

TIGER TIM IN CHINA

One pleasant afternoon in May, in fact it was at that time when afternoon became evening, when the sky's colour altered ineffably and the poignance of the atmosphere prompted contemplation. Tiger Tim sat outside the door. Having just eaten the ham out of some trimmed sandwiches he was licking the butter from his paws. Unaccountably, he was taken by a desire to be elsewhere. He stood and left without a word. By not even a turn of a hair did he indicate that he would travel far. Since I last saw his tail disappear from sight around the corner of the house I have only erratically received reports to convey.

It came about, I know not how, that Tiger Tim's travels brought him to the region of Foo Chou in China. This remote region is famous for its Buddhist monastery which is built high on a hill and reached by a series of perilous wooden stairways and swinging suspended walkways. Only those whose thoughts are engrossed in higher things and never look below reach the tranquillity of its halls. Whether Tiger Tim numbered among those or got there because he was a cat cannot be known.

However, he made his silent entry one day and was, on account of his courteous and enigmatic air, immediately made welcome. He became a student. His anatomy would not admit of the Lotus position but the grace with which he sat on his hind legs and turned his front paws upwards more than made up for it. At meditation he excelled. The distraction of mice was absent, the reason I shall get to in a moment, and flies at that altitude were mercifully few.

The absence of mice there was connected to its name. Foo Chou was called after the sound of the owls who made their home there and attended to the mouse population. While most owls gave hoots, this local breed called "Foo Chou, Foo Chou" all night long. Owls are universally known to be wise so men and women and sometimes animals who aspired to wisdom came to live among them to gain whatever benefit there might be from doing so. The colony of owls all held to the cliffs and ravines of the high place and from the constant "Foods" and "Chous" heard in the valley the thin trickle of sandal shod, shorn men and women climbing strenuously upwards were said to be travelling to Foo Chou. Hence the name came into common usage.

So there was Tim, on modest rations, among monks of varying degrees of radiance, learning the art of meditation. And, as I have observed earlier, excelling at it. If Tiger Tim had a fault to overcome apparently it was

pride. Though he achieved great things in many aspects of his training in the end his failing here told on him.

His wise guru directed his efforts and there came the day when he was ready to learn levitation. Tiger rose early, groomed carefully, abstained from breakfast. He came prepared to the Hall of Great Concentration. The sun shone outside, a warm breeze blew, but inside was shaded and cool.

Tiger took his place and gave his mind to his instructions. He practised and practised. Hour by hour. His master wondered at him. He worried. And with reason. Tiger Tim wanted so much to be the first of the novices to rise from the ground. Time after time he schooled his thoughts. "I am a feather floating in the sky". "I am a sycamore seed twirling in the wind". "I am a dandelion puff blown on a breath".

And so it was! Tiger's tail rose first and the rest of him followed. Ah, here is the sad part of the story. Tiger Tim was so taken with his flight that he forgot his master's warning – "Do not exceed four feet!" At a height of four feet where they would provide no distraction to the sitting devotees large glassless windows allowed air to flow from south to north. The highest points of the hills were to the west. The flow of air was unimpeded.

As Tiger in his pride rose and rose he came into this fresh air flow and, it being quite a windy day by now, was swiftly borne by the south wind right out of a north window. Having his eyes closed he was quite unaware of what was happening and simply flew on and on with an ecstatic smile on his face and his paws to the sky. "Oh, what a clever cat I am", he may have been thinking.

His master looked sadly after him. "The best are vain", he said, "and go the same way". That depended on the season of course. This was Spring. In Autumn the winds were northerly and they would fly south.

The wise owls interrupted their daytime sleep to open one eye but said nothing. Other birds crying "Here is a cat who can fly. Now we are all doomed!" abandoned their search for worms, swooping for scant flies and sought shelter in their nests, losing feathers as they trembled.

Our Tiger Tim flew away from the hills out of range of the soothing sounds of "Foo Chou, Foo Chou". He was over quite another region when, feeling hunger even though he could levitate, he opened his eyes. Instead of seeing, as he had expected, the admiration of his fellow

students and the appreciation of his master he found that he was quite alone, quite high up and suspended above a wide, yellow/brown, sluggish river. "Oh dear oh dear" he said, as, losing height with the loss of concentration he fell earthwards at a good speed, "I have learned to levitate but not to swim".

The only human being in the area was in a tiny sampan sailing along nicely with the current and the breeze. He was a fisherman. Happy with a good catch he was going home for his dinner. He was smoking his favourite pipe. He lost his pipe. When he saw that what was flying straight at him was a tiger cat it fell from his mouth into the deep river and he never saw it again.

Some time later I did hear, he caught a fish with yellow staining around its mouth and a peculiar smokey flavour. But that is another story. Now I return to the adventures of Tiger Tim.

At that moment Tiger was falling, falling quickly. He had righted himself. His meditation pose was no longer appropriate. An expression of serenity was out of place. His paws were down, his tail up and the fur was flattened about his worried face. He didn't make a fuss. He didn't make a splash. No, he landed with a thud on a coil of hemp rope which filled the prow of the boat.

It sailed on placidly after a little wobble. Tiger and the fisherman quietly contemplated the hand of providence as they made a silent beginning to their acquaintance. The fisherman did not speak indeed until after he had reached home. He hardly knew what to say.

He soon busied himself with sails and nets and fish (the fish had already caught Tiger's attention), as he approached his mooring at the riverside village where he lived. When he had tied up he helped Tiger ashore. At an invitation to follow, given by a courteous and respectful gesture of the hand, Tiger padded gratefully by the left side of the fisherman. He was glad to feel the earth beneath his paws again. He had lost his taste for levitation. He had had enough of air and water.

And besides the man was carrying his catch slung from his left hand. Ah, Tiger was hungry. But first he must rest. He was welcomed at the fisherman's house and shown to a quiet corner to sleep. Hours later the whistling sound of many whispers woke him. He rolled onto his back and opened one eye. The fisherman's house was crowded. Everyone was

looking at him. Even with two eyes open now Tiger Tim saw no way out. Besides there was a very good smell coming from somewhere nearby.

It was fish, but one with which Tiger was not familiar. Ah well he might not be. The entire village had heard and had come to celebrate “The Cat who falls from Heaven”. They had prepared their greatest feast. The tables were set in the village square. The lanterns were hung all about, with orange and red and yellow lights. There were streamers, there was music and there was that wonderful smell.

A chair at the place of honour was raised with cushions to a convenient height. Tiger did not need to be shown the way. He headed straight for that chair and settled himself on the top cushion of blue and green shot silk. The fisherman sat on his left, the headwoman of the village on his right. Serving began. All prepared to wait until the guest of honour ate first. But they didn’t have to wait. Tiger was a considerate guest.

He did full justice to their favourite delicacy, roasted carp with red wine. He ate and drank exclusively. They ate, drank, wondered and questioned among themselves. They awaited the arrival of the Mandarin. It fell to him to hear first the amazing story “The Cat who falls from Heaven” “Perhaps”, they surmised, “he is the Marco Polo of his kind. Perhaps there is a sky world mirrored over ours where cats are kings and people chase rats and mice”.

Just as the lychees were being served there was a trumpet fanfare. It was hard on Tiger Tim’s sensitive ears. “The Mandarin”, the crowd roared. Another look of pain crossed Tim’s face. There was a further painful clatter as the people knocked back their chairs and rushed to kow tow. Tiger observed this unfazed. The entourage approached. He was thinking of rice wine and mandarins. He began to muse aloud and mandarins in trifle, mandarins with jelly and cream sprinkled with hundreds and thousands.

The incensed guards rushed towards him drawing their swords. Fright and rice wine overcame Tiger. He dropped as dead under the table. The swords were held too high. They cut the strings. The lanterns collapsed and there was darkness. People fled. The remaining chairs clattered down. The tressles were kicked from under the table. Rice wine spilled. The Mandarin’s litter fell from under him. His hat was knocked askew. It was horrible.

In the melee Tiger Tim was lost. I hesitate to say it but he was even, in the press of the moment, forgotten. In the morning he was found to be gone.

That morning was a grey, chilly, misty morning. Country people about their early business saw a tiger cat meditating by the shore of a small lake on the road to the mountains. He was heard to philosophise soberly on the proper place for all things, casts on the ground, rice in the fields, in the deep green water the brocaded carp and soldiers better employed in foraging and setting up winter quarters than in defending the honour of collars and small, though exquisite, juicy oranges.

When news of this reached the villagers they said “Ah”. Stories of these events are still told on the banks of that great river. The fisherman especially visited by good fortune, believing that the gods help those who help themselves, let it be known that Tiger Tim spoke in his sleep. He is now esteemed all over China, even the world, for his little striped book “The Sayings of Tiger Tim”.

And Tiger Tim? I am happy to say he has recovered from his indulgence. He travels on.

Rena Fleming