

The Fighting Quails

By P'u Sung-ling

Wang Ch'êng belonged to an old family in P'ing-yuan, but was such an idle fellow that his property gradually disappeared, until at length all he had left was an old tumble-down house. His wife and he slept under a coarse hempen coverlet, and the former was far from sparing of her reproaches. At the time of which we are speaking the weather was unbearably hot; and Wang went to pass the night with many other of his fellow-villagers in a pavilion which stood among some dilapidated buildings belonging to a family named Chou. With the first streaks of dawn his comrades departed; but Wang slept well on till about nine o'clock, when he got up and proceeded leisurely home. All at once he saw in the grass a gold hair-pin; and taking it up to look, at it, found engraved thereon in small characters—"The property of the Imperial family." Now Wang's own grandfather had married into the Imperial family,¹ and consequently he had formerly possessed many similar articles; but while he was thinking it over up came an old woman in search of the hair-pin, which Wang, who though poor was honest, at once produced and handed to her. The old woman was delighted, and thanked Wang for his goodness, observing that the pin was not worth, much in itself, but was a relic of her departed husband. Wang asked what her husband had been; to which she replied, "His name was Wang Chien-chih, and he was connected by marriage with the Imperial family." "My own grandfather!" cried Wang, in great surprise; "how could you have known him?" "You, then," said the old woman, "are his grandson. I am a fox, and many years ago I was married to your grandfather; but when he died I retired from the world. Passing by here I lost my hair-pin, which destiny conveyed into your hands." Wang had heard of his grandfather's fox-wife, and believing therefore the old woman's story, invited her to return with him, which she did. Wang called his wife out to receive her; but when she came in rags and tatters, with unkempt hair and ditty face, the old woman sighed, and said, "Alas! alas! has Wang Chien-chih's grandson come to this?" Then looking at the broken, smokeless stove, she added, "How, under these circumstances, have you managed even to support life?" Here Wang's wife told the tale of their poverty, with much sobbing and tears; whereupon the old woman gave her the hair-pin, bidding her go pawn it, and with the proceeds buy some food, saying that in three days she would visit them again. Wang pressed her to stay, but she said, "You can't even keep your wife alive; what would it benefit you to have me also dependent on you?" So she went away, and then Wang told his wife who he was, at which his wife felt very much alarmed; but Wang was so loud in her praises, that finally his wife consented to treat her with all proper respect. In three days she returned as agreed, and, producing some money, sent out for a hundredweight of rice and a hundred weight of corn. She passed the night with them, sleeping with Mrs. Wang, who was at first rather frightened, but who soon laid aside her suspicions when she found that the old lady meant so well towards them. Next day the latter addressed Wang, saying, "My grandson, you must not be so lazy. You should try to make a little

¹ The direct issue of the Emperors of the present dynasty and their descendants in the male line for ever are entitled to wear a yellow girdle in token of their relationship to the Imperial family, each generation becoming a degree lower in rank, but always retaining this distinctive badge. Members of the collateral branches wear a red girdle, and are commonly known as *gioros*. With the lapse of two hundred and fifty years, the wearers of these badges have become numerous, and in many cases disreputable; and they are now to be found even among the lowest dregs of Chinese social life.

money in some way or another.” Wang replied that he had no capital; upon which the old lady said, “When your grandfather was alive, he allowed me to take what money I liked; but not being a mortal, I had no use for it, and ‘consequently did not draw largely upon him. I have, however, saved from my pin-money the sum of forty ounces of silver, which has long been lying idle for want of an investment. Take it, and buy summer cloth, which you may carry to the capital and re-sell at a profit.” So Wang bought some fifty pieces of summer cloth; and the old lady made him get ready, calculating that in six or seven days he would reach the capital. She also warned him, saying,

Be neither lazy nor slow—
For if a day too long you wait,
Repentance comes a day too late.

Wang promised all obedience, and packed up his goods and went off. On the road he was overtaken by a rain-storm which soaked him through to the skin; and as he was not accustomed to be out in bad weather, it was altogether too much for him. He accordingly sought shelter in an inn, but the rain went on steadily till night, running over the eaves of the house like so many ropes. Next morning the roads were in a horrible state; and Wang, watching the passers-by slipping about in the slush, unable to see any path, dared not face it all, and remained until noon, when it began to dry up a little. Just then, however, the clouds closed over again, and down came the rain in torrents, causing him to stay another night before he could go on. When he was nearing the capital, he heard to his great joy that summer cloth was at a premium; and on arrival proceeded at once to take up his quarters at an inn. There the landlord said it was a pity he had come so late, as communications with the south having been only recently opened, the supply of summer cloth had been small; and there being a great demand for it among the wealthy families of the metropolis, its price had gone up to three times the usual figure. “But,” he added, “two days ago several large consignments arrived, and the price went down again, so that the late corner have lost their market.” Poor Wang was thus left in the lurch, and as every day more summer cloth came in, the value of it fell in a corresponding ratio. Wang would not part with his at a loss, and held on for some ten days, when his expenses for board and lodging were added to his present distress. The landlord urged him to sell even at a loss, and turn his attention to something else, which he ultimately did losing over ten ounces of silver on his venture. Next day he rose in the morning to depart, but on looking in his purse found all his money gone. He rushed away to tell the landlord, who, however, could do nothing for him. Some one then advised him to take out a summons and make the landlord reimburse him; but he only sighed, and said, “It is my destiny, and no fault of the landlord’s.” Thereupon the landlord was very grateful to him, and gave him five ounces of silver to enable him to go home. He did not care, however, to face his-grandmother empty-handed, and remained in a very undecided stat; until suddenly he saw a quail-catcher winning heaps of money by fighting his birds, and selling them at over 100 *cash* a-piece. He then determined to lay out his five ounces of silver in quails, and pay back the landlord out of the profits. The latter approved very highly of this plan, and not only agreed to lend him a room, but also to charge him little or nothing for his board. So Wang went off rejoicing, and bought two large baskets of quails, with which he returned to the city, to the great satisfaction of the landlord, who advised him to lose no time in disposing of them. All that night it poured in torrents, and the next morning the streets were like rivers, the rain still continuing to fall. Wang waited for it to clear up, but several days passed and still there were no signs of fine weather. He then went to look at his quails, some of which he found dead and others dying. He was much

alarmed at this, but was quite at a loss what to do; and by the next day a lot more had died, so that only a few were left, which he fed all together in one basket. The day after this he went again to look at them, and lo! there remained but a single quail. With tears in his eyes he told the landlord what had happened, and he, too, was much affected, 'Wang then reflected that he had no money left to carry him home, and that he could not do better than cease to live. But the landlord spoke to him and soothed him, and they went together to look at the quail. "This is a fine bird," said the landlord, "and it strikes me that it has simply killed the others. Now, as you have got nothing to do, just set to work and train it; and if it is good for anything, why, you'll be able to make a living out of it." Wang did as he was told; and when the bird was trained, the landlord bade him take it into the street and gamble for something to eat. This, too, he did, and his quail won every main; whereupon the landlord gave him some money to bet with the young fellows of the neighbourhood. Everything turned out favourably, and by the end of six months he had 'saved twenty ounces of silver, so that he became quite easy in his mind and looked upon the quail as a dispensation of his destiny.

Now one of the princes was passionately fond of quail-fighting, and always at the Feast of Lanterns anybody who owned quails might go and fight them in the palace against the Prince's birds. The landlord therefore said to Wang, "Here is a chance of enriching yourself by a single stroke; only I can't say what your luck will do for you." He then explained to him what it was, and away they went together, the landlord saying, "If you lose, burst out into lamentations; but if you are lucky enough to win, and the Prince wishes, as he will, to buy your bird, don't consent. If he presses you very much, watch for a nod from me before you agree." This settled, they proceeded to the palace, where they found crowds of quail-fighters already on the ground; and then the Prince came forth, heralds proclaiming to the multitude that any who wished to fight their birds might come up. Some man at once stepped forward, and the Prince gave orders for the quails to be released; but at the first strike the stranger's quail was knocked out of time. The Prince smiled, and by-and-by won several more mains, until at last the landlord said, "Now's our time," and went up together with Wang. The Prince looked at their bird and said, "It has a fierce-looking eye and strong feathers. We must be careful what we are doing." So he commanded his servants to bring out Iron Beak to oppose Wang's bird; but, after a couple of strikes, the Prince's quail was signally defeated. He sent for a better bird, but that shared the same fate; and then he cried out, "Bring the Jade Bird from the palace!" In a little time it arrived, with pure white feathers like an egret, and an unusually martial appearance. Wang was much alarmed, and falling on his knees prayed to be excused this main, saying, "Your highness's bird is too good. I fear lest mine should be wounded, and my livelihood be taken from me." But the Prince laughed and said, "Go on. If your quail is killed I will make it up to you handsomely." Wang then released his bird, and the Prince's quail rushed at it at once; but when the Jade Bird was close by, Wang's quail awaited its coming head down and full of rage. The former made a violent peck at its adversary, and then sprang up to swoop down on it. Thus they went on up and down, backwards and forwards, until at length they got hold of each other, and the Prince's bird was beginning to show signs of exhaustion. This enraged it all the more, and it fought more violently than ever; but soon a perfect snowstorm of feathers began to fall, and, with drooping wings, the Jade Bird made its escape. The spectators were much moved by the result; and the Prince himself, taking up Wang's bird, examined it closely from beak to claws, finally asking if it was for sale, "My sole dependence," replied Wang, "is upon this bird. I would rather not part with it." "But," said the Prince, "if I give you as much as the capital, say, of an ordinary tradesman, will not that tempt you?" Wang thought some time, and then answered, "I would rather not sell my bird; but as your

highness has taken a fancy to it I will only ask enough to find me in food and clothes.” “How much do you want?” inquired the Prince; to which Wang replied that he would take a thousand ounces of silver. “You fool!” cried the Prince; “do you think your bird is such a jewel as all that?” “If your highness,” said Wang, “does not think the bird a jewel, I value it more than that stone which was priced at fifteen cities.” “How so?” asked the Prince. “Why,” said Wang, “I take my bird every day into the market-place. It there wins for me several ounces of silver, which I exchange for rice; my family, over ten in number, has nothing to fear from either cold or hunger. What jewel could do that?” “You shall not lose anything,” replied the Prince; “I will give you two hundred ounces.” But Wang would not consent, and then the Prince added another hundred; whereupon Wang looked at the landlord, who, however, made no sign. Wang then offered to take nine hundred; but the Prince ridiculed the idea of paying such a price for a quail, and Wang was preparing to take his leave with the bird, when the Prince called him back, saying. “Here! Here! I will give you six hundred. Take it or leave it as you please.” Wang here looked at the landlord, and the landlord remained motionless as before. However, Wang was satisfied himself with ‘this offer, and being afraid of missing his chance, said to his friend, “If I get this price for it I shall be quite content. If we go on haggling and finally come to no terms, that will be a very poor end to it all.” So he took the Prince’s offer, and the latter, overjoyed, caused the money to be handed to him. Wang then returned, with his earnings; but the landlord said to him, “What did I say to you? You were in too much of a hurry to sell. Another minute, and you would have got eight hundred.” When Wang got back he threw the money on the table and told the landlord to take what he liked; but the latter would not, and it was only after some pressing that he would, accept payment for Wang’s board. Wang then packed up and went home, where he told his story and produced his silver, to the great-delight of all of them. The old lady counselled the purchase of a quantity of land, the building of a house, and the purchase of implements; and in a very short time they became wealthy family. The old lady always got up early in the morning and made Wang attend to the farm, his wife to her spinning; and rated them soundly at any signs of laziness. The husband and wife henceforth lived in peace, and no longer abused each other until at the expiration of three years the old lady declared her intention of bidding them adieu. They both tried to stop her, and with the aid of tears succeeded in persuading her; but the next day she had disappeared.²

² Quail fighting is not so common now in China as it appears to have been formerly. Cricket-fighting is, however, a very favorite form of gambling, large quantities of these insects being caught every year for this purpose, and considerable sums frequently staked on the result of a contest between two champions.