

The Legend of the Monster Misfortune

By Lafcadio Hearn

He that hath a hundred desireth a thousand; he that hath a thousand would have a hundred thousand; he that hath a hundred thousand longeth for the kingdom; he that hath a kingdom doth wish to possess the heavens. And being led astray by cupidity, even the owners of riches and wisdom do those things which should never be done, and seek after that which ought never to be sought after. . . . Wherefore there hath been written, for the benefit of those who do nourish their own evil passions, this legend taken from the forty-sixth book of the Fa-youen-tchou-lin.

In those ages when the sun shone brighter than in these years, when the perfumes of flowers were sweeter, when the colors of the world were fairer to behold, and gods were wont to walk upon earth, there was a certain happy kingdom wherein no misery was. Of gems and of gold there was superabundance; the harvests were inexhaustible as ocean; the cities more populous than ant-hills. So many years had passed without war that plants grew upon the walls of the great towns, disjuncting the rampart-stones by the snaky strength of their roots. And through all that land there was a murmur of music constant as the flow of the Yellow River; sleep alone interrupted the pursuit of pleasure, and even the dreams of sleepers were never darkened by imaginary woe. For there was no sickness and no want of any sort, so that each man lived his century of years, and dying laid him down painlessly, as one seeking repose after pleasure, the calm of slumber after the intoxication of joy.

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One day the king of that country called all his counsellors and ministers and chief mandarins together, and questioned them, saying: "Behold! I have read in certain ancient annals which are kept within our chief temple, these words: '*In days of old Misfortune visited the land,*' Is there among you one who can tell me what manner of creature Misfortune is? Unto what may Misfortune be likened?"

But all the counsellors and the ministers and the mandarins answered: "O king, we have never beheld it, nor can we say what manner of creature it may be."

Thereupon the king ordered one of his ministers to visit all the lesser kingdoms, and to inquire what manner of creature Misfortune might be, and to purchase it at any price,—if indeed it could be bought,—though the price should be the value of a province.

Now there was a certain god, who, seeing and hearing these things, forthwith assumed the figure of a man, and went to the greatest market of a neighboring kingdom, taking with him Misfortune, chained with a chain of iron. And the form of Misfortune was the form of a gigantic sow. So the minister, visiting that foreign market, observed the creature, which was made fast to a pillar there, and asked the god what animal it was.

"It is called the female of Misfortune," quoth the god.

"Is it for sale?" questioned the minister.

"Assuredly," answered the god.

"And the price?"

"A million pieces of gold."

“What is its daily food?”

“One bushel measure of needles.”

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Having paid for the beast a million pieces of good yellow gold, the minister was perforce compelled to procure food for it. So he sent out runners to all the markets, and to the shops of tailors and of weavers, and to all the mandarins of all districts within the kingdom, to procure needles. This caused much tribulation in the land, not only by reason of the scarcity of needles, but also because of the affliction to which the people were subjected. For those who had not needles were beaten with bamboos; and the mandarins, desiring to obey the behest of the king's minister, exercised much severity. The tailors and others who lived by their needles soon found themselves in a miserable plight; and the needlemakers, toil as they would, could never make enough to satisfy the hunger of the beast, although many died because of overwork. And the price of a needle became as the price of emeralds and diamonds, and the rich gave all their substance to procure food for this beast, whose mouth, like the mouth of hell, could not be satisfied. Then the people in many parts, made desperate by hunger and the severity of the mandarins, rose in revolt, provoking a war which caused the destruction of many tens of thousands. The rivers ran with blood, yet the minister could not bring the beast to the palace for lack of needles wherewith to feed it.

Therefore he wrote at last to the king, saying:

“I have indeed been able to find and to buy the female of Misfortune; but the male I have not been able to obtain, nor, with your Majesty's permission, will I seek for it. Lo! the female hath already devoured the substance of this land and I dare not attempt to bring such a monster to the palace. I pray your Majesty therefore that your Majesty graciously accord me leave to destroy this hideous beast; and I trust that your Majesty will hear in mind the saving of the wise men of India: *‘Even a King who will not hearken to advice should be advised by faithful counsellors.’*”

Then the king, being already alarmed by noise of the famine and of the revolution, ordered that the beast should be destroyed.

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Accordingly, the female of Misfortune was led to a desolate place without the village, and chained fast with chains of iron; and the minister commanded the butchers to kill it. But so impenetrable was its skin that neither axe nor knife could wound it. Wherefore the soldiers were commanded to destroy it. But the arrows of the archers flattened their steel points upon Misfortune, even when directed against its eyes, which were bright and hard as diamonds; while swords and spears innumerable were shattered and broken in foolish efforts to kill it.

Then the minister commanded a great fire to be built; and the monster was bound within the fire, while quantities of pitch and of oil and of resinous woods were poured and piled upon the flame, until the fire became too hot for men to approach it within the distance of ten *li*. But the beast, instead of burning, first became red hot and then white hot, shining like the moon. Its chains melted like wax, so that it escaped at last and ran out among the people like a dragon of fire. Many were thus consumed; and the beast entered the villages and destroyed them; and still running so swiftly that its heat increased with its course, it entered the capital city, and ran through it and over it upon the roofs, burning up even the king in his palace.

Thus, by the folly of that king, was the kingdom utterly wasted and destroyed, so that it became a desert, inhabited only by lizards and serpents and demons.

NOTE.—This and, the following fable belong to the curious collection translated by M. Stanislas Julien from a Chinese encyclopedia, and published at Paris in 1860, under the title, “Les Avadânas,”—or “The Similitudes,”—a Sanscrit term corresponding to the Chinese *Pi-yu*, and justified by the origin of the stories, translated by the Chinese themselves, or at least reconstructed, from old Sanscrit texts. I have ventured, however, to accentuate the slightly Chinese coloring of the above grotesque parable.—L. H.