The Ch‘i-lin Purse

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Folk tales are stories or legends that are told over and over from one generation to the next. As you read, imagine that someone is sitting next to you telling you the story.
It is said that many years ago in China, in a small town called Teng-chou, there lived a wealthy widow, Mrs. Hsüeh. She had only one daughter, Hsüeh Hsiang-ling. Hsiang-ling was beautiful and intelligent, and her mother loved her dearly. But since everything Hsiang-ling wanted was given to her, she became rather spoiled.

When Hsiang-ling was sixteen years old, her mother decided that it was time for her to marry. Through a matchmaker, Hsiang-ling was engaged to a young man from a wealthy family in a neighboring town. Mrs. Hsüeh wanted to prepare a dowry for Hsiang-ling that no girl in town could match. But Hsiang-ling was hard to please. Almost everything her mother bought for her was returned or exchanged at least two or three times.

When the dowry was finally complete, Mrs. Hsüeh decided to add one more item to it. It was the Ch'i-lin Purse, a red satin bag embroidered on both sides with a ch'i-lin, a legendary animal from ancient times. The ch'i-lin had scales all over its body and a single horn on its head. In the old Chinese tradition, the ch'i-lin is the symbol of a promising male offspring. Mrs. Hsüeh wanted to give Hsiang-ling the purse because she hoped that her daughter would give birth to a talented son.

When the purse Mrs. Hsüeh had ordered was ready, a family servant brought it home. But Hsiang-ling was not satisfied at all. “I don’t like the pattern, take it back!” she said.

The servant returned to the store and ordered another. But when it was brought home, Hsiang-ling merely glanced at it and said, “The colors of the ch'i-lin are too dark, take it back!”

The servant went to place another order, but the new purse still did not please her. This time the servant broke down in tears. “I won’t go back again, young mistress. The people in the store laugh at me. They say I am hard to please. This is not true. You are the one who is hard to please. If you don’t want this purse, I am going to leave you and work for someone else.”

Although Hsiang-ling was spoiled, she was not a mean-spirited person. She somehow began to feel sorry for the old man, who had been with her family for more than forty years. So she looked at the purse and said, “All right, I will have this one. You may go and pay for it.” The servant went back to the store, paid for the purse, and gave it to Mrs. Hsüeh.

Hsiang-ling’s wedding fell on the eighteenth day of the sixth month according to the lunar calendar. It was the day Hsiang-ling had longed for since her engagement. She was very excited and yet a bit sad, because she knew she was leaving her mother and the home she had lived in for sixteen years.

Hsiang-ling wore a red silk dress and a red silk veil over her head. As she sat in her hua-chiao, a sedan chair draped with red satin, and waited to be carried to her new home, her mother came to present her with the Ch'i-lin Purse. “My dear child,” she said as she lifted up the satin curtain in front, “this is your ta-hsi-jih-tzu, your big, happy day. I am delighted to see you get married even though I will miss you terribly. Here is the Ch'i-lin Purse. I have put some wonderful things in it. But don't open it now. Wait until you are in your new home, and you will feel that I am with you.”
Hsiang-ling was hardly listening. She was thinking about the wedding and wondering about her husband-to-be, whom she had never met. She took the purse and laid it on her lap. A few minutes later, four footmen came. Picking up the hua-chiao, they placed it on their shoulders, and the wedding procession began.

As the procession reached the road, it started to rain. Soon it was pouring so heavily that the footmen could not see well enough to continue. The wedding procession came to a halt, and the hua-chiao was carried into a pavilion that stood alongside the road.

There was another hua-chiao in the pavilion. It was shabby, with holes in the drapes. Hsiang-ling could hear a girl sobbing inside. This annoyed her, because she believed that a person crying on her wedding day could bring bad luck. So she told her maid to go and find out what was wrong.

“The bride is very sad,” the maid said when she returned. “She is poor and has nothing to take to her new home.”

Hsiang-ling couldn’t help feeling sorry for the girl. Then her eyes fell on the Ch'i-lin Purse in her lap. She realized that she was lucky to have so many things, while this girl had nothing. Since she wasn’t carrying any money with her, she handed the Ch'i-lin Purse to her maid. “Give this to the girl, but don’t mention my name.”

So the maid went over and gave the purse to the other bride. The girl stopped crying at once. Hsiang-ling had given away her mother’s wedding gift without ever finding out what was inside.
A few minutes later, the rain stopped, the footmen picked up Hsiang-ling’s hua-chiao, and the procession continued on its way. In an hour, Hsiang-ling arrived at her new home. She was happily married that evening, and to her delight she found her husband to be a wonderful and handsome young man. In a year’s time, when she became the mother of a little boy, she felt she was the happiest woman in the world.

But six years later, there came a terrible flood. Hsiang-ling and her family lost their home and everything they owned. When they were fleeing their town, Hsiang-ling became separated from her husband and young son in the crowds of other townspeople. After searching for them in vain, Hsiang-ling followed a group of people to another town called Lai-chou. She had given up hope that she would ever see her husband and child again.

As Hsiang-ling sat, exhausted and alone, at the side of the road leading to Lai-chou, a woman came up to her and said, “You must be hungry. Don’t you know that a li (one-third of a mile) down the road there is a food-distribution shack? Yüan-wai Lu has opened it to help the flood victims. Talk to his butler. I am sure you can get something to eat there.”

Hsiang-ling thanked the woman, followed her directions, and found the place. A long line of people with bowls in their hands was waiting to get a ration of porridge. Hsiang-ling had never done such a thing in her life. As she stood in line holding a bowl and waiting her turn, she felt distraught enough to cry, but she forced herself to hold back the tears.

Finally, when it was her turn, Yüan-wai Lu’s butler scooped the last portion of porridge into her bowl and said to the rest of the people in line, “Sorry, no more porridge left. Come back early tomorrow.”

The person behind Hsiang-ling began to sob. Hsiang-ling turned around and saw a woman who reminded her of her mother, except that she was much older. Without a word, she emptied her porridge into the woman’s bowl and walked away.

The butler was surprised at what Hsiang-ling had done. Just as she had made her way back to the road, he caught up with her and said, “Young lady, I don’t understand. Why did you give away your porridge—are you not hungry?”

“I am hungry,” said Hsiang-ling, “but I am young and I can stand hunger a bit longer.”

“You are very unselfish,” said the man. “I would like to help you. My master, Yüan-wai Lu, is looking for someone to take care of his little boy. If you are interested, I would be happy to recommend you.”

Hsiang-ling gratefully accepted his offer and was brought to the house where Yüan-wai Lu and his wife lived.
Yüan-wai Lu, a man in his early thirties, was impressed by Hsiang-ling’s graceful bearing, and he agreed to hire her. “My wife’s health is very delicate and she seldom leaves her room. Your job is to take care of our son. You may play with him anywhere in the garden, but there is one place you must never go. That is the Pearl Hall, the house that stands by itself on the east side of the garden. It is a sacred place, and if you ever go in there, you will be dismissed immediately.”

So Hsiang-ling began her life as a governess. The little boy in her care was very spoiled. Whenever he wanted anything, he wanted it right away, and if he didn’t get it, he would cry and cry until he got it. Hsiang-ling was saddened by his behavior; it reminded her of how spoiled she had been as a child.

One day, Hsiang-ling and the little boy were in the garden. Suddenly, the ball they were playing with disappeared through the window of the Pearl Hall. The boy began to wail, “I want my ball, I want my ball! Go and get my ball.”

“Young Master, I cannot go into the Pearl Hall,” said Hsiang-ling. “Your father doesn’t allow it. I will be dismissed if I do.”

But the little boy only cried louder, and finally Hsiang-ling decided that she had no choice. She walked over to the east side of the garden and looked around. No one was in sight. She quickly walked up the steps that led to the Pearl Hall and again made sure that no one was watching. Then she opened the door and stepped in.

She found herself standing in front of an altar, where two candles and some incense sticks were burning. But in the place where people usually put the wooden name-tablets of their ancestors was a Ch'i-lin Purse! Instantly she recalled the events of her wedding day and how happy she had been. She thought of her wonderful husband and her own son and how much she missed them. She had everything then, and now she had nothing! Hsiang-ling burst into tears.

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder. When she turned around she found herself face-to-face with Mrs. Lu, her mistress, and a young maid.

“What are you doing here?” Mrs. Lu asked angrily.

“Young Master told me to come here and pick up his ball,” Hsiang-ling replied.
“Then why are you weeping at the altar?”
“Because I saw the purse which once belonged to me.”

Mrs. Lu looked startled. “Where are you from?” she asked, as she took the purse from the altar and sat down on a chair that leaned against a long table. There was a tremble in her voice.

“I am from Teng-chou.”

“Bring her a stool,” said Mrs. Lu, motioning to her maid. Not wanting to wait on another servant, the maid grudgingly brought a stool and put it to Mrs. Lu’s right. “You may sit down,” said Mrs. Lu. Somewhat confused, Hsiang-ling sat down.

“What was your maiden name?”
“Hsüeh Hsiang-ling.”
“When were you married?”
“On the eighteenth day of the sixth moon, six years ago.”

“Bring her a chair and put it to my left,” Mrs. Lu ordered the maid. Hsiang-ling was told to move to the chair. She was surprised to see herself treated as a guest of honor.

“Tell me how you lost the purse,” said Mrs. Lu.
“It was a gift from my mother. My wedding procession was stopped on the road because of a storm, and my hua-chiao was carried into a pavilion. There was another hua-chiao in it, and the bride was crying.”

“Move her chair to the middle and move mine to the right side,” ordered Mrs. Lu. The chairs were switched, and once again Hsiang-ling was told to sit down. She was astonished to find herself sitting in the middle seat—the place of the highest honor.

“Please continue,” said Mrs. Lu.
“I gave the bride my purse. I never saw it again, and I have no idea how it got here.”

Mrs. Lu dropped to her knees in front of Hsiang-ling and cried, “You are my benefactor! All these years I have been praying here for your well-being. When I got to my new home, I opened the purse and found it full of valuables, including this.” She opened the purse and took out a piece of jade. “My husband and I were able to pawn it for a large sum of money. Using the money, we started a business and have now become very wealthy. So I reclaimed the jade and have kept it here in the purse since. We also built the Pearl Hall to house the purse and to honor you.

“I knew that you lived in the Teng-chou area, so when I heard about the flood I prayed day and night in that direction, begging Buddha to protect you from harm. I was hoping that one day I would find you and show you my gratitude. And here you are, taking care of my son! I know what we must do. We shall divide our property and give you half of it. That will make us all very happy.”

Hsiang-ling was speechless as Mrs. Lu placed the purse in her hands. That same day, Yüan-wai Lu sent out servants in all directions to look for Hsiang-ling’s husband and son. Soon they were found, in a village not far from Teng-chou.

A great friendship developed between the two families. Later, whenever Hsiang-ling told people about her purse, she would always end the tale by saying, “If you have a chance to do something good, be sure to do it. Happiness will come back to you.”