

THE TALE OF THE UNICORN

A king who lived in a certain land was bloody-minded, coarse and very strong. One night the king had an amazing dream. He saw that everywhere inside his palace was filled with rays of light and the light lit up everyplace in his domain under the sky. He thought, "This sort of light is greatly amazing. I can't get enough of it. Where does it come from?" When he looked where the light was coming from, he saw an animal which was completely at ease and happy. It was in the middle of a large forest; its body was colored pure gold and every one of its hairs glittered with light completely illuminating the whole place.

After the king awoke, he thought how suitable it would be to sit on his throne beautifully decorated with the skin of the animal that had appeared to him in his dream. But malice touched all his thoughts. Thereupon he assembled all the ministers and subjects under him and proclaimed, "I will give half the wealth of my kingdom to whoever has seen or heard of an animal like I saw in my dreams last night."

Thereupon the nine great and three lesser ministers, bearing the king's command in mind, went to search everywhere in the land, but found nothing and came back disheartened.

At that time, a poor servant of the king went to collect firewood every day in a great forest neighboring that land. He had to cross back and forth over a small stream in the center of the forest. One day, when the poor man crossed the stream to collect wood, suddenly a large amount of rain fell. He quickly gathered the firewood together and when he got to the edge of the stream, it was overflowing and he did not have time to cross. He stood there sadly, but the stream got bigger and bigger. He thought, "If I wait for this stream to go down, I'll die of hunger and cold for sure. Instead if I cross now, is it certain I can get across?" When he forded the stream a large wave carried him and the firewood away.

The poor man was frightened and afflicted, and he cried aloud. The unicorn that lived in the forest heard him and with great pity it quickly went to the water's edge. Without regard for its own life, it leapt into the water and saved the poor man.

After some time, the poor man completely recovered his senses. When he looked, he saw an amazing, resplendent creature before him. He knew in his mind that this was the animal that had saved his life. And owing the animal gratitude he said, "How can I repay your kindness for saving my life?"

The unicorn said, "You don't have to return the favor. But when you go back to your village, do not say 'Today the unicorn, whose entire body is filled with light, saved me from the river.' Sinners think it's okay to eat my body, but keep it secret for fear harm will come to me. I've no greater favor to ask in return than that." When the poor man went every day to gather firewood, the unicorn carried him back and forth across the river.



At that time, the king's command filled the land, and the poor man also heard it. He very much wanted to be given half the king's wealth, and went as quick as he could to the king's palace. He said, "I've seen the animal which your highness is seeking." The king sent someone to bring the poor man into the palace and questioned him. The poor man told the king the story of how he had been saved from the river in detail.

The king was very glad and said, "Where is such an animal? Lead us there!" The king and his ministers donned their armor, took their bow and arrows and spears, followed the poor man, and went to the forest. The poor man said to the king, "The animal is in the center of this forest." The king gave orders and made his army of retainers surround the four sides of the great forest. Gradually they went to the center and saw the actual animal—absolutely amazingly, its entire body filled with light.

But the unicorn knew why they had come, and thought, "I don't deserve to die now." With its face full of tears, it lifted its head and stared. When the whole army went to catch it, there was not even one who could go forward because of the unbearable light.

The king gave the poor man a bow and arrow, and ordered, "Shoot it!" The poor man completely forgot the favor it owed the animal for saving his life before, and, thinking only of the wealth of the kingdom, loosed an arrow, whereupon it struck the unicorn in the right foreleg. Immediately the soldiers ran, bound the unicorn and took it to the king's palace.

That night, the king set out satisfying food and drink for the poor man and the troops, and they enjoyed an unrestrained celebration. After it became light, the king summoned some butchers, and when they went to skin the unicorn, it was not where they had left it. The king and ministers hurriedly searched every room and space, but they did not find it.

Then from the sky a great light, unbearable to watch, suddenly shone forth. First the poor man became blind; blood poured from his mouth and nose and he died. Of the evil-thinking and evil-doing king and ministers, some became blind in both eyes, some had both arms break and fall off, and some had their faces burnt.

—Lha mkhar Tshe ring, *Qinghai Folk Literature* 4, 1993