

THE PRINCE WHO LIKED CARPENTRY

Once upon a time there was in a place an old king, whose face was completely filled with wrinkles with a beard down to his chest.

One day, after he had examined his old and decrepit reflection in a mirror, he heaved a sigh and thought, "Soon I must give my position to my son and he'll look after the land. But isn't it unfortunate that for some reason he enjoys only the skill of carpentry. If he goes on like this, how can I give him the kingdom and feel comfortable about it?"

Even though he really explained things, the prince did not take his studies seriously, other than enjoying the pursuit of carpentry. As far as the king was concerned, the circumstances were really a great responsibility. Hence the king paced back and forth in his room thinking about it a lot, and finally he thought of a way to make the prince enjoy his studies. The king summoned the prince to his own chamber and said, "Look! This little bird is beautiful, isn't it?" The prince looked around, but saw no bird. The room was just like it was before, and there was nothing new at all. The prince was astonished and asked, "Great Father! Where's the bird?"

The king pointed to a corner of the room and said, "Not only is this bird a tribute, recently given me by my nephew, but it's also a bird of a special kind, one in a hundred."

The prince was very much astonished and asked, "Well, why don't I see it?"

The king replied as if he had much experience. "It's a special invisible bird. I've been thinking to have you make a special cage for it."

A cage! The prince was greatly astonished, and said, "Royal Father! How can I make a cage for a bird I can't see? I don't even know how big it is!"

The king gave the prince a slap on the shoulder and said, "Don't ask! Haven't I already told you it's an invisible bird? Come see me in a week and bring the cage!"

The prince was at a loss, and left the king's chamber in an unhappy mood. He decided to find a wise man to find out what to do according to his father's thoughts.

The wise man took the prince to his own library. The prince used it for a few days and read many ancient books, but he did not find any material about invisible birds.

But those days were absolutely not a purposeless waste of time for the prince. He was enticed by much knowledge of the kinds of birds from among the books—birds that could fly faster than the wind, birds able to carry a sheep in a single

talon, birds that slept all day and sought their food at night, birds that could see bugs on the ground from high in the sky, birds that could catch fish from the sea, the birds that were rarely seen on earth at present, and so on. This made him forget even to eat or sleep.

The wise man asked, "Prince, have you found the invisible kind of bird?"

He replied, "I've read much material on various kinds of birds. But I didn't see an invisible bird upon this earth."

The sage could but remark, "Hence, the king played a joke on you. Maybe it's a bird for which a cage is unsuitable."

For an entire week the prince took great pains to read books and sought the kind of bird until his meeting with the king.

"The king said, "The agreed time has arrived. You haven't yet done the work you were responsible for, so from now on you must throw away your carpentry axe."

"But, Great Father, I've finished making the bird cage," said the prince.

The king was astonished and asked, "You're done? Where is it?"

The prince led the king to the gardens and pointed to a three-forked branch on a big tree. "Great Father, look! The cage is there."

The king looked unhappy and said, "If it's really there, how come I don't see it?"

The prince replied, "Since it's for an invisible bird, it's an invisible cage."

The king said, "Is there really such a thing?" and, knowing he had hit the mark he had aimed at, he felt happy over his son's cleverness. However, without changing his expression even a little, he said in all seriousness, "If I look at what you've done for a week, is it only a single invisible cage?" Haven't you been able to learn anything else besides this?"

The Prince said, "No. My royal father! This week I acquired much extensive knowledge about types of birds. And I especially learned the good points about books. I've recognized the jewel of culture in books is worth more than gold. Together with this, I feel that crafts are a very extensive and profound culture as well. Father, what we must learn are really many things. The reason is that the world we encounter is a world of secrets and wonders, that's why."

After the king had listened to these words he became happy and said, "I think that it won't be so hard to find the future king after all."

—Bu chung, *Qinghai Folk Literature* 1, 1995