

From Bad to Good to Bad to Good

In ancient times there lived in the northern steppes of China a young farmer who was a fancier of horses. It was a great blow to him when, one day, his favourite mare ran away and crossed the frontier into the land of the barbarians. All his neighbours and friends came to sympathize with him in his sorrow—and indeed he was inconsolable—but they found the young man's father perversely cheerful.

'Sorrow?' he said. 'Ah yes, it is sad to lose one's horse, but then who is to know what blessing might not come from this bad fortune? We shall just have to wait and see.'

Several months later the horse came back home, bringing a handsome Mongolian stallion running alongside. Now the neighbours and friends gathered to admire the stallion and rejoice in the young farmer's great good fortune, but this time they found the father shaking his head in the other direction.

'Ah, yes,' he said darkly, 'this seems like good fortune well enough, but who is to know what bad thing might not come of it?' He continued to shake his head with gloomy foreboding. 'We must wait and see.'

With his favourite mare back in the stable and the magnificent stallion in the next stall, the young man began to enjoy a life of luxury and spent more and more time riding and less and less time farming. Then one day

FROM BAD TO GOOD TO BAD TO GOOD

while riding hard, he was thrown from the stallion's back and broke his hip-bone. Again his relatives and friends and neighbours came to sigh over this misfortune, but there was the farmer's father belying their grief once more.

'Hoh!' he cried. 'Let us not mourn just yet, for who is to know what blessing is even now on its way because of this accident? Wait and see! Wait and see!'

They didn't have to wait long. Before the month was out barbarians attacked the northern frontier and all the able-bodied men were called to arms to repel them. So fierce was the fighting that nine out of ten perished in the invaders' onslaught, and many a young man's bed was forever after empty.

Not so the young farmer's.

His unfortunate fall from the horse left him unfit for battle. When everybody else went off to be slaughtered by the barbarians, he was forced to remain at home with his father, safe.

In later years—he lived to a ripe old age—when winter chills sent an ache through his mended bone, he was only grateful for the twinges of pain. They reminded him of his great good fortune to be alive.

Han Dynasty (202 BC – AD 220)