

THE GREAT BELL OF PEKING

Retold by

Elizabeth Latsch

*Continued and concluded
from the December Number*



JUST as Ko-ai had finished singing her song of spring from *The Book of Jade*, she saw her mother approaching her in great distress. Quickly the beautiful notes of the song died upon her lips. Already the world she lived in grew darker. "Ko-ai," her mother called out, "thy beloved father has returned from the Great City. I fear him. He is a sick man and grown very old in the service of the Emperor."

Ko-ai dropped her embroidery work and ran into the house. In the darkest corner of the room she found her father—crouched in misery. He looked up as his daughter entered and a sad but sweet smile spread over his face, for after all, Ko-ai was a pleasing sight to behold. She was like a golden chrysanthemum that had jumped off a stem in the Emperor's fine garden.

"Ko-ai, it is as I feared. I shall leave thee and thy mother in disgrace. Thou

shalt have to become a beggar by the roadside. The Bell of Peking, *The Great Bell of Peking* will never be produced by me."

"But father, thou knowest not yet the outcome. Never you mind, you may bring forth a bell that surpasses all your dreams."

"Nevertheless, I am here to take thee and thy mother to the Great City. There shalt the very sight of thee comfort me. Only two days are left, ere the bell will be cast into its mold. Perhaps thou wilt yet find thyself begging mercy from the Emperor."

Kuan-yu returned to the Imperial City with his loved ones. Finally, the day came and the Emperor and his court went to witness the casting of the great bell. All were dressed in the finest array. The colors of their clothes were like those of the rainbow in the sky. Such a long, long procession wending its way into the place had never before appeared in old Peking. Up toward the High Throne the Emperor led the way, where he seated himself with due dignity. He raised his gorgeously embroidered fan as a signal that the great caldrons were to be lifted and emptied into the mold. Everyone watched breathlessly. Only the hissing of the metal could be heard. Ko-ai and her mother held their hands in a firm clasp, with a prayer upon their lips. But Kuan-yu felt, indeed, the most wretched of all. He almost felt himself turn into stone, so frightened was he.

For five days they waited for the metal to cool. When the mold was taken off, there stood a misshapen form, indeed. The Emperor became furious; his anger was great! He would give Kuan-yu one more chance.

Once more Kuan-yu grew busy searching in the great books—fearing he had missed some knowledge in his previous search. Once more he traveled far and wide to visit and consult the great scholars and magicians. Piles of gold, copper, brass, bright tin and silver were again sent to the great building. But many were the things which Kuan-yu could not even now understand!

He, himself, had never before studied such great works—now it was all the harder.

Thus Kuan-yu grew paler and thinner while Ko-ai continued to work on her wedding garments. This time there were no songs upon her lips, but prayers for her beloved father, that the bell would turn out to be *The Great Bell of Peking*. "What if my father should fail a second time? It would mean death to him and the green robe of disgrace for me. In some manner must he be rescued, though I climb the mountain pinnacles of the Jade Pass and pray that the cold stars themselves reach out their beams of frozen light to help my father."

Ko-ai, unfortunately, found no means of helping her father. The appointed day came and for the second time a bell was to be cast. Kuan-yu was full of despair. Again there was a hush throughout the great city for five long days. And again the bell turned out misshapen in form and dull in sound. The Emperor was more provoked than previously and Kuan-yu was

informed that he was worthy only of a death penalty. There would be only one more chance—for after all, the third might be charmed. But if Kuan-yu failed in this third attempt, there would be no mercy for him nor his loved ones.

Ko-ai wept and wept to hear such a doom pronounced. She must help. In the garden she would find the quiet to think clearly and ponder upon what could be done. When her spirit had drunk in the peace of the out-of-door life, Ko-ai found herself watching the insects, the butterflies and the birds. The song of the bird seemed filled with a great message, indeed. Particularly, a tiny, tiny bird which was fluttering all around the blossoms, was all aflame with color and its throat was full of

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song. Its notes rang out clearly, "Ko-ai, Ko-ai, sell all your jewels and go to the Astrologer—Ko-ai, Ko-ai."

"Go to the Astrologer: go to the Astrologer," continued to ring in Ko-ai's ears. "Surely he can help me. I will go to him at once." She ran to the house for her little lacquer box in which her jewels were stored. Thereupon she took her precious old jewels to a shabby shop where a dealer gave her a large sum of money in return.

On to the Astrologer she hastened with the money. He was old and withered and trembling. Green eyes and long bony fingers he had. He was not at all the confiding spirit whom Ko-ai had hoped to find. Nevertheless, she mustered courage enough to speak, "I have come to ask your help, O Honorable and Wise one, for my father, Kuan-yu the cannon molder, is in great distress." Throughout her petition

for help, the Astrologer continued to keep busy on an Unbreakable Rope made out of forty million cobweb strands. Ko-ai thought he was not listening at all.

But when she finished he turned toward her and in a very harsh voice said, "O foolish one, do you not know that the metals in the bell will never combine unless the blood of a maiden, fair and pure, be mixed with them? Then only can the bell become well formed and pleasing to the Emperor."

"Is there no other way?" questioned Ko-ai in a faint whisper.

"There is no other way, foolish one," replied the old and withered Astrologer.

Ko-ai dragged herself back to the home. Into the beloved garden she went. Up to every bush, up to every plant she walked and said goodbye. How much she loved all of these beautiful things! Everything was so dear to her, but above all her mother and her father. What would she not do to save

him? Many thoughts passed through her delicate little brain. I must go very far, very far, but I must tell no one, she thought.

When the day for the third attempt of the casting of the bell arrived, Ko-ai whispered to her father, "Do not fear, do not fear. All will be well with thee!" And just when the crowd grew the thickest, Ko-ai slipped up toward the great caldron. She mounted the big platform clad in her beautiful wedding robe. It was the very gown upon which she had embroidered such lovely designs. Yes, the very robe into which she had stitched her beautiful thoughts and her melodious songs.

The Emperor again set forth the signal for the hot metal to be poured into the mold. Thereupon the seethingly hot stuff writhed and coiled. The vapors rose like something threatening. Suddenly Ko-ai jumped upon the very edge of the mold. There she stood but for a fleeting moment, a vision of rare loveliness and charm and then she



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was seen no more. Only her voice could be heard—"For thee, my father."

Yes, he had seen her but was much too late to catch her. Only one of her slippers remained in his hands—a blue satin one, embroidered by her with delicate blossoms.

This morning
the blue satin of my shoes glistened like steel,
and one could see the black embroidered traceries;
but now my shoes are covered with dust.

When I set out,
the sun was laughing in the sky,
the butterflies hovered around me,
and I counted the white daisies,
scattered through the grass
like handfuls of pearls.

It is evening now,
and there are no daisies

But for me there are many miles to go.

Since then five hundred years have passed. The Great Bell of Peking rings out from the tower and its notes carry far into the beyond. There is none like it in music nor in beauty of form. Sometimes the good people of the land hear a sad lamenting note. "Ko-ai, Ko-ai," it calls forth on the forward stroke. Then there comes a hush upon the Great City. And on its backward stroke the bell whispers, hsieh, hsieh, which is the Chinese word for slipper. Then the people remember the sacrifice of the beautiful maiden and give thanks for such a daughter. And the listening children look up saying, "We know; we know: Ko-ai is crying for her slipper, pure and lovely Ko-ai, whose beauty comes forth from the music of the Great Bell of Peking!"

PEN AND PENCIL

(Continued from page 27)

My dear Aurora,

That is a nice poem which you included in your letter. I hope that our friends of the Pen and Pencil Circle would learn it by heart. Try to write a short poem sometime and send it to me. I will publish it in the YOUNG CITIZEN.

Aunt Alma.

LINCOLN, A GREAT

(Continued from page 18)

stand up for anything that was right or just or honorable, even if it were unpopular.

That same trait was shown when he fought for the freedom of the slaves. It was a hard fight but he fought hard and long till he succeeded. His success in that fight made him immortal.

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