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The Mandarin And The Butterfly

L. Frank Baum

A mandarin once lived in Kiang-ho who was so exceedingly cross and disagreeable that everyone hated him. He snarled and stormed at every person he met and was never known to laugh or be merry under any circumstances. Especially he hated boys and girls; for the boys jeered at him, which aroused his wrath, and the girls made fun of him, which hurt his pride.

When he had become so unpopular that no one would speak to him, the emperor heard about it and commanded him to emigrate to America. This suited the mandarin very well; but before he left China he stole the Great Book of Magic that belonged to the wise magician Haot-sai. Then, gathering up his little store of money, he took ship for America.

He settled in a city of the middle west and started a laundry.

He made no acquaintances with other Chinese of the town, who, when they met him and saw the red button in his hat, knew him for a real mandarin and bowed low before him. He put up a red and white sign and people brought their laundry to him and got paper checks, with Chinese characters upon them, in exchange, this being the only sort of character the mandarin had left.

One day as he was ironing in his shop in the basement of 263 1/2 Main street, he looked up and saw a crowd of childish faces pressed against the window. He hated them and tried to drive them away. But as soon as he returned to his work they were back at the window again, mischievously smiling down upon him.

The naughty mandarin uttered horrid words in the Manchu language and made fierce gestures; but this did no good at all. The children stayed as long as they pleased, and they came again the very next day as soon as school was over, and likewise the next day, and the next. For they saw their presence at the window bothered the man and were delighted accordingly.

The following day being Sunday the children did not appear, but as the mandarin worked in his little shop a big butterfly flew in at the open door and fluttered about the room.

The mandarin closed the door and chased the butterfly until he caught it, when he pinned it against the wall by sticking two pins through its beautiful wings. This did not hurt the butterfly, there being no feeling in its wings; but it made

him a safe prisoner.

This butterfly was of large size and its wings were exquisitely marked by gorgeous colors laid out in regular designs like the stained glass windows of a cathedral.

The mandarin now opened his wooden chest and drew forth the Great Book of Magic he had stolen from Haot-sai. Turning the pages slowly he came to a passage describing “How to understand the language of butterflies.” This he read carefully and then mixed a magic formula in a tin cup and drank it down with a wry face. Immediately thereafter he spoke to the butterfly in its own language, saying:

“Why did you enter this room?”

“I smelled bees-wax,” answered the butterfly; “therefore I thought I might find honey here.”

“But you are my prisoner,” said the mandarin. “If I please I can kill you, or leave you on the wall to starve to death.”

“I expect that,” replied the butterfly, with a sigh. “But my race is shortlived, anyway; it doesn’t matter whether death comes sooner or later.”

“Yet you like to live, do you not?” asked the mandarin.

“Yet; life is pleasant and the world is beautiful. I do not seek death.”

“Then,” said the mandarin, “I will give you life—a long and pleasant life—if you will promise to obey me for a time and carry out my instructions.”

“How can a butterfly serve a man?” asked the creature, in surprise.

“Usually they cannot,” was the reply. “But I have a book of magic which teaches me strange things. Do you promise?”

“Oh, yes; I promise,” answered the butterfly; “for even as your slave I will get some enjoyment out of life, while should you kill me—that is the end of everything!”

“Truly,” said the mandarin, “butterflies have no souls, and therefore cannot live again.”

“But I have enjoyed three lives already,” returned the butterfly, with some pride. “I have been a caterpillar and a chrysalis before I became a butterfly. You were never anything but a man, although I admit your life is longer than mine.”

“I will extend your life for many days, if you will obey me,” declared the man. “I can easily do so by means of my magic.”

“Of course I will obey you,” said the butterfly, carelessly.

“Then, listen! You know children, do you not?—boys and girls?”

“Yes, I know them. They chase me, and try to catch me, as you have done,” replied the butterfly.

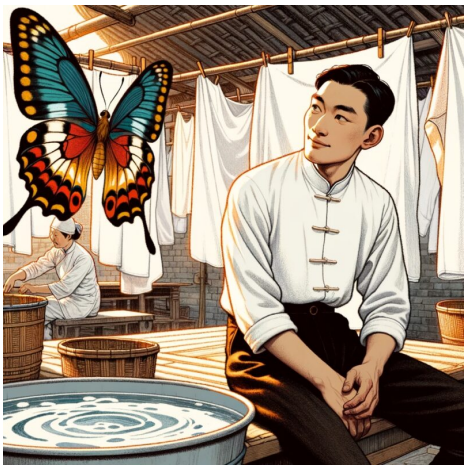
“And they mock me, and jeer at me through the window,” continued the mandarin, bitterly. “Therefore, they are your enemies and mine! But with your aid and the help of the magic book we shall have a fine revenge for their insults.”

“I don’t care much for revenge,” said the butterfly. “They are but children, and ’tis natural they should wish to catch such a beautiful creature as I am.”

“Nevertheless, I care! and you must obey me,” retorted the mandarin, harshly. “I, at least, will have my revenge.”

Then he stuck a drop of molasses upon the wall beside the butterfly’s head and said:

“Eat that, while I read my book and prepare my magic formula.”



So the butterfly feasted upon the molasses and the mandarin studied his book, after which he began to mix a magic compound in the tin cup.

When the mixture was ready he released the butterfly from the wall and said to it:

“I command you to dip your two front feet into this magic compound and then fly away until you meet a child. Fly close, whether it be a boy or a girl, and touch the child upon its forehead with your feet. Whosoever is thus touched, the book declares, will at once become a pig, and will remain such forever after. Then return to me and dip your legs afresh in the contents of this cup. So shall all my enemies, the children, become miserable swine, while no one will think of accusing me of the sorcery.”

“Very well; since such is your command, I obey,” said the butterfly. Then it dipped its front legs, which were the shortest of the six, into the contents of the tin cup, and flew out of the door and away over the houses to the edge of the town. There it alighted in a flower garden and soon forgot all about its mission to turn children into swine.

In going from flower to flower it soon brushed the magic compound from its legs, so that when the sun began to set and the butterfly finally remembered its master, the mandarin, it could not have injured a child had it tried.

But it did not intend to try.

“That horrid old man,” it thought, “hates children and wishes to destroy them. But I rather like children myself and shall not harm them. Of course I must return to my master, for he is a magician, and would seek me out and kill me; but I can deceive him about this matter easily enough.”

When the butterfly flew in at the door of the mandarin’s laundry he asked, eagerly:

“Well, did you meet a child?”

“I did,” replied the butterfly, calmly. “It was a pretty, golden-haired girl—but now ’tis a grunting pig!”

“Good! Good! Good!” cried the mandarin, dancing joyfully about the room. “You shall have molasses for your supper, and to-morrow you must change two children into pigs.”

The butterfly did not reply, but ate the molasses in silence. Having no soul it had no conscience, and having no conscience it was able to lie to the mandarin with great readiness and a certain amount of enjoyment.

Next morning, by the mandarin’s command, the butterfly dipped its legs in the mixture and flew away in search of children.

When it came to the edge of the town it noticed a pig in a sty, and alighting upon the rail of the sty it looked down at the creature and thought.

“If I could change a child into a pig by touching it with the magic compound, what could I change a pig into, I wonder?”

Being curious to determine this fine point in sorcery the butterfly fluttered down and touched its front feet to the pig’s nose. Instantly the animal disappeared, and in its place was a shock-headed, dirty looking boy, which sprang from the sty and ran down the road uttering load whoops.

“That’s funny,” said the butterfly to itself. “The mandarin would be very angry with me if he knew of this, for I have liberated one more of the creatures that bother him.”

It fluttered along after the boy, who had paused to throw stones at a cat. But the cat escaped by running up a tree, where thick branches protected her from the stones. Then the boy discovered a newly-planted garden, and trampled upon the beds until the seeds were scattered far and wide, and the garden was ruined.

Next he caught up a switch and struck with it a young calf that stood quietly grazing in a field. The poor creature ran away with piteous bleats, and the boy laughed and followed after it, striking the frightened animal again and again.

“Really,” thought the butterfly, “I do not wonder the mandarin hates children, if they are all so cruel and wicked as this one.”

The calf having escaped him the boy came back to the road, where he met two little girls on their way to school. One of them had a red apple in her hand, and the boy snatched it away and began eating it. The little girl commenced to cry, but her companion, more brave and sturdy, cried out:

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you nasty boy!”

At this the boy reached out and slapped her pretty face, whereupon she also began to sob.

Although possessed of neither soul nor conscience, the butterfly had a very tender heart, and now decided it could endure this boy no longer.

“If I permitted him to exist,” it reflected, “I should never forgive myself, for the monster would do nothing but evil from morning ’til night.”

So it flew directly into his face and touched his forehead with its sticky front feet.

The next instant the boy had disappeared, but a grunting pig ran swiftly up the road in the direction of its sty.

The butterfly gave a sigh of relief.

“This time I have indeed used the mandarin’s magic upon a child,” it whispered, as it floated lazily upon the light breeze; “but since the child was originally a pig I do not think I have any cause to reproach myself. The little girls were sweet and gentle, and I would not injure them to save my life, but were all boys like this transformed pig, I should not hesitate to carry out the mandarin’s orders.”

Then it flew into a rose bush, where it remained comfortably until evening. At sundown it returned to its master.

“Have you changed two of them into pigs?” he asked, at once.

“I have,” replied the butterfly. “One was a pretty, black-eyed baby, and the other a freckle-faced, red-haired, barefooted newboy.”

“Good! Good! Good!” screamed the mandarin, in an ecstasy of delight. “Those are the ones who torment me the most! Change every newboy you meet into a pig!”

“Very well,” answered the butterfly, quietly, and ate its supper of molasses.

Several days were passed by the butterfly in the same manner. It fluttered aimlessly about the flower gardens while the sun shone, and returned at night to the mandarin with false tales of turning children into swine. Sometimes it would be one child which was transformed, sometimes two, and occasionally three; but the mandarin always greeted the butterfly’s report with intense delight and gave him molasses for supper.

One evening, however, the butterfly thought it might be well to vary the report, so that the mandarin might not grow suspicious; and when its master asked what child had been had been changed into a pig that day the lying creature answered:

“It was a boy, and when I touched him he became a pig.”

This angered the mandarin, who was in an especially cross mood. He spitefully snapped the butterfly with his finger, and nearly broke its beautiful wing.

The butterfly became very indignant at this abuse from the mandarin. It refused to eat its molasses and sulked all the evening, for it had grown to hate the mandarin almost as much as the mandarin hated children.

When morning came it was still trembling with indignation; but the mandarin cried out:

“Make haste, miserable slave; for to-day you must change four children into pigs, to make up for yesterday.”

The butterfly did not reply. His little black eyes were sparkling wickedly, and no sooner had he dipped his feet into the magic compound than he flew full in the mandarin’s face, and touched him upon his ugly, flat forehead.

Soon after a gentleman came into the room for his laundry. The mandarin was not there, but running around the place was a repulsive, scrawny pig, which squealed most miserably.

The butterfly flew away to a brook and washed from its feet all traces of the magic compound. When night came it slept in a rose bush.

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