# The Golden Canister

In the days of the Tang dynasty there lived a certain count in the camp at Ludschou. He had a slave who could play the lute admirably, and was also so well versed in reading and writing that the count employed her to indite his confidential letters.Once there was a great feast held in the camp. Said the slave-girl: “The large kettledrum sounds so sad to-day; some misfortune must surely have happened to the kettledrummer!”The count sent for the kettledrummer and questioned him.“My wife has died,” he replied, “yet I did not venture to ask for leave of absence. That is why, in spite of me, my kettledrum sounded so sad.”The count allowed him to go home.At that time there was much strife and jealousy among the counts along the Yellow River. The emperor wished to put an end to their dissensions by allying them to each other by marriages. Thus the daughter of the Count of Ludschou had married the son of the old Count of Webo. But this did not much improve matters. The old Count of Webo had lung trouble, and when the hot season came it always grew worse, and he would say: “Yes, if I only had Ludschou! It is cooler and I might feel better there!”So he gathered three thousand warriors around him, gave them good pay, questioned the oracle with regard to a lucky day, and set out to take Ludschou by force.The Count of Ludschou heard of it. He worried day and night, but could see no way out of his difficulties. One night, when the water-clock had already been set up, and the gate of the camp had been locked, he walked about the courtyard, leaning on his staff. Only his slave-girl followed him.“Lord,” said she, “it is now more than a month since sleep and appetite have abandoned you! You live sad and lonely, wrapped up in your grief. Unless I am greatly deceived it is on account of Webo.”“It is a matter of life and death,” answered the count, “of which you women understand nothing.”“I am no more than a slave-girl,” said she, “and yet I have been able to guess the cause of your grief.”The count realized that there was meaning in her words and replied: “You are in truth an extraordinary girl. It is a fact that I am quietly reflecting on some way of escape.”The slave-girl said: “That is easily done! You need not give it a thought, master! I will go to Webo and see how things are. This is the first watch of the night. If I go now, I can be back by the fifth watch.”“Should you not succeed,” said the count, “you merely bring misfortune upon me the more quickly.”“A failure is out of the question,” answered the slave-girl.Then she went to her room and prepared for her journey. She combed her raven hair, tied it in a knot on the top of her head, and fastened it with a golden pin. Then she put on a short garment embroidered with purple, and shoes woven of dark silk. In her breast she hid a dagger with dragon-lines graved on it, and upon her forehead she wrote the name of the Great God. Then she bowed before the count and disappeared.The count poured wine for himself and waited for her, and when the morning horn was blown, the slave-girl floated down before him as light as a leaf.“Did all go well?” asked the count.“I have done no discredit to my mission,” replied the girl.“Did you kill any one?”“No, I did not have to go to such lengths. Yet I took the golden canister at the head of Webo’s couch along as a pledge.”The count asked what her experience had been, and she began to tell her story:“I set out when the drums were beating their first tattoo and reached Webo three hours before midnight. When I stepped through the gate, I could see the sentries asleep in their guard-rooms. They snored so that it sounded like thunder. The camp sentinels were pacing their beats, and I went in through the left entrance into the room in which the Count of Webo slept. There lay your relative on his back behind the curtain, plunged in sweet slumber. A costly sword showed from beneath his pillow; and beside it stood an open canister of gold. In the canister were various slips. On one of them was set down his age and the day of his birth, on another the name of the Great Bear God. Grains of incense and pearls were scattered over it. The candles in the room burned dimly, and the incense in the censers was paling to ash. The slave-girls lay huddled up, round about, asleep. I could have drawn out their hair-pins and raised their robes and they would not have awakened. Your relative’s life was in my hand, but I could not bring myself to kill him. So I took the golden canister and returned. The water-clock marked the third hour when I had finished my journey. Now you must have a swift horse saddled quickly, and must send a man to Webo to take back the golden canister. Then the Lord of Webo will come to his senses, and will give up his plans of conquest.”The Count of Ludschou at once ordered an officer to ride to Webo as swiftly as possible. He rode all day long and half the night and finally arrived. In Webo every one was excited because of the loss of the golden canister. They were searching the whole camp rigorously. The messenger knocked at the gate with his riding-whip, and insisted on seeing the Lord of Webo. Since he came at so unusual an hour the Lord of Webo guessed that he was bringing important information, and left his room to receive the messenger. The latter handed him a letter which said: “Last night a stranger from Webo came to us. He informed us that with his own hands he had taken a golden canister from beside your bed. I have not ventured to keep it and hence am sending it back to you by messenger.” When the Lord of Webo saw the golden canister he was much frightened. He took the messenger into his own room, treated him to a splendid meal, and rewarded him generously.On the following day he sent the messenger back again, and gave him thirty thousand bales of silk and a team of four horses along as a present for his master. He also wrote a letter to the Count of Ludschou:“My life was in your hand. I thank you for having spared me, regret my evil intentions and will improve. From this time forward peace and friendship shall ever unite us, and I will let no thought to the contrary enter my mind. The citizen soldiery I have gathered I will use only as a protection against robbers. I have already disarmed the men and sent them back to their work in the fields.”And thenceforward the heartiest friendship existed between the two relatives North and South of the Yellow River.One day the slave-girl came and wished to take leave of her master.“In my former existence,” said the slave-girl, “I was a man. I was a physician and helped the sick. Once upon a time I gave a little child a poison to drink by mistake instead of a healing draught, and the child died. This led the Lord of Death to punish me, and I came to earth again in the shape of a slave-girl. Yet I remembered my former life, tried to do well in my new surroundings, and even found a rare teacher who taught me the swordsman’s art. Already I have served you for nineteen years. I went to Webo for you in order to repay your kindness. And I have succeeded in shaping matters so that you are living at peace with your relatives again, and thus have saved the lives of thousands of people. For a weak woman this is a real service, sufficient to absolve me of my original fault. Now I shall retire from the world and dwell among the silent hills, in order to labor for sanctity with a clean heart. Perhaps I may thus succeed in returning to my former condition of life. So I beg of you to let me depart!”The count saw that it would not be right to detain her any longer. So he prepared a great banquet, invited a number of guests to the farewell meal, and many a famous knight sat down to the board. And all honored her with toasts and poems.The count could no longer hide his emotion, and the slave-girl also bowed before him and wept. Then she secretly left the banquet-hall, and no human being ever discovered whither she had gone.Note: This motive of the intelligent slave-girl also occurs in the story of the three empires. “On her forehead she wrote the name of the Great God”: Regarding this god, Tai I, the Great One, compare annotation to No. 18. The God of the Great Bear, i.e., of the constellation. The letters which are exchanged are quite as noticeable for what is implied between the lines, as for what is actually set down.

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