



## The Wonderful Bridge

THE LOYANG RIVER was very difficult to cross because the water there was always so rough, especially where the river ran into the sea. Since there was no bridge there, the only way to get to the other side was by boat.

One day, when a boat was in the middle of the stream, great waves rose up and began to toss the small craft. When it seemed the boat would surely sink with the next wave, a voice was clearly heard above the roar of the water.

"Be still, you waves!" it said. "Do you not know that Professor Tsai is on board this vessel?"

Instantly the huge waves became gentle ripples. The boat floated as if it were on a small inland lake.

Aboard ship everyone looked at everyone else in astonishment. Who was this very important Professor Tsai for whose sake the waves were made still?

There was no professor aboard. But there were two members of the Tsai family there—a woman with a baby boy in her arms. Now, learning is greatly respected in China, and the woman was overcome by what she had just seen and heard. Claspng the child to her breast, she made a vow. "If my son becomes a professor," she said, "I will see to it that a bridge is built over this river."

The boy, Tsai Hisiang, grew and became a fine scholar. In time he attained the rank of professor. It was then that his mother told him of her vow.

Being a dutiful son, Tsai Hisiang gave up his teaching and dedicated himself to fulfilling his mother's vow. It was far from a simple undertaking. But after several years of writing and talking to officials, Tsai Hisiang received a commission from the emperor to build the bridge.

Professor Tsai made his plans carefully. The design was perfect. He was given workmen and materials. But try as they would, they could not put down the foundations for the bridge. The waves were too much for the workmen and they went away to other jobs.

Tsai Hisiang was in despair. How could he fulfill his mother's promise? Finally he wrote a letter to the dragon king of the river, explaining what he was trying to do and why. He sealed the letter in a silver tube, tied a stone to the tube and tossed it far out into the water.

The next morning Tsai Hisiang found the tube on the river shore. Inside was the dragon king's answer.

"Because you are a dutiful son, you will be permitted to lay the foundations for the bridge. Do so at midnight—in the Hour of the Horse—on the twenty-first day of this month."

The professor was overjoyed. Now all he needed to do was get his men together again. But there were no men to be hired. They had all gone off to work on a new palace for the emperor.

Tsai Hsiang sat and stared at the river and at the pile of stone blocks on the shore. He could not build the bridge by himself.

Suddenly eight strangers appeared before him. "We would like to help build the bridge," they said.

"That is all very well," Tsai Hsiang replied. "But I fear there are not enough of us for so big a project."

"That is yet to be seen," the eight replied.

The twenty-first day approached. But Tsai's work crew of eight showed no concern. They sat on the shore and played chess, game after game. Tsai was going to scold them. But then he thought, "What good are eight men when there are hundreds of stone blocks to be laid?"

Finally the appointed hour arrived. Tsai was about to weep with vexation at his own failure. All at once he looked at the river and could not believe his eyes. The waters seemed to divide. Then there was a whirlwind of flying sand and stone right where the eight men had been playing chess!

When the wind ceased and the dust settled, there was no sign of the chess players. And not only the foundations, but the whole framework of the bridge had been laid. It spanned the river in a beautiful high arch. All that remained to be done was the final paving, and a rail to protect the people crossing the bridge. How had this miracle been accomplished? Where were the eight workmen he had hired?

Then Tsai Hsiang began to remember details about the eight men. There was the lame one with the iron crutch. And there was one with a sword . . . and one with a flute . . . and one with a basket of fruit . . . one had a feather fan . . . and another carried a tablet in his hand. And now that he thought of it, one of the men had a donkey . . . and the eighth among them—why, the eighth was not a man at all, but a woman! Tsai

Hsiang realized who his wonderful helpers had been. Not ordinary men at all, but the Eight Immortals!

At this moment the water of the river swished and gurgled on the shore at his feet. Tsai Hsiang listened, and the water seemed to say, "Dutiful son . . . dutiful son . . . Professor Tsai . . ."

His mother's vow had been fulfilled. Now Professor Tsai was free to return to his beloved books and his pupils and the quiet and peace of a scholar's life.

