

The Fish-Basket Goddess

A long time ago in ancient China, all roads to the capitol of Luoyang were flooded everyday with people from the four corners and five directions. Merchants came to trade silk and tea and students arrived on the shore filled with hope for their luck in the imperial examinations. Parents bought sweet cakes for their children to munch on while they watched puppets, acrobats, and lion dancers.

To reach the city gate, everyone had to cross a wide river. Crowds climbed onto boats where they would talk and laugh while watching the water sway like green silk. Sitting happily on the boat, they would open their shiny lacquer lunch boxes to enjoy picnics of pork buns, ginger chicken, steamed fish, and sweet tea.

Then one morning, the River Dragon King woke up in a terrible angry mood and, to spoil everyone else's day, began to stir up giant waves. As he thrashed his tail, all the boats capsized, spilling fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, boys, girls, dogs, cats -- and everybody else -- into the raging river. Seeing them all flapping and flailing their limbs in the roaring water, he burst into laughter. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Look at that little boy soaking wet and struggling like a rat! And that round man bobbing like a watermelon! Oh, see that yellow dog, he can swim, but the wave took his bone away! And that angry cat, I bet she doesn't like getting wet! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

After that day, the dragon became addicted to this game of dunking people.

One little girl, after climbing out on the shore, began to cry. Her pork bun had fallen into the river and she had nothing to eat. Her poor, wet cat was howling miserably. Guan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion, heard the little girl and her cat and decided to come down to help.

The Goddess descended from her heavenly palace all the way to the river bank, where huge waves were splashing against the shore. She called out, "Dragon King! Dragon King! Please come! I have to talk to you!"

The dragon had been having a sweet dream below the water. He was dreaming of eating a banquet of crab and shrimp when he was awakened by the Goddess' earnest calling. Annoyed, he quickly left his dragon bed and rose above the water. When he saw a beautiful young woman standing alone by the cliff, he was too surprised to say anything.

Guan Yin opened her mouth and said most respectfully, “Honorable Dragon King,” she smiled, her face shining with compassion, “I’m here to ask you to stop making waves. They are certainly enjoyable to look at, but do you know that they have also made many people miserable?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” The Dragon King laughed until his whiskers shook, “Pretty lady, of course I know. But that’s what makes me happy!”

Guan Yin tried to be patient. “But many good people have suffered because of your happiness.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Who cares!” The dragon looked proudly at his golden scales glittering in the sun. “I’m having a lot of fun!”

Not only did the Dragon King sneer at the Goddess’ pleas, he decided to show off his power to this pretty woman. With a roar as loud as thunder, he thumped his tail as hard as he could, making waves leap up as high as mountains.

Seeing that the dragon would not be persuaded, Guan Yin flew back to heaven to think of some other way of getting the dragon to stop disturbing the people. When she returned the next day, she transformed herself into a fishmonger and walked straight into the city’s market place. At the busiest spot she set down her basket. Since she was very beautiful and the fish inside her basket were very fresh with shiny scales and moving eyes, a crowd soon started to gather around her.

Everyone wanted to see Guan Yin and in a few minutes all the fish were sold. Still, the people crowded around her. Then the Goddess said, her bright eyes smiling, “Dear ladies and gentlemen, since I have no more fish to sell, we can play a game.” She paused, her face flushed an attractive pink. “The one who can toss the most money into my basket, I’ll be his wife. But the money that misses the basket will be used to build a bridge so that you can all walk safely over the Dragon King’s river.”

The crowd cheered.

A young man cast the pretty fishmonger a suspicious glance. “But how can she tell who cast the most money?”

Another man in a patched shirt looked very sad. “But I’m very poor, and so I’ll never have the chance to marry her.”

A third one burst into laughter. The basket is big, so how can one miss?”

The men could not wait to untie their purses and toss copper, silver and gold coins into Guan Yin's basket.

But something strange happened. None of the money reached the basket. As if all the coins had eyes but were blinded by the goddess's beauty, they landed all over the ground instead.

A year later, a magnificent bridge was seen suspended across the Luoyang River.

The Dragon King, although he could still stir waves, couldn't have the pleasure of dunking people. When he saw all the children with their mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, cats and dogs walking happily on the bridge, he felt so defeated that he finally lost his power even to make waves.