

The Noodle

A long time ago in China, there lived a very rich man whose only son was so dull of wit that no amount of money spent on his upbringing could make him appear less stupid in word or deed. His most inconsequential act ended in disaster; if he didn't spill soup down the fronts of his father's guests, then he slopped tea down their backs. To answer the simplest question he must scratch at his head to get his thoughts on the move, saying first hmmm, then dmmm, and shifting from one foot to another like a beggar waiting at the gate; even at that the words tumbled out all wrong. People laughed at the very mention of his name and called him 'that Noodle!' so often that indeed his own name fell out of use.

When the Noodle was still a very young child and seemingly quite clever enough for a rich man's son, his father had arranged a marriage for him with the daughter of an extremely proud and important family in the same district. Now, however, the future father-in-law regretted the arrangement and was determined not to give his daughter to such a dolt. The Noodle's father was distressed at the possibility of losing this excellent marriage connection; as a last resort, he gave his foolish son one hundred pieces of silver and sent him out into the world to sharpen his wits enough to win his bride. 'For,' said the father, 'the blind mendicant at my gate has more

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wit than my son. It must come from grubbing about in the streets and rubbing about in the countryside.'

With the coins clinking in his pocket, the Noodle left home. For two days he wandered here and there, looking in vain for someone to teach him the winning of a bride. Early on the third day he happened into a garden where there was a small pond. A gardener stood gazing into the water, shaking his head sorrowfully, and murmuring:

'Here's water sparkling to the brim—

How sad no fishes in it swim!'

The Noodle thought this sentiment was charming, so pleasingly and gracefully it expressed. He offered to pay twenty silver pieces if the man would teach it to him. This the gardener was only too pleased to do, and proffered an additional text at no extra cost: 'A fool and his money are soon at some distance from each other,' but the Noodle was interested only in wisdom, not in bargains. When he could say the couplet by heart, he paid the gardener and went on.

Soon the Noodle arrived at the outskirts of a village. There he found an old farmer with a cart stopped at the edge of a deep stream that was bridged by a single board. While casting about for another board with which to widen the little bridge, the farmer kept pulling at his scrimpy beard and muttering:

'One puny plank will not suffice

On which to move a load of rice.'

Pleased by the sound of this rhyme, the Noodle rushed up to the farmer and offered to pay twenty silver pieces for the teaching of it to him. The old man was overjoyed to earn so much so easily, and repeated the rhyme until the Noodle could say it without stumbling. He also offered to

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teach him 'A fool and his money are soon strangers to each other,' but the Noodle would take only what he had paid for and went on, saying his two couplets over by turn so as not to forget them.

Later, walking in the woods, he stumbled upon two hunters, both aiming their weapons at a brightly-coloured bird as it fluttered back and forth between two huts. Together they chanted:

'From east to west the red bird flies—

Now which man wins, and which one sighs?'

The Noodle had no difficulty getting the hunters to teach him their verse for twenty coins apiece, and refusing their further offering of 'A fool's pocket leaks money,' he turned homeward, for he had spent nearly all of his pieces of silver.

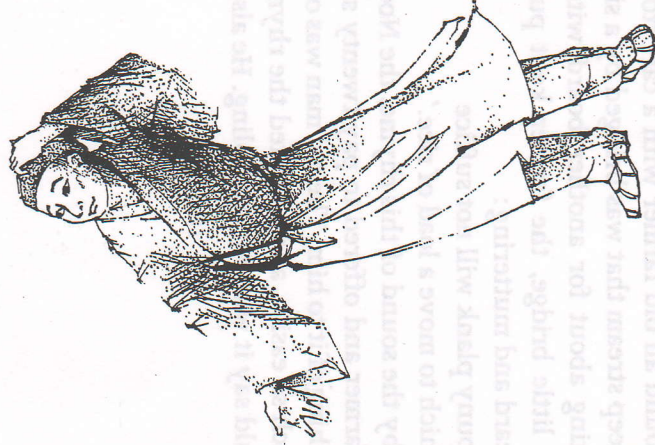
As he entered the city gate, he saw a guest taking leave of his host and overheard his parting words:

'I've much to say, but time is short—

I'll tell the rest to you at court.'

His fancy once more caught, the Noodle hastily approached the departing guest and asked him to repeat the verse. The guest did so with alacrity when he saw the twenty coins and wished to add for good measure, 'A fool's money runs away faster than a burbling stream,' but the Noodle, busily memorizing the couplet, paid no attention. He paid out the last of the money to the guest and hurried on, content that he had spent his hundred pieces of silver wisely and well.

When he neared his future bride's home, he was astonished to find it brightly lit with festive lanterns and wondered how his bride's family had known he would be back this very day for the wedding. The flurry caused by



his entrance was gratifying, though of course quite befitting the arrival of a bridegroom. He graciously allowed himself to be escorted to a place at the feast.

The ushers, at first outraged by the Noodle's appearance, quickly realized the amusement they might have at his expense, for clearly he had no idea that his intended bride was about to be given in marriage to another. When they brought soup to the other guests, therefore, they gave the Noodle but a bowl of warm water and stood by to watch his face when he tasted it.

Bowl in hand, the Noodle was about to drink when he appeared to be struck with a thought, and said loudly:

'Here's water sparkling to the brim—

How sad no fishes in it swim!'

In great chagrin, the ushers quickly exchanged the water for soup. When the main course was served, however, they couldn't resist baiting the Noodle by furnishing him with one chopstick instead of a pair. The Noodle seemed not the least bit perturbed by this slight, but only looked about at the assembled guests and said amiably:

'One puny plank will not suffice

On which to move a load of rice.'

All of the guests were amazed at the Noodle's witty dealing with an embarrassing social situation; and the ushers, shamefaced, brought him a pair of chopsticks.

When the bride in her red wedding dress stood with the groom, ready for the marriage ceremony, the Noodle's clear and innocent voice rose over their heads:

'From east to west the red bird flies—

Now which man wins, and which one sighs?'

The witnesses began to admire this man who could coolly compose verses while watching the celebration of his intended bride's marriage with another. Clearly, the Noodle was not nearly so foolish as they had been led to believe; perhaps the girl's proud father was wrong not to honour his agreement.

For his part, the Noodle was beginning to feel bored with the proceedings and exceedingly tired from his journeyings. He wished to leave, but he still had one of his dearly-purchased verses left. Therefore, he sought out his host, the girl's father, bade him good-bye, and, stifling his yawns, recited the last couplet:

'T've much to say, but time is short—

I'll tell the rest to you at court.'

The father, being no fool himself, was quick to

recognize the threat of a lawsuit for not honouring a marriage contract. Thoroughly frightened, he turned the other suitor out of the house. With all the haste that ceremony would allow, then, he led the Noodle to his daughter's side, and the marriage was performed at once.

If afterwards, through habit, people still occasionally referred to the bridegroom as the Noodle, they did so with the respect due a man who could, solely through his wit, marry into the most important family in the district. As for the family, they never showed anything but delight in having such an amiable son-in-law in their midst.

Oral tradition