



THE GOLDEN TORTOISE

GREAT-HEART and Perfect-Nobility had been friends since childhood. Great-Heart was rich and Perfect-Nobility was poor.

One day Great-Heart said to Perfect-Nobility:

"You lack the necessary funds to set up a business. Let us advance you enough capital for a beginning, and you can pay us back when you are able."

Perfect-Nobility reflected for a long time:

"I should accept," he said to himself, "these friends are kind and sincere. But if I fail in my enterprise, how will I be able to pay off the debt?"

He consulted his wife. She shared his scruples, and the two were unanimous in their decision to refuse the offer and resign themselves to a lifetime of poverty.

* * *

The next day Perfect-Nobility went to the home of his friend.

"I thank my brother and sister," he said, "but truly I do not know what kind of business I could go into. I cannot accept your money."

During the conversation, Great-Heart showed his guest a golden tortoise that he had had cast from all the precious metal he and his wife possessed. They chatted awhile, drank tea together, and then dozed off.

While they were asleep, Great-Heart's son entered the room. He saw the golden tortoise on the table and carried it out of the room, intending to play with it. Later, he left for a neighboring village without returning the tortoise.

Shortly after the two friends awoke. Perfect-Nobility took leave of his friend without either of them observing that the golden tortoise had disappeared.

* * *

As soon as Great-Heart noticed that the golden tortoise was gone he questioned his wife about the matter. She replied that she had not touched the tortoise. He did not know what to think, but not for a moment was Perfect-Nobility under suspicion.

When Great-Heart and Perfect-Nobility met on the following day, the former said:

"Did you by any chance take our golden tortoise to show to your wife? Please keep it as long as you like."

Perfect-Nobility and his wife were thus placed in a cruelly embarrassing situation. "We are poor," they



said to each other, "if we say that we do not have the tortoise, others will be under suspicion. We must spare our friends this misfortune."

Perfect-Nobility and his wife sold the few goods that they possessed and went to knock at the door of the richest landlord of the region, Generous-Opulence, the owner of immense paddy fields. They threw themselves at his feet and begged him to take them into his service for life, in exchange for the quantity of gold needed to cast another golden tortoise, which they could deliver to Great-Heart.

As soon as he had heard their story, Generous-Opulence obtained the necessary gold and gave it to the goldsmith who had manufactured the original tortoise. Thus everything was done in accordance with the wishes of Perfect-Nobility and his wife. However Generous-Opulence did not demand that they remain in his service. On their part, Perfect-Nobility and his wife refused to leave and remained in the home of their benefactor, "in order to wait on him hand and foot."

* * *

Sometime later Great-Heart's son returned the golden tortoise to the room and was surprised to see a second tortoise there.

"Papa! Mama!" he cried as soon as he had seen it. "You thought it was lost! Fortunately I took it!"

The parents were completely dumbfounded. Of the two tortoises which was really theirs? And whence came the other?

Having suspected the truth, Great-Heart hastened

VIETNAMESE LEGENDS



132



133

to the home of Perfect-Nobility. He found the house deserted. The neighbors told him that his friends had sold themselves into the service of Generous-Opulence and could be found in the latter's home.

Emotionally touched, Great-Heart ran there as fast as he could. He sent for Perfect-Nobility and the two friends burst into tears and embraced heartily.

Great-Heart desired to deliver the second tortoise into the hands of Generous-Opulence in order to redeem his friends' freedom.

But Generous-Opulence answered him thusly:

"You have borrowed nothing from me; therefore there is no question of returning anything. As for your two friends, I have never commanded them to remain here. You do not have to redeem them; they have never ceased to be free."

It was impossible to arrive at an agreement. Generous-Opulence would not accept the gold that he had given them. Perfect-Nobility and his wife considered themselves indentured and refused to leave the service of Generous-Opulence. Great-Heart did not wish to keep that which did not belong to him.

Finally, they found it necessary to refer the case to the mandarin. We do not know his decision.