

MISTRESS CLEVER

A CHINESE FOLK TALE



SUPPLEMENT TO
CHINA RECONSTRUCTS

No. 3, 1954

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Once upon a time, there lived on a mountainside a young farmer named Chuang. He worked hard but had to give nearly all his earnings to the wicked Emperor for taxes. So he couldn't afford to take a wife.



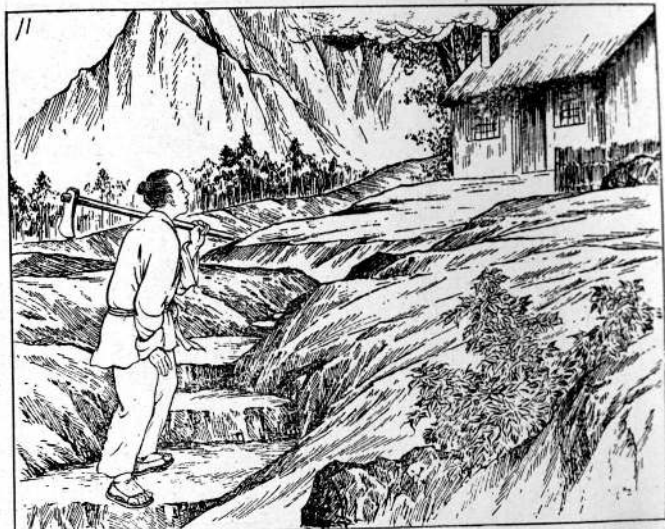
His friends sang: "The Emperor's barns are bursting full,
 Poor Chuang hasn't a penny.
 The Emperor has wives by scores and dozens,
 Poor Chuang hasn't any!"



An artist, sorry for Chuang, painted a picture of a beautiful girl, and gave it to him to brighten the walls of his lonely home.



Chuang fell in love with the charming painting. As he set out for the fields the next morning, he looked at the picture girl and said with a sigh, "If only you could cook for me!"



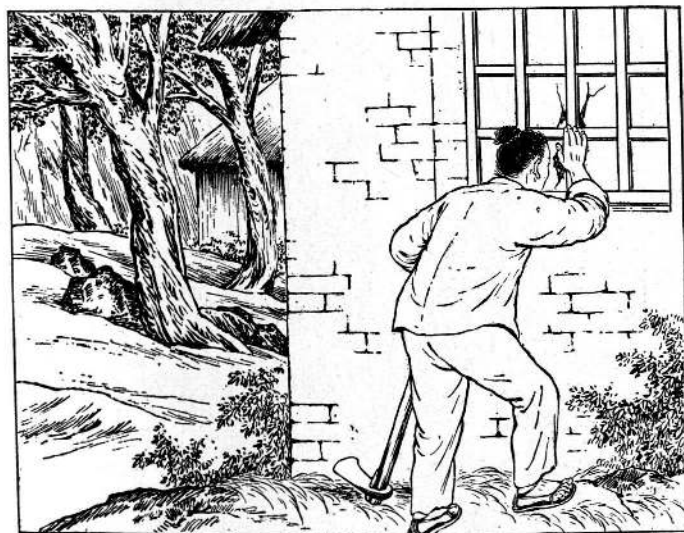
Returning home that evening, he was surprised to see smoke rising from his chimney.



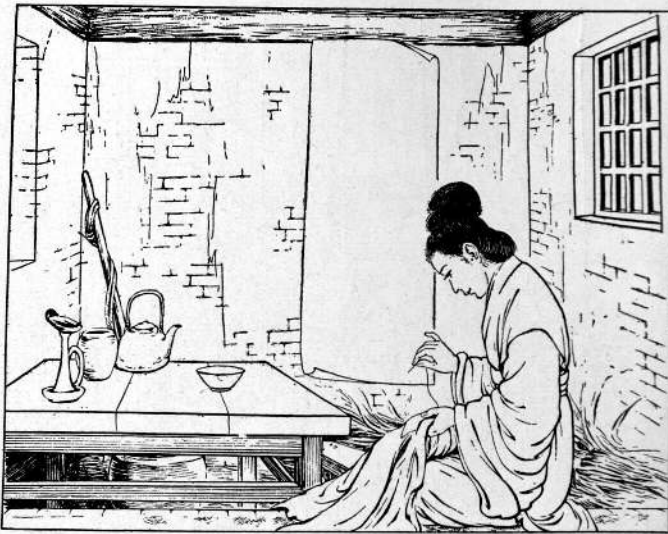
He entered the door, and there were big dumplings steaming on the stove! Chuang was puzzled, but he ate every one. He didn't notice the picture girl smiling at his hearty appetite.



The next day, he left his tattered coat at home, saying "Yesterday, some maiden took pity on me and cooked my dinner. Today, maybe she'll mend my coat."



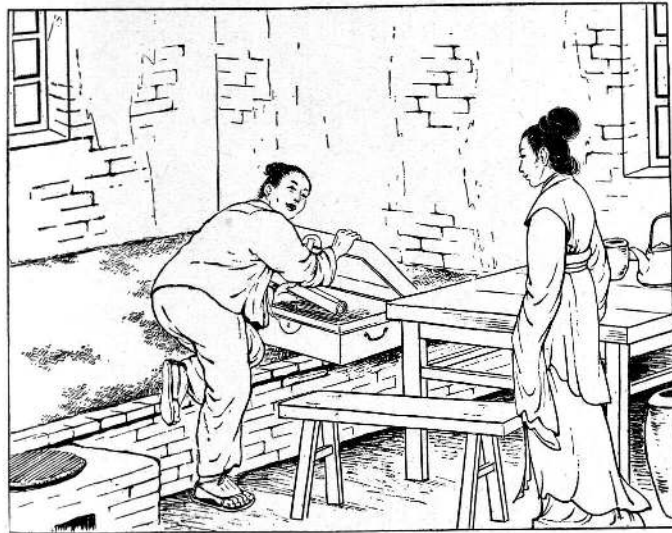
He purposely came home early and peeped in through the window.



A beautiful girl was patching his coat. And the picture had become a blank sheet of paper!



Chuang rushed in and grasped the maiden's hand. "Please," he begged, "never go back to the picture again!" Shyly, she consented. "You're good and honest," she said. "I'll stay with you."



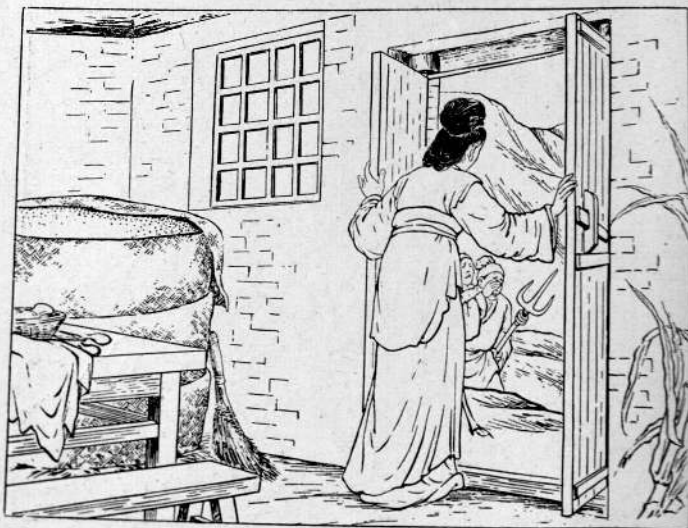
Overjoyed, Chuang rolled up the empty picture and locked it away in a chest.



They knelt before the hearth and solemnly pledged themselves as man and wife.



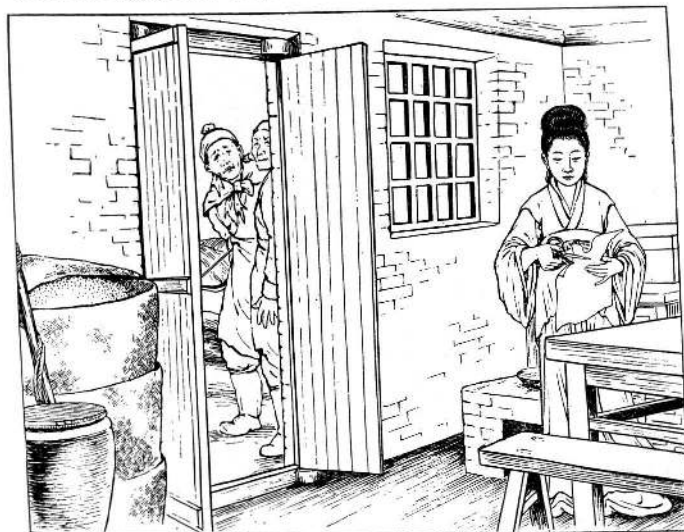
Because the girl was so thrifty and skilful as a housewife, the couple began to make ends meet. Everyone called her "Mistress Clever". Chuang was very happy.



One day, when Mistress Clever was home alone, two men passed her door, weeping loudly. She asked them what was wrong.



The men said they were royal hunters who had not been able to catch any doves for the Emperor, who loved to eat them stewed, every day. They were afraid the Emperor would be angry, and chop off their heads.



"Oh, is that all?" said Mistress Clever. "I can help you. Wait here." She went into the house and cut two doves out of a piece of paper.



She blew once on the paper birds, and they flew out of the door and became real doves. The hunters quickly caught them and, thanking Mistress Clever, departed.



That night, when the Emperor tasted the stewed doves, he asked where such delicious birds had been found. That was how he learned about Mistress Clever.



The Emperor then dispatched his Minister of Birds and Beasts to demand that Mistress Clever send two tasty doves to the palace daily. "I will," said she, "if you stop taxing the poor people on the mountainside." The minister had to agree.



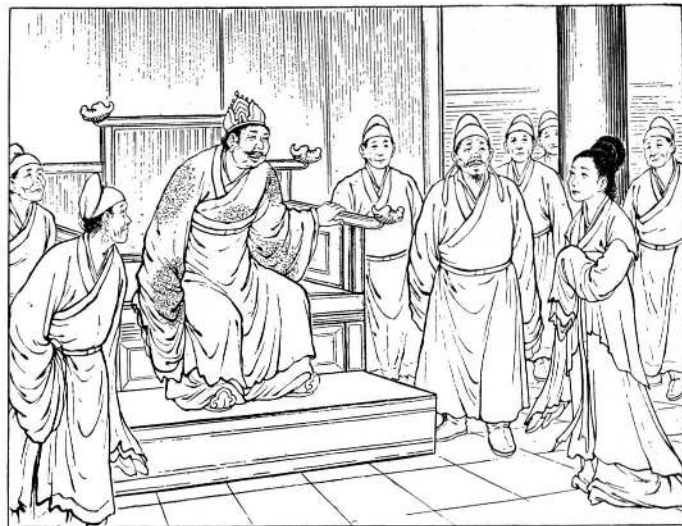
The next morning, Mistress Clever gave Chuang two paper birds to bring to the Emperor. "Will these do?" asked Chuang. "Just deliver them and don't worry," she replied.



In the palace, Chuang took out the paper doves, and at once they came to life. The Minister of Birds and Beasts, and all the other high officials, jumped and scrambled to catch them.



"What right has this dirty farmer to come into my royal palace!" said the Emperor angrily. "Tell his wife to bring the birds herself tomorrow!"



The next day, Mistress Clever came to the palace. When the Emperor saw how lovely she was, he nearly fell off his throne. "You're too beautiful to be married to a simple farmer," he said. "Why not stay here and be my chief wife?"



"My husband is better than you in every way," replied Mistress Clever. "I don't want to leave him." She swept out of the palace before anyone could stop her.



The Emperor was furious. "How dare she say her husband is better than me!" He sent a message challenging Chuang to a horse-race the following day,—“the winner gets the wife!”



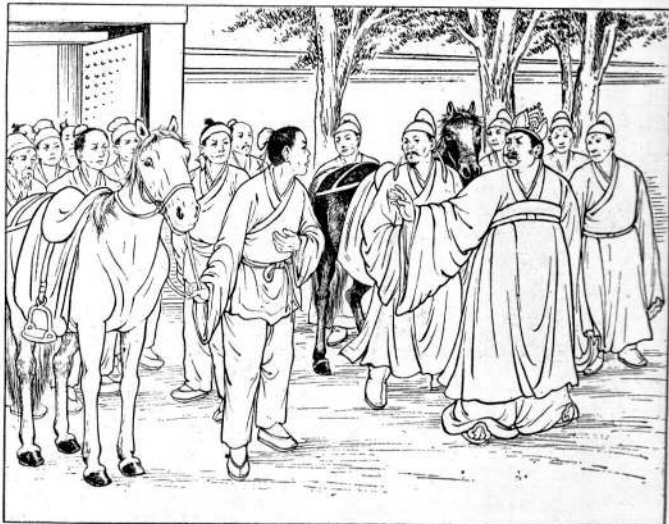
Mistress Clever wasn't worried. "You won't lose," she told Chuang. She built a horse of bamboo and paper, blew on it once, and it became a white mare.



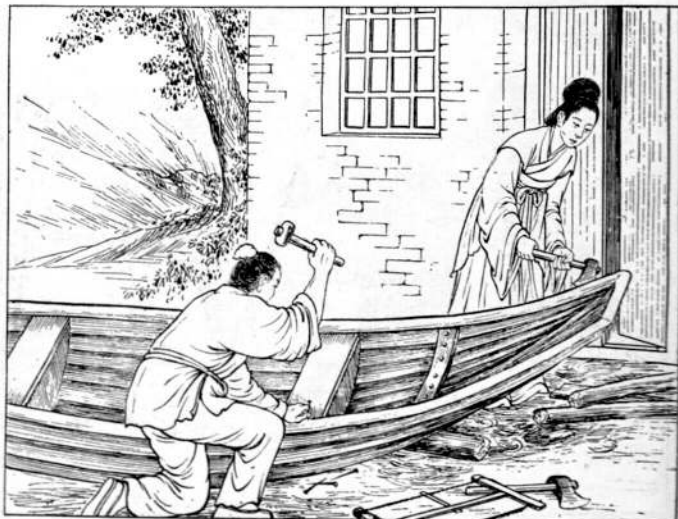
The next day Chuang raced with the Emperor, whose big black charger quickly drew into the lead. The Emperor looked back at Chuang and sneered in triumph.



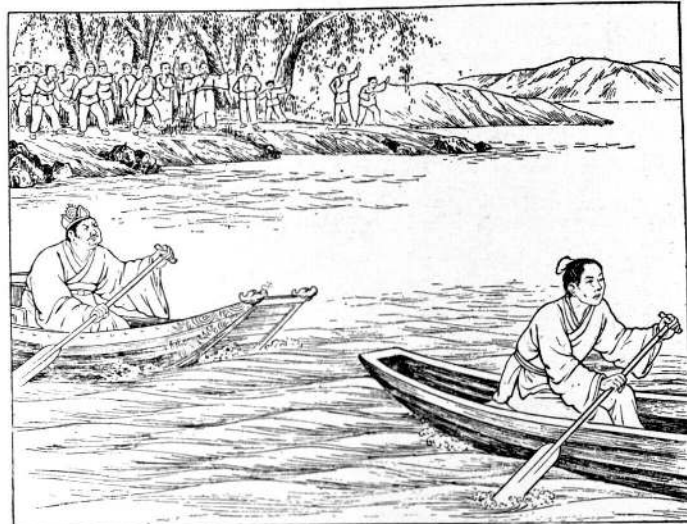
But as they neared the finish, Chuang's white mare suddenly spurred ahead to win. The people cheered and applauded.



"That's all, I suppose?" said Chuang. "Nothing of the sort!" snapped the wicked Emperor. "Tomorrow we'll have a boat race. If you win, you can keep your wife."



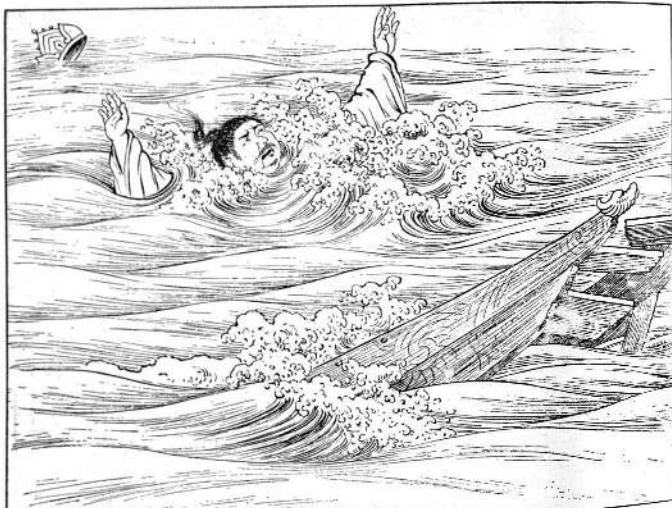
Chuang and his wife worked the whole night and built a boat of cedar. They made the back of it hard and sharp as a



The day of the race, Chuang's boat quickly forged ahead. The crafty Emperor tried to ram Chuang, to overturn his boat and drown him. From the shore, the people shouted a warning.



But when the front of the Emperor's craft struck the hard sharp end of Chuang's boat, the royal vessel split wide open.



The Emperor fell into the river and had to be fished out by his ministers. He was sick as a dog from having swallowed too much water.



"You've ruined my royal robe," yelled the Emperor. "Get me a new one woven from the feathers of birds and embroidered with a dragon, a phoenix, the sea and the sun! Bring it in three days, or I'll chop off your head."



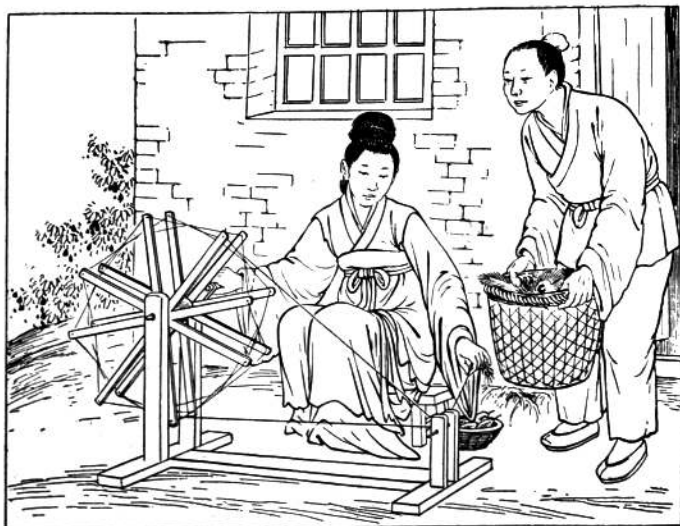
Mistress Clever told Chuang to help her cut out paper birds of all sizes and shapes. She tossed them into the air, singing, "Fly away little sisters, fly, fly away, but first drop some feathers for me today!"



In an instant, thousands of birds filled the evening sky, their beating wings blocking out the moonlight.



Then beautiful feathers of every shade and colour came fluttering down, and thickly carpeted the ground.



Chuang and Mistress Clever spun the feathers into thread. Then they wove the thread into cloth.



They embroidered the phoenix and the dragon. But by the evening of the third day they hadn't finished the sea and the sun. Chuang was so worried that he wept. His tears fell on the robe and became the sea.



Mistress Clever had been working so hard, her fingers began to bleed. Her blood fell on the robe and became the sun. They had finished their task.



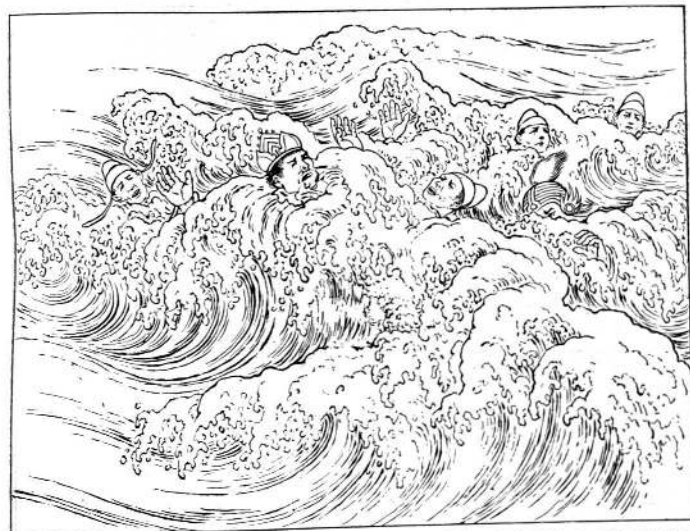
The Emperor was delighted with the robe. But he still tried to keep Mistress Clever in his palace. "I want to see with my own eyes how she makes me another robe," he said cunningly.



"I can make you ten robes if you want," said Mistress Clever. "But first try this one on. We both worked very hard on it. We want to see how it fits."



"All right," said the Emperor. He put on the gorgeous new robe. Mistress Clever suddenly puffed a breath at him, and the sea on the robe turned into real waves.



Higher and higher rose the waves. The Minister of Birds and Beasts and the other high officials and generals rushed to rescue the Emperor. But the wicked Emperor and his whole court were drowned in the foaming sea.



Chuang and Mistress Clever set free the girls who had been forced to marry the Emperor and be his slaves. Standing on the shore, they watched a great red sun climbing above the sea into the heavens.



Thousands of birds again filled the sky, singing as they flew:
 "Fly, fly, fly! Fly to freedom for life.
 Congratulations Chuang, Mistress Clever,
 Splendid young husband and wife!"



巧媳婦