



*The*

**MAGIC GOURD**

CHANG TIEN-YI

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS  
PEKING 1959

I'm going to tell you a story. But first let me introduce myself: I'm Wang Pao. This is going to be a true story about myself and my adventures with a magic gourd.

You may ask:

"What! A magic gourd? Like the ones in fairy tales?"

Yes, that's exactly the kind I mean.

I must make it clear, though, that I'm not a fairy or ogre or anything. I'm an ordinary person just like you. See, I'm a Young Pioneer. And, just like you, I enjoy listening to stories.

I knew about magic gourds from the time I was very small. My grandmother told me. Every time granny wanted me to do anything, she had to tell me a story. That was our rule.

"Come along, there's a good boy, and let granny wash your feet." She would run after me, beckoning.

"I won't. The water's too hot." I would try to escape.

"It's not hot. It's been cooling for some time."

"It'll be too cold, then."

Granny would catch me and say the water was exactly right, neither too hot nor too cold. There was no getting out of washing.



I would have to give in. But only on one condition:

"All right, then. But you must tell me a story."

Then granny would tell a story about a magic gourd.

"Don't move, Pao!" After washing my feet, granny would suddenly want something else. "Let me cut your nails. . . ."

What! Cut my nails? Certainly not! I would start to run away, barefoot. But granny would catch hold of my arm. There was nothing I could do.

Still I would make the same condition:

"You must tell me a story, then."

Then granny would tell me another story about the magic gourd.

So, from the time I was very small until I was ten, granny used to tell me stories. Every single one was different. The first time, Chang San bumped into a fairy one day who gave him a magic gourd. The second time, Li Ssu went off on a long journey and swam to a dragon's palace where he found a magic gourd. Wang Wu got one because he was a good boy and let his grandmother change his clothes. Chao Liu found one by digging in the ground.

But whoever it was, once he had the magic gourd he was in luck, because all his wishes came true. Chang San thought: "I'd like some peaches," and at once a plate of juicy peaches was before him. Li Ssu wished for a big spotted dog and one just appeared out of nowhere—it rushed up wagging its tail and licked his hand.

What happened afterwards? Why, that goes without saying, they lived happily ever after.

These stories often made me think of myself.

Suppose I had a magic gourd? What should I wish for?

I used to think like that even when I was quite big. Sometimes I'd be sitting staring at a sum, not knowing how to do it, and the figure "8" would remind me of the magic gourd—ah, if only I had that!

"That would save heaps of trouble."

When the boys in our form tried to see who could grow the best sunflower, mine came up long and thin with a miserable little flower, the worst of the lot.

"If I had a magic gourd," I thought, "I'd wish for the very best sunflower, the finest ever seen."

That was just a dream, though.

Still, I often used to think that way. I did that day when I quarrelled with the Science Group.

"Now if I had a magic gourd. . . ."

Well, I'd better start from the beginning.

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It was a Sunday. At nine o'clock after breakfast I hurried to school, because at ten our Science Group was going to start making an electro-magnetic crane.

But that day everything went wrong: the others did nothing but pick quarrels with me. For instance, I was playing chess with Yao Chun and anybody could see I

was winning. I'd even taken one of his castles. Then without any warning—I don't know how it happened—Yao Chun's knight nipped over and "Check!" I was going to move my king to a place of safety when I saw a bishop covering that square.

"How did that bishop of yours get there?" I asked.

"It's been there all along."

"It hasn't! I'd have seen it if it had."

"Whose fault is it if you didn't?" A fine thing to say!

So we started squabbling. And the others who had been watching all took his side and said I was in the wrong. I pushed the chessboard away and refused to play.

And then, when we started making the crane, Su Ming-feng picked a quarrel with me.

Don't you know who Su Ming-feng is? He's our group leader. Not that there's anything so marvellous about him—he can't beat me at pingpong. But he's always finding fault. While he was doing his own job, he kept looking round at the rest of us.

"The way you're winding's no good, Wang Pao. Keep the wire straight."

And presently:

"Wang Pao, that's not tight enough."

I ask you, friends! I was doing the most important job of the lot. That was electro-magnetic wire I was winding. Without it, the crane just couldn't pick things up.

I ask you, friends! Was that an easy job? I had to wind that No. 28 insulated wire on a wooden spool, making it tight and neat. This is the sort of thing a girl would be good at. The trouble is I'm not a girl.

But Su Ming-feng simply didn't see that. There I was, working so hard that my nose was beaded with sweat, yet he kept blaming me for this, that and the other.

I lost my temper.

"If what I'm doing doesn't suit you—do it yourself!"

"All right, I'll wind the wire. You can make the handle for the gearing."

The handle for the gearing—that was pretty important. You couldn't move the gearing or raise the jib till I'd finished that handle and fitted it on. The crane just wouldn't be a crane without it. So I was very glad to have this job. I was pleased to be making such a big contribution to the whole project.

But suddenly Su Ming-feng shouted:

"Not like that, Wang Pao! You've shaped it like the letter N. Those two corners have to be right angles."

When I put it right, though, he still wasn't satisfied.

"That won't do—you've made them obtuse."

"What's wrong now?"

"We can't use that: the handle wouldn't turn."

"How do you know it wouldn't?"

Someone else chipped in:

"That really doesn't look like a handle—it looks like someone on the edge of the swimming-pool getting ready to dive in."



It did look rather like that. They all laughed. I threw it on the floor.

“Bah! All you can do is jeer at other people. I’m through. I’m quitting!”

I kicked the thing on the floor as I dashed out.

Su Ming-feng ran after me:

“Wang Pao! Wang Pao!”

“Leave me alone!”

“Wang Pao! What way is that to behave?”

“Ha, you’re the one who behaves so well. I think you’re wonderful! They’ll soon be printing your picture in *Young Pioneers of China!*”

“Wang Pao, no one will approve of what you’re doing.”

“What do I care whether they approve or not?” I stamped off without looking back.

I was sure Su Ming-feng would catch me up and make me go back. But the others stopped him, telling him to let me go.

That made me angrier than ever.

“That’s fine! Fine friends you are! . . . Never mind!”

I went home and sulked for a while. I wanted to go back to school and see how they were getting on, but . . . I’d have felt a fool. I told myself:

“Who cares about their old electro-magnetic crane? It’s only a toy. What’s so wonderful about it?”

Somehow that set me thinking of the magic gourd. And that reminded me of lots of things. I won’t go

into them now, as three whole days and nights wouldn't be enough. And what I ended up thinking about I can't say, because soon I fell asleep.

While I was asleep I heard someone call:

"Wang Pao, come on! We're going fishing!"

"Who is it?"

"Hurry up, can't you?"

I did seem to remember agreeing to go fishing with some of the fellows. See, I'd even got the bait ready there on the table. Grabbing my rod and a bucket I rushed out.

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I left the town and went to the river bank. But not one of my form was there.

"Where have they gone? Why didn't they wait for me? Fine friends they are!"

Then I said to myself:

"This is all right. If I were fishing with the others and they all caught lots of fish while I didn't catch one, that wouldn't be much fun. I'm better off on my own—I can practise my fishing."

I still didn't do too well, though. I sat alone on the bank under a willow. And all I had to keep me company was my bucket with a solitary snail inside it. The snail lay there on one side, putting its head out to look round as if it were anxious for some company too.

I don't know how long I sat there. But I wasn't going home with an empty bucket. I must catch one fish at least. I went on, growing crosser every minute.

"I'll show 'em!"

The sun would soon be setting. The river sparkled like gold. Plop! Big ripples spread in ever-widening circles till my line was dancing up and down.

"Who did that?" I shouted, angry because the fish were bound to be frightened away.

The answer was a cross between a frog's croak and a human voice:

"Ger-goo-loo, ger-goo-loo!"

"Eh?"

"Goo-loo, goo-loo." When you listened carefully, it sounded like "It's me! It's me."

"Who are you?"

"Ger-goo-loo, ger-goo-loo." This reply was repeated till I caught what it meant:

"Magic gourd . . . magic gourd. . . ."

Yes, it sounded more and more like that.

"What!" I threw down my rod and jumped to my feet. "The magic gourd? . . . Is that what you said?"

The answer was another croak, but I understood it.

"That's what I said."

"You mean you're the magic gourd of the story-books?"

"That's right, that's right." It was speaking more clearly now.

I still couldn't quite believe it.

"Hey, excuse me! Are you really the magic gourd? M-a-g-i-c, magic. G-o-u-r-d, gourd. Can you hear me? Is that what you are?"

"I really am a magic gourd." The answer couldn't have been more distinct.

I scratched my head. I hopped. I pulled my nose. I pinched my cheek. Ouch! That hurt.

"Well, it doesn't seem to be a dream."

"It isn't a dream," said the voice, just like an echo.

I looked all round.

"Where are you, though?"

"Here, here."

"Eh? Where's 'here' exactly?"

"In the water."

Ha, I knew—

"Magic Gourd, do you still live in a dragon's palace?"

"Bah, who builds dragon palaces nowadays?" The voice really was coming from the river, very distinct now, though not much like the voice of one of us. "They used to build 'em. My grandfather lived in one once. . . ."

I couldn't help interrupting:

"Do you mean to say you have a grandfather?"

"Of course. If I hadn't had a grandfather, where would my father have come from? If I hadn't had a father, where would I have come from?"

That was it, I remembered now!

"So that magic gourd that granny told me Chang San—or was it Li Ssu?—got, must have been your grandfather!"

“Goo-loo!” It made a sound between a cough and a sarcastic laugh.

“What Chang San and Li Ssu? Never heard of them. Who are they?”

I told it:

“That was a most amusing story. One day, Li Ssu ran out. . . .”

“Excuse me. I don’t find it amusing.”

A hazy shape was floating down the river as if blown off by the wind. Zigzag ripples wrinkled the water.

“Why are you going, Magic Gourd?”

“I’ve no time to listen to stories.” The voice was fainter. I seemed to hear a sigh. “As a matter of fact, I was looking specially for you because I wanted to serve you. But you don’t need me. . . .”

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Well, listen to that! It had been looking for me specially! I was excited and worried at the same time. At all costs I must stop it.

“Come back! Come back, Magic Gourd!”

I stared hard at the river, waiting.

“Come back!”

Plop! That sounded like a fish jumping. No matter how hard I looked I could see nothing, for a purple mist had risen over the river.

But the voice—just listen!—came back.



"What can I do for you?"

"What did you say just now? I don't need you? Who told you?"

"If you needed me, why waste time talking instead of getting me ashore at once?"

"I'll get you ashore right away!" I snatched up my fishing-rod and measured the distance with my eye.

"Can you catch on to the hook?"

"Goo-loo."

My line grew taut and the float slowly sank. I whipped up my rod and the thing I had hooked bounced on to the bank before I could see what it was.

It really was a gourd, all wet and glistening, yellowish green like an apple. It wasn't too big to fit into a pocket. And in a satchel it wouldn't show at all.

I picked it up. It was very light. When I shook it ever so slightly, something inside went "Goo-loo, goo-loo!" I listened carefully and heard it say:

"Thank you, thank you!"

I wondered:

"Can this be the famous magic gourd? The magic gourd that makes wishes come true? Does the wonderful magic gourd look like this?"

With a sound between a croak and a rattle it answered (It knew all that I was thinking!):

"Don't worry. Don't judge by appearances—I look like any other gourd, but every gourd has something different inside. I'm a gourd that can really make you happy. I had a hard time finding you. You must be

my master. I want to carry out your orders and make your wishes come true."

My word! That was friendly, if you like. But I had to get one thing clear.

"Why look for me specially? Why do you want me to be your master?"

"Because you're someone special. You're a fine young fellow. . . ."

"How?" I cut in. "Fine in what way? What's fine about me?"

It said I was fine in every way. I agreed, but I wanted it to go into details.

"How can I put it into words?" it said.

"Why not?"

"You're too good, too good, too good for words." It gave another "Goo-loo" of admiration. Then it went on earnestly: "Please believe me. I understand you so thoroughly."

"That's right."

"And you'll like me too."

"Quite true."

"I know you want something of my kind to serve you. That's why I came."

"You mean, you mean—" I was so surprised and excited, I could hardly breathe. "You mean—I can—have anything I want?"

"Of course. I promise, to the best of my ability."

Oh, just listen to it!



What should I do? Holding this magic gourd which frankly admitted it was a magic gourd, both my hands trembled. . . . It was a treasure, no question about that. Well, I must try it out. But I couldn't think of anything I wanted.

"What shall I ask for?" I looked right and left till my eye fell on the bucket. "I want—I want—some fish!"

Keeping quite still, I stared into the bucket, stared till my eyes started aching.

But all I could see was half a bucket of water, absolutely unruffled. At the bottom lay the snail, exactly as before.

One minute passed. It was still the same.

Three minutes passed. Four minutes, five minutes passed. Still nothing moved.

"I want fish!" I shouted again. "Give me fish! Did you hear? Fish!"

A creaking noise made me jump. . . . I looked up. It was nothing but the wind in the willows. I looked back at the bucket—still quiet and half full of water.

I wondered if my eyes were playing me tricks.

I squatted down and peered carefully at my bucket. The only thing in it was that old snail, which had lazily poked its head half way out of its shell.

"Bah, you were lying! You're not a magic gourd!"

I dropped the gourd and kicked it as hard as I could. It rolled several yards away.

I took my rod, picked up my bucket and started home in a temper.