed into a beautiful young woman. When he continued to chase the goat, she followed swiftly behind; when he stopped to rest, she came up to sit close beside him.

"Where do you come from, sister?" he asked.

"I come from the eastern sky," she replied.

"Do your parents know you are here?"

"No," she replied, "they are all butterflies and cannot talk, they do not know I am here."

"Well! How did you become a maiden who can talk?"

"Because I gathered and sipped the nectar from a fairy flower," she answered.

"Oh, then you are a fairy," he exclaimed.

The young woman smiled sweetly, but Young Ah Lidayang asked anxiously, "Are you going back to the eastern sky?"

"No, never, I'm going to stay with you forever," she replied, lowering her head shyly.

The young man looked at beautiful Butterfly Maiden and then glanced down at his torn and tattered clothes. "You had better go back," he said awkwardly, "I am very poor and Hapo is after me."

“No,” she said. “Your three families died a really cruel death. I have come to help you take your revenge.”

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when she changed back into a butterfly which spread its bright wings and flew off towards the west.

There, on the top of a high mountain, the butterfly covered its wings with a poisonous pollen and flew down to Hapo’s house. Fluttering its wings vigorously, it flitted over the water jars, sprinkling the poisonous pollen into them. The day after, the whole of Hapo’s family and all his watch-dogs were dead.

When the news got around, Young Ah Lidayang and the villagers were overjoyed.

However, a few days later, the county official ordered a search for the murderer, and Young Ah Lidayang was tied up and taken away. “What a shame,” the people said, “the line of the three hunter families will die out.”

Yet a few days after, an unexpected thing happened: A huge swarm of butterflies flew into the prison and set Young Ah Lidayang free.

The young man and Butterfly Maiden were married, and from then on hunted together in the mountains every day. They caught much game which Young Ah Lidayang would often take into town on a carrying-pole to sell both pelts and flesh at the market. The couple’s life became much easier. One day the young man was selling his tiger skins and deer hides in the street when he was suddenly hauled off to the county government, the *yamen*.

The county official banged his cane of office and said, "Everyone has to pay taxes! From now on, every day you must deliver two head of game; otherwise no hunting in the district under my control!"

"Master," said Young Ah Lidayang, "if I bring you game every day, when will I have time to go hunting?"

"Then every month you must bring me thirty head!"

Why, thought the young man, even at the best of times he could only catch thirty in one month. What were they going to eat? And he returned silently to his cave with a very long face.

"My dear," said Butterfly Maiden to him tenderly, "did someone bully you today at the market?"

Young Ah Lidayang heaved a long sigh. "We're just rid of that vulture of a Hapo. Now we have a wolf of a county official! Life is hard for the poor!"

"I suppose he wants you to deliver goats to him?"

"What else?"

"Don't worry," she told him. "I will go and find that fairy flower in the east and dip your arrows in the pollen so they become magic arrows." So saying, she changed into a butterfly and flew away.

Three days later, Butterfly Maiden returned with the pollen, which she smeared over her husband's arrowheads. Immediately they became glittering, golden magic arrows.

When the county official again ordered them to bring the exact number of goats, Butterfly Maiden struck the mountain rock with a magic arrow. There was a loud noise

and thirty dead goats with arrow wounds appeared before them. Young Ah Lidayang and Butterfly Maiden carried all of them into town on carrying-poles. When the official saw the young woman as bright and lovely as a crimson blossom, he promptly began to lust for her. "Well!" he said, grinning broadly, "I thought you were alone in the mountains, and here you have this beautiful maiden with you. Next month, bring me sixty goats! If you are even one short, the girl will stay with me!"

On the thirtieth day of the month, Young Ah Lidayang struck the cliff rock with a magic arrow. There was a loud crack, and sixty goats lay on the ground, but however hard they tried, the young couple could not carry them all. Finally Butterfly Maiden said, "Let's get thirty people to help us!"

"Where from?" asked her husband.

"With the magic arrow, we can get whatever we want."

Overjoyed, Young Ah Lidayang struck the rock with the arrow, there was a roar and thirty stalwart young men appeared. Each picked up two goats and carried them to the county official.

With the delivery of the sixty goats, the official's trick to make Butterfly Maiden his tenth concubine had failed, but he refused to give up so easily. "With all these people, how can you deliver only sixty goats? Each one must bring me thirty, so next month I want nine hundred and sixty. If you are one short, the girl stays with me!"

Young Ah Lidayang was very upset. "Master," he said, "only the maiden and myself are real people, the others are all fakes. They are here to help us bring the goats to you, in a moment they will vanish without a trace."

"There's no such thing as 'fake people'," snorted the official. "Tomorrow you must bring thirty of them here. They must all wear identical suits of indigo cloth and carry reed instruments of varying sizes. I want them to play in unison and to dance on the clearing in front of the *yamen*. If they should disappear, then the girl stays with me!"

At most these fake people could last for one day and once they disappeared, thought Young Ah Lidayang, he would lose his precious Butterfly Maiden. What a wicked man the official was! "My dear," he said, growing angrier the more he thought about it all, "if you stay with me, you will only suffer. Better return to the eastern sky!"

Butterfly Maiden was touched. "Don't worry," she comforted him, "there is a way to deal with this serpent of a man."

The next day, she struck the cliff face with the magic arrows so that sparks flew in all directions. Soon thirty piles of dynamite appeared on the ground. Then she gave a loud cry and the piles changed into thirty fake people, each carrying a reed instrument. Butterfly Maiden led them over to Young Ah Lidayang and told him how to command them. Strangely enough, these people behaved exactly like real live ones: At his orders to line up and march, they did just as they were told. When they arrived on the clearing

outside the *yamen*, he shouted to them to lie down and they promptly reverted to thirty piles of earth. Young Ah Li-dayang called the official to come and see.

“Where are the fake people?” demanded the official.

“Rise!” shouted Young Ah Lidayang, and in a flash the piles had become people once more.



“Play your instruments!” he shouted again. The fake people made a circle and piped away very tunefully.

The county official was amazed and pleased. “Can these men do anything else?” he asked.

“Anything you want!”

“What do they eat?”

“These people eat neither rice nor vegetables, nor do they need a roof. When they go to sleep, all they need is to be fed a glowing ember,” replied Young Ah Lidayang.

The official was very pleased with these people who needed neither grain nor money for their keep, yet could play music and perform all sorts of chores. That night, he did as Young Ah Lidayang said, settling them all in a room nearby and telling his servants to feed them glowing embers.

The thirty men swallowed the embers and suddenly there was a terrific explosion. Earth and sky seemed to be ripped asunder by the blast of the thirty simultaneous explosions. The *yamen* bust into flames and thick smoke enveloped it as all the officials, high and low, were blown to smithereens.

From then on, Young Ah Lidayang and Butterfly Maiden lived happy and free in the mountains and hunted whenever they liked.

Adapted by Wu Yaohui and Su Mingqing
(both Dong nationality)

The White Kerchief

(A Dong Story)

A long, long time ago, there lived a hunter named Baosan. One day, he set out from his Dong village for the capital with a load of wild animal skins on his carrying-pole. He had just laid out his wares on the street when there came a gust of wind and a white kerchief fluttered down onto his skins. Glancing up at the sky, he saw a large black cloud scudding away towards the south. The kerchief was pure white, with a fine design and felt smooth and soft to the touch. He picked it up and placed it carefully beside his pelts.

A short while later, a group of men on horseback came galloping along the main road. When they saw the white kerchief, they leapt off their steeds and, without more ado, trussed Baosan up. Only then did they ask him: "Where did you get this kerchief?"

The hunter told them all he had seen. The leader of the group said, "I am the King. This morning, my daughter, the Princess Peach Blossom, was carried away by a fierce gust of wind. Since you saw which way it blew, you had better lead the way."

They all hurried in a southerly direction, climbing many high mountains until finally, they reached a steep rocky peak which dropped away sheer thousands of feet on one side. The path came to an end there. Peering over the edge, they saw the mouth of a cave in the rock face, from which came the sound of a woman's soft weeping. The King turned to his men and said, "The demon holds my daughter captive in that cave. Whoever rescues her may marry her!" The members of his retinue looked at each other, but none dared go down to the cave. Said Baosan to himself, "Poor Princess! Someone should get her out!" and turning to the King he declared, "I will go down and take a look!" The king ordered his men to cut bamboos and weave a basket with which to lower Baosan down to the cave. He tied his horse-bells to the rope of the basket and told Baosan to shake it three times when he had rescued the Princess, so that his men could haul them both up again.

When Baosan entered the cave, the sound of weeping grew louder. Grasping his bow and arrows firmly, he walked in about one hundred feet and entered a large chamber. Suddenly the weeping stopped and a woman's voice asked, "Who are you? Get away as fast as you can! When the demon awakes, he will devour you!" Baosan looked in the direction of the voice and saw a beautiful young woman gazing at him with wide eyes.

"Are you Princess Peach Blossom?" he asked. "I have come to rescue you. Please come with me."

“No one can get away while the demon lives,” she replied.

“Where is this demon?” asked the hunter.

“He is drunk and is asleep in the inner chamber.”

Baosan crept closer to the demon, then hid behind a rock, drew his bow and aimed at the creature’s throat. The arrow whistled to its mark, causing the demon to leap up with a shout and then fall heavily to the ground, to lie motionless.

“The demon is dead,” said Baosan. “Let us go quickly!”

Impressed by his valour, the young woman asked him, “What is your name? Who sent you to rescue me?”

Baosan returned the white kerchief to her and told her the whole story. When the Princess heard that her father had promised her in marriage to the man who saved her, she was filled with happiness and cast herself into Baosan’s arms. Pressing her face to his chest, she said with deep feeling, “Dear Baosan! You are a hero! I willingly obey my father’s wish and will become your wife!”

Said Baosan, “I am a poor hunter and it is my duty to rescue you. I want no reward. You are a princess, how can you come with me into the mountains?” and he pushed her away from him. But the Princess clasped him tightly and tearfully replied, “My Baosan, I can live with you in the mountains! Even if my father had not given his word, I would still tell you that I love you truly. If you will not have me for your wife, then I will die here in this cave!” So say-

ing, she released Baosan and made as if to throw herself against the rock walls. The alert hunter held her back and told her he was willing to marry her. At that, her tears turned to smiles, she took his hand and tripped lightly to the mouth of the cave.

When they both tried to get into the bamboo basket, they found it was too small, and argued for a while as to who should go first. Finally, Baosan picked the Princess up bodily and placed her in the basket, then he shook the rope so the bells tinkled loudly and watched as she was hauled up the cliff face. She had just gone up about three feet when it suddenly occurred to her that her father often changed his mind, so she threw the white kerchief back to Baosan, saying, "Should my father break his promise, come to the Palace with this kerchief to find me."

As soon as the Princess reached the top of the cliff, her father put her on a horse. When she asked him to let the basket down again to bring Baosan up as well, the King refused, saying, "Let him feed the demon!" and ordered his troupe to mount and return to the Palace.

Baosan waited until nightfall, but still no basket came down. By then he was tired and hungry, so he felt his way into the cave in search of something to eat. However, he took a wrong turn and ended up in another stone chamber where he could hear the sound of a woman weeping. Following the direction of the crying, he peered through a crack in the rock and saw a young maiden.

"Who are you?" he asked, getting as close to the crack