

## THE WILLOW-PATTERN PLATE.

M<sup>A</sup>NY, many hundred years ago, there lived in China a very powerful Mandarin who, by inflicting unfair taxes and fines on the poor people he governed, had made a large fortune.

Having gained as much wealth as he wished, and fearing his evil ways would soon be found out, he sought leave from the Emperor to retire, and built himself a splendid riverside palace, where he spent his days in feasting and gay living.

Now this Mandarin had an only daughter, a pretty, black-haired girl named Coo-Ee. He was very proud of her; and it was the dearest wish of his heart that she should marry some rich lord.

The Mandarin's secretary, a handsome young man named Chang, happened one day to be passing through the palace gardens and met Coo-Ee. Directly he set eyes on the maiden he fell in love.

One day she noticed on the water below a tiny boat made of half a cocoanut shell, and fitted with a little sail that sent it merrily forward.



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And Coo-Ee, who had never seen so fine and handsome a young man before, fell in love with him too. The young people knew quite well that the old Mandarin would never allow his pretty daughter to wed a poor secretary, but they loved each other so much that they felt they would rather die than be parted.

Every evening, as the sun went down, Coo-Ee, attended by her faithful handmaid, would meet Chang in some sheltered part of the gardens, and they would wander hand in hand through the orange-groves and by the placid waters of the lake, telling each other of their love.

One day a spying servant told the Mandarin of the lovers' meetings. He was in a great fury, and drove Chang from the house, declaring that if he ever attempted to see Coo-Ee again he should surely die.

The lovely Coo-Ee was then shut up in a set of rooms behind the banquet-hall; and as these rooms were surrounded on three sides by water, and had no outlet except through the banquet-hall, where the Mandarin sat nearly all day long, Coo-Ee could hardly stir without his knowledge. He dismissed her handmaid, and put an ugly, cross old woman in her place.

But not wishing to spoil his daughter's beauty by depriving her of fresh air, he caused a balcony to be built, jutting out over the water's edge, where she could lounge in the sunshine.

The Mandarin soon afterwards betrothed his daughter to a rich lord, who was old and ugly, and very disagreeable; and Coo-Ee was told that, whether she liked or no, when the peach-trees bloomed in spring, her marriage would take place.

Poor Coo-Ee was very miserable indeed, and spent her days in weeping and sighing.

No news came from Chang, but she did not despair, for, as they were parted, the young man had managed to whisper, "Do not fear, dear one. You shall never be wedded to another whilst I live. I may not be able to come at once, but be sure that I shall come in time to save my own true love! Trust me, and all will yet be well!"

But as the weeks sped by and no message came from Chang, Coo-Ee grew very sad, and all her pretty smiles vanished.

"Surely he is dead," she said again and again.

One day, as she stood on her little balcony

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overlooking the lake, she noticed on the water below a tiny boat made of half a cocoanut shell, and fitted with a little sail that sent it merrily forward. Leaning over the edge, she managed to reach the boat with her sunshade. Within the shell was a folded note which proved to be a message from Chang. He told her he had heard of her coming marriage with the rich lord, and that if it ever came to pass he would certainly die.

At this Coo-Ee wept, but presently, drying her tears, she wrote a hopeful and loving little message in reply, bidding her lover not despair, but to try and save her.

Putting her message in the little boat, she set a lighted joss-stick at one end, and launched it on the water. The light burned steadily, and the little vessel sailed out of sight without mishap. Coo-Ee took this for a good omen, and hope bloomed anew in her heart.

But for many days no further message came from Chang; and when at last the willow-blossoms faded, and the buds on the peach-trees began to unfold, she despaired again.

One bright morning the Mandarin came into her room bearing a beautiful box of jewels, which he said were a present from the rich

lord, who was coming that very day to feast with him, and to see his future bride.

“Take them away!” cried Coo-Ee, bursting into tears. “I will not marry him for all the jewels in the world! I will marry none but my beloved Chang!”

“Never dare to mention that rogue in my presence again!” roared the Mandarin. “He will never be your husband, for you shall marry the Ta-jin to-morrow! He will be here in a few hours, and will ask to see you after he has feasted on the good things I have had prepared for him. So let your maids dress you in your finest robes, and deck you with the jewels your future husband has sent you, and dry those tears at once or it will be the worse for you!”

When the wedding toilet was completed, the maids further adorned her with the Ta-jin’s jewels, and declared that never had so beautiful and richly dressed a bride been seen before. But Coo-Ee refused to be comforted; and waited in her chamber, her hands folded in her lap, the picture of misery.

Shortly afterwards the Ta-jin arrived, gaily dressed servants going before him, beating gongs and shouting his praises, as was the





The Mandarin raised an alarm, and, snatching up his whip, ran after the lovers.

custom in those days when great lords went visiting.

He was dressed most gorgeously, and wore a broad grin on his ugly face as he thought of the beautiful bride he was soon to secure.

The Mandarin received his visitor with pride, leading him at once to the banquet-hall, where a splendid feast had been set. The revellers drank so much wine, and grew so merry, that they forgot all else, and, indeed, towards evening could scarcely keep their eyes open. So when at dusk a stranger came to the door no one took the slightest notice of him, and he managed to step inside quite unseen by the servants.

This stranger was no other than Chang, the faithful lover. Looking around, he hastily threw on a servant's robe, and then drew a light screen across the entrance to the banquet-hall. He was thus able to step past and enter the room beyond.

In another moment the lovers were in each other's arms.

"We must fly at once," cried Chang.

Coo-Ee gave him the casket of jewels sent her by the Ta-jin, and then, wrapping a dark cloak over her wedding robe, she followed

him as he crept softly behind the screen and down the steps into the garden beyond.

But now the Mandarin chanced to look from the window and caught sight of the fugitives. He raised an alarm, and, snatching his whip, ran after the lovers, shouting to them to stop. But they paid no heed and flew over the bridge, as you may see in any willow-pattern plate. Coo-Ee leads, carrying a distaff which she had snatched up ere she left, to show she did not mean to be an idle wife; the second figure is Chang, bearing the casket of jewels; and last comes the angry, fierce-eyed Mandarin, brandishing his whip.

Luckily for the lovers, the Mandarin, having feasted so long, could not move very quickly; so they had no great difficulty in out-running him and getting safely across the water.

When the Mandarin returned, to the banquet-hall and told his guest what had happened, the Ta-jin flew into a great rage, and vowed to be revenged, declaring that Chang should be executed as a common thief for having run away with his jewels. Soldiers and servants were at once sent in every direction to hunt for the missing pair, but all their

efforts proved vain, for Coo-Ee's former handmaid had met them on the other side of the river, and taken them secretly to her home.

If you look on the left of the plate you will see her little house. Here Coo-Ee and Chang were married, and for a few days lived in peace. But soon their hiding-place was discovered, and late one evening the soldiers came knocking at the door.

The lovers were now in great danger, for the soldiers were at the front, and the house was surrounded by the river on all other sides. The handmaid ran to the door to ask the men their business, and thus gained a few precious moments, during which Chang leapt through the back window into the river. Coo-Ee watched him struggling with the water, swollen high with rain; but shortly, to her great joy, he returned with a boat, which had been kept in readiness.

When the soldiers rushed into the house they found no trace of the lovers, and, though they suspected that the pair had got away by the river, it was too dark to be certain.

The lovers floated swiftly down the stream. If you look at the willow-plate you will see the boat, with Chang at the prow, whilst Coo-Ee sleeps in the cabin.



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The lovers floated swiftly down the stream.

Before daylight they had reached a great river, where many fine vessels of all kinds were to be seen. Here they sold one of their jewels, and with the money bought food and other necessities. For many days and nights afterwards they went on far down the river towards the sea.

Presently they reached a small island where they thought it would be quite safe to remain. Chang crossed to the mainland, and by selling some more of the Ta-jin's jewels was able to buy the island. Then he set to work to build a house.

As the years passed Chang grew quite rich, for he cultivated his little island so well that it bore rich crops. Indeed, he became quite a famous farmer, and wrote a very learned book telling people how their land could be made more fruitful.

Although Chang's book brought him fame, it also led to a great danger, for through its means his ancient enemy learnt where he was. Gathering a great band of soldiers, the wicked Ta-jin sent them to attack the happy island-home.

The peaceful dwellers on the river could do little to defend themselves; and though Chang

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fought bravely, he was quickly slain by a soldier's spear. Seeing her beloved husband fall dead, Coo-Ee, filled with despair, and preferring to die rather than fall into the hands of the Ta-jin, set her room on fire and perished in the flames.

In pity for their sad fate, the good fairies, it is said, caused the spirits of the lovers to take the forms of two immortal doves, and these still float through the world, side by side, the emblems of a love which death itself could not destroy.

The wicked old Ta-jin, as a punishment, was afflicted with a horrible disease which soon brought him to a wretched end.

Now, when you look at mother's willow-pattern-plates you will be able to follow the story, which children, in China and many other lands have loved for ages.

THE END