

THE TALE OF THE KING OF BEASTS AND THE OLD WOMAN

Once upon a time in India, behind a mountain before a thick forest, there was a town called the Cool Grove of the Hermits. In that town there were a poor mother and son who made their living by selling wood. The mother's name was Yangdzom and the boy's was Lekden. Since the mother was very old, she could just stir from the house and only do a bit of outside work. She always lovingly took care of the boy and the boy loved her. So they became a field of praise for the people of that place.

On the morning of a very cold winter's day, Lekden got up early. After he had drunk his morning tea, he took his axe and rope, and, together with the neighbors, he went to cut wood in the forest. Mother Yangdzom made the afternoon tea and waited for her son until sunset, but Lekden did not come, so she was worried. Unable to stay at home she went to the top of a mesa at upper part of the area and looked. Some neighbor boys and girls were coming carrying wood, but Lekden was not among them. She quickly went up to them and asked about Lekden, and Dröma, the daughter of Uncle Rindzin's family, told her the matter in a low voice, with tears of unbearably sad affliction falling like the beads of a rosary. "This morning elder brother Lekden unluckily met a hungry wounded lion and it ate him." When she heard the unfortunate words which stretched her to the breaking point, Mother Yangdzom beat her breast like a drum as if her heart had been cut with a knife. Loudly she lamented, "Alas, dear god. If you have any kindness and compassion look upon us ill-fated mother and son!" Then she fainted. Her neighbors supported her and conveyed her back to her own home.

That evening Mother Yangdzom thought, "Before my life, which is hanging by a thread, comes to an end, I must get revenge for my son's body, in any way possible." As soon as it was daybreak, she went to the court and told the judge in detail why she had come. The judge was at a loss and sadly he said, "Old Woman, the lion is an animal that dwells in the forest and doesn't recognize the law. Since legalities cannot deal with it at all, how are we going to get compensation for your son's body?" Mother Yangdzom angrily said, "If you don't take responsibility for my wishes I'll die right in front of you," and while saying so, she beat her head against a pillar. The judge got scared and did not know what to do. Then the judge thought again about the old woman's welfare and decided to capture that pitiless lion and execute it; how could that not be taking responsibility to fulfill the woman's wishes?

The judge took responsibility for the old woman's wishes, but he had no way to catch the lion. So he called the people under his domain and said, "Whosoever is able to capture that lion in the forest, I will reward with five hundred silver pieces," but he did not get a single taker. Then a little while later, the investigator Rindzin, having drunk beer on his friend's birthday, came drunk and staggering to perform his duties at the office. After he heard what the judge had said, he

went to the judge and whispered intrepidly, "Today I really got drunk with Dutch courage. How could I do other than go before the lion and sacrifice my life?" This matter was amazing news, a time when there was no one who did not discuss it, shaking their heads, in all the restaurants, taverns and shops on either side of the town's main road.

The investigator Rindzin returned home, and when he sobered up, he remembered that a while ago he had sworn before the judge to catch the lion. He really regretted what he had done before and thought it would be better if he petitioned the judge. Whereupon he rushed to where the judge was, knelt down and humbly made his petition, "Your Honor, since I was drunk before, I made a promise about this matter without paying attention to it. Everyone knows that I don't have the ability to catch the lion, the king of beasts. This time please pardon me." The judge got angry, and, slamming his fist on the table, he yelled, "Rindzin, listen to me well! This is a place for straight talk, not for making jokes. If you don't practice what you've preached, you deserve nothing less than to be severely punished." Rindzin got scared and not daring to say anything more, he returned home.

After a few days, Rindzin took a few hunters to assist him and went to the forest to catch the lion. On the way they went like a dying bug at the entrance to an anthill; they fell into a sea of thought about how they were going to become a meal for the lion.

They got to the middle of the forest and in the lee of a large tree took up their bows and arrows, waiting for the lion to come later looking for food. But even after five days had passed by, they had not seen even so much as its shadow, and so they were weary and went home to sleep.

On the morning of the next day, they were roasting the meat they had hunted and drinking their morning tea, when suddenly from within the forest before them there was a loud frightening roar of something they did not know, and simultaneously a lion with a slight wound came slowly walking toward them. The others threw their weapons away and fled far away. Rindzin felt like fleeing, but recalling the judge's orders, he did not dare, and he stood there not knowing what to do. The lion nodded its head at a distance and seemed as if it were acting respectfully. Even though Rindzin was scared, he pretended he was not. He pointed at the lion and boasted in a loud voice, "You malevolent pitiless lion, you ate Lekden, the son of Mother Yangdzom, whom she loved like her own eyes. Today you will go with me to where the judge is and if you confess, it will be all right." The lion lay down on the ground, as if it were confessing, folded its forelegs, and stayed there with lowered head. Then Rindzin was encouraged, and, tying a rope around the lion's neck, he led it out of the forest. The assistants who were off in the distance, after seeing how the lion was amazingly tame, did not wait for Rindzin, but went quickly to the court and reported the circumstances to the judge. The judge shook his head in surprise, and thought about how he would decide this new dispute—something that had never happened before in the legal history of the world.

After a short time, Rindzin led the lion and arrived in glory at the court. The judge saw the lion and asked loudly, "Is it true that you ate Lekden, the son of Mother Yangdzom's family?" Tears dropped from the lion's eyes, like beads on a rosary, and it sadly nodded its head, a sign that it was true. Again the judge said, "Killing a person is the most serious crime under heaven. Think about it thoroughly! The son Legden was the supporter of his mother Yangdzom's livelihood. But you unwittingly ate him, so what will she do now? Generally if we practice the law as usual, if you kill, your life is forfeit in return. But if we regard your character, you have confessed, and accordingly I will let you go without capital punishment. Before I let you go, you must agree to our conditions." The lion lifted its head and looked at the judge, and, as if it wanted to know quickly what the conditions were, it stood there without stirring. Then the judge said, "From today on you must regard the old woman Yangdzom as your own mother to whom you owe gratitude, and look after her as best you can." At that decision the lion nodded a sign of agreement. The judge made Rindzin untie the rope around the lion's neck and made him send the lion back to the forest.

Mother Yangdzom heard that not only had the judge caught the lion, but sent it back without a problem, without getting compensation for her son's body, and moreover no punishment at all. After that she hated the judge and she decided to go bring a lawsuit to the emperor in the city the next day.

On the morning of the next day, Mother Yangdzom got up early. When she opened the gate, lots of game animals meat—deer, hare, etc.—had been heaped next to it. She got scared, not knowing what was going on and was left a bit stunned. Then she thought, "A village hunter forgot all this animal meat and left it," and she went to all the hunters' houses and asked. But they all said no and looked for what she would say. At that point, Rindzin, the legal steward appointed by the judge, came and carefully explained the past day's court decision to everyone. She was touched, and, heaving a sigh, she said, "If that's the case, the lion decided to bring me all this meat; what a mind this creature has!" She sold the meat she could not finish eating to others and supplemented her income.

From that day on, the lion continued to deliver lots of animal meat to her door every day and sometimes it brought quite a few silver and gold coins. Her livelihood grew better from day to day. In the evenings when she was leisurely sleeping by herself, the lion would come quietly and sleep by the door, and when dawn announced itself only then did it go to the forest.

After three years passed this way, Mother Yangdzom died. On that day the lion came running from the woods, embraced her dead body and cried in sad lamentation. All the neighbors heard the lion crying, and, knowing something was amiss, came to the house. The court servant Rindzin also came, and the lion saw them and bowed its head, trying to be respectful. Then Rindzin, perceiving clearly what was in the lion's mind, told the neighbors that the money she had saved must be used for an extensive funeral ritual.

The neighbors buried her in a grassy and watered meadow next to the forest. From then on the lion always left a lot of game animals meat next to the grave. Not only did it make death-offerings as best it could, but even at night it still stayed without moving, crying next to the gravesite, so that all the households in the facing village were able to hear it. It is said that from then on the good custom of always respecting one's parents spread to all the lands in India.

—Bla ma Tshe ring, *Qinghai Folk Literature* 3, 1994