The Weighing of the Elephant

OR

HOW KAN LO BECAME PRIME MINISTER.

(Translated from the Chinese by Ardsheal.)

THREE-HUNDRED years before the Christian era the Dynasty of Ch' in reigned in China. In those days the Emperor ruled over all countries and states "within the four seas," and was recognized by them as their lord and master. As a sign of their dependence they were in the habit of sending tribute at regular intervals to the Capital of the Emperor's Kingdom, and as a rule they were most submissive and obedient. There was one State, however, which had been gradually growing stronger. With its growth of strength desire sprung up to free itself from the galling yoke of subjection to the Emperor of China and to remain no longer a mere vassal of the reigning Dynasty. Accordingly, when the time for sending tribute drew nigh, the State, which desired to be independent, determined to avail itself of this opportunity to endeavour to free itself from the degrading confession of dependence involved in the sending of tribute. A remonstrance was drawn up by the Prime Minister of the State which, after pointing out that, though minute inquiry had been made, nothing had been discovered to justify the exaction of tribute, proceeded as follows:—

"Though we are unable to recognize any right on the part of China to demand any sign of submission from our State, we are, nevertheless, willing, out of regard for long-established custom, to forward tribute this year, but only conditionally. We are sending to the Emperor an elephant and the condition we impose is that the exact weight of the elephant must be ascertained within three days and duly published. If this condition be fulfilled, our State will continue to pay tribute as before; but, if the condition be not fulfilled, our State will declare its independence and forthwith make
an attack on the Emperor. If we succeed, the Emperor's dominions will be divided and he will become a mere vassal. It is requested that an early answer may be given to our remonstrance."

The Emperor, to whom the remonstrance was duly presented by the ambassador from the inferior State, was so enraged on reading it that he at once issued an order to decapitate the person who had dared to convey such an audacious document into his presence. The ambassador, however, pointed out that he was not in any way to blame, as he was merely acting on behalf of his prince and that, although his death would be a matter of no importance, he was afraid that if he were put to death the other States would ridicule the Emperor for not possessing in his kingdom a single person capable of discharging the insignificant task of weighing an elephant. The Emperor was struck by the force of these remarks and, recognizing the inadvisability of showing his weakness by killing the ambassador before any attempt had been made to answer the remonstrance, he issued instructions that the ambassador should be properly received and entertained. At the same time he handed the remonstrance to his Ministers to read and commanded them to devise a plan without delay for weighing the elephant.

The Ministers were quite perplexed. The idea of weighing anything of the bulk and dimensions of an elephant had never occurred to them, nor had it ever been even referred to in the writings of their ancient sages. What they had omitted to mention was not likely to be a matter easy of accomplishment. They sat for hours in solemn silence cudgelling their brains and trying to solve the difficulty. But they were as much perplexed at the end of their reflections as they were at the beginning and were as far as ever from being able to suggest any solution of a problem so difficult. When they informed their Royal Master of their helplessness he flew into a towering rage and declared that Ministers who could not help him in such a trifling matter must be either fools or knaves "I will," he continued, "give you two days within which to ascertain the weight of the beast. If you do not succeed within that period in finding out the exact weight of the beast you shall all be beheaded. Withdraw!"

The Ministers at once retired and wended their way homewards, looking very woe-begone and devoutly wishing that the elephant was still an unknown species.

One of the Ministers, named Kan, who had hitherto been a special favourite at Court, wore a most doleful appearance and, when he reached his home, refused to eat or speak, looking as if he were indeed weary of a life of which elephants constituted such an important part. This Minister had a son named Kan Lo, who was only twelve years of age, and who was still at school where he had already gained a reputation for the rapid progress he had made in his studies. He had been through all the Classics and could quote them as glibly as if he had been a student for years.

On returning from school he noticed that his father, who as a rule enjoyed the best of spirits, was looking very sad and depressed, and inquired why he was so downcast. His father replied by telling him that children should be seen and not
heard and should not question their elders. Kan Lo, who was devoted to his father, suspected there was some great trouble at Court which was causing his parents unhappiness and, being anxious to relieve his father’s anxiety, addressed him as follows:

"Every family has its eldest son as a State has its Prime Minister. In family matters father and son deliberate; in affairs of State, Prince and Minister. A son should share the sorrows of his father just as a Minister should share those of his Prince. Seeing you look sorrowful it is my duty to inquire the reason, for, perhaps, I may be able to alleviate your grief."

Being impressed by the earnestness of his child, he proceeded to tell him the difficulty about weighing the elephant. Kan Lo, on hearing it, burst into laughter, being much amused at the idea of his father being worried by such a trifle. This levity greatly incensed his father who rated his son soundly. "You little rascal!" he exclaimed, "you ought to be well flogged for treating lightly a matter of supreme importance which is now monopolising the whole time and attention of all the high officers of the State. Are you not aware that there are spies on all sides who if they hear anyone say that they know how to weigh the elephant, will immediately take them before the Emperor to put their knowledge to the test and if their deed is not as good as their word they will be at once beheaded? If you are overheard talking in this way you will run a great risk of losing your life." Kan Lo, in no way abashed, replied:—

"Father, you may make yourself easy in mind. I know of a plan by the adoption of which the elephant can be weighed. I will guarantee its success. If it fail, I am quite willing to be punished." The father demanded that the plan should be revealed to him, but Kan Lo declared that he could reveal it to no one except the Emperor. He then set off for school, leaving his father wondering whether a child of
twelve could possess such ability and, if he did, why he should hesitate to reveal the secret to his own father.

Next morning the father went to Court and, being driven to desperation through his not having been able to devise any scheme of his own for weighing the elephant, there was nothing for it but to report to the Emperor that his son had declared his ability to accomplish what seemed an impossible task.

The Emperor's joy on hearing the intelligence knew no bounds. He at once inquired the age of his Minister's son, and, when he was informed that he was only twelve, he declared that a child of so tender an age, gifted with such talents, was certain to be a blessing to the State, and ordered that he be brought into his presence forthwith. He was sent for at once and, being ushered into the royal presence,

![The Elephant Being Led to the Boat.](image)

behaved with such dignity that the Emperor was much struck by his demeanour, which differed in no way from that of an old and experienced Minister of State. When questioned regarding the weighing of the elephant, he replied that he was quite prepared to undertake that task and that, if he failed in his attempt, he was willing to submit to any punishment that might be desired. The Emperor, having decided to give him an opportunity of trying his weighing scheme, inquired what he would require to carry it out. He replied that he had only three requests to make which he trusted would be granted. In the first place he wanted a large boat and some stones; secondly, he desired the populace to be allowed to assemble on the banks of the river to witness the weighing of the elephant; and, thirdly, he requested that the ambassador, who had brought the elephant, should not be put to death but should be allowed to return to his own State so that he might inform his Prince that the Emperor had at any rate one subject capable of dealing with difficulties. The Emperor at once granted his requests, and ordered that the weighing should take place next day at
noon, promising at the same time that if the attempt to weight the elephant was successful, Kan Lo should be emnobled.

Kan Lo then retired from the palace along with the Ministers who kept wondering how an elephant could be weighed with the aid of a boat and stones. His father was full of anxiety and fear lest the scheme should fail, but was reassured by his son who declared failure to be impossible.

A royal proclamation was issued notifying the people that the elephant would be weighed and ordering them to repair next day at noon to the banks of the river to witness the spectacle.

![The Elephant on the Boat](image)

When the morning arrived Kan Lo, nothing daunted by the serious nature of the risk he was running if he failed, looked calm and collected. Before setting out to fulfil his self-appointed task, he repaired to the palace to return thanks to the Emperor for his royal favour in having allowed him to presume to attempt what others, older and wiser than he, had not ventured to undertake. His audience at the palace having been finished, he set out, mounted on horseback, for the river, accompanied by the ambassador and an Imperial bodyguard, the elephant following in the rear. Crowds of people lined the route to the river, anxious to catch a glimpse of the hero of the hour. His appearance created a favourable impression amongst most of the onlookers, who were struck by his distinguished bearing and handsome features, though there were some who scoffed at the idea of a child being able to carry out what had puzzled the wise men of the land.

The long, slowly-moving, procession at last reached the bank of the river. There a boat was in readiness, anchored near the bank, and close by it was a pile of stones, all of uniform size. The elephant, which up to that time had behaved with the greatest decorum, began to show signs of discontent and became somewhat unruly.
The keepers tried to pacify it and to coax it into quiescence by giving it cakes. But the elephant refused to be comforted and became more and more restive, as if it anticipated trouble.

In the meantime Kan Lo had been completing his arrangements, after which he suddenly ordered the elephant to be led on board the boat. The elephant seemed to comprehend the order for it at once tried to bolt and would have succeeded in breaking loose had it not been secured by ropes.

An attempt was now made to get the beast on board the boat, but it refused to move. Coaxing was tried, but, after all the coaxing acts had been exhausted, the elephant still remained unmoved. A little gentle pressure was then applied but with no effect. The patience of the keepers was becoming gradually exhausted and they were beginning to show signs of temper. Heavy blows with thick sticks now rained on the hide of the elephant, whilst it was being pushed from behind and dragged in front. These attentions becoming too continuous at last had the desired effect, and with a loud noise the elephant plunged into the boat which sank deep into the water under the weight of so heavy a cargo.

People now began to wonder what the object of shipping the beast could be, and their surprise became all the greater when suddenly Kan Lo ordered the elephant to be removed from the boat and to be led on to the bank again.

The elephant seemed quite out of its element in the boat and it required no coaxing to induce it to leave it. With one bound it jumped on to the bank and whinnied with delight. No sooner had the beast landed than Kan Lo proceeded close to the bank and, after having carefully examined the boat outside and inside, he directed it to be filled with the stones with which he had specially requested to be furnished.
The spectators on hearing Kan Lo's last order became more and more doubtful of his ability to weigh the elephant. Indeed many now thought that he was indulging in a childish freak, as they could not see what possible connection there was between the elephant and a cargo of stones.

In the meantime, the boat was being filled with stones under the superintendence of Kan Lo, who watched the process with great care. After a large quantity of stones had been placed on board, he suddenly ordered the loading to cease and the stones to be again removed from the boat. This command was received with a loud hum of discontent from the crowds of spectators, who began to be more than ever convinced that they had been fooled into coming to witness Kan Lo attempting an impossible task. He, however, was in no way disconcerted by this outbreak of popular displeasure, but calmly caused the stones which had been taken out of the boat and which were all of a uniform size to be counted. When the work of counting was over and the exact number of stones taken from the boat had been ascertained, a smile of triumph passed over his features, and in a loud voice he announced that he was in possession of the exact weight of the elephant, an announcement which the crowd received with loud shouts of derision. Kan Lo then stepped forward and explained how he had ascertained the exact weight:

"My object in ordering the elephant to be put on board the boat was to see how far the boat would sink under its weight into the water. Having carefully marked the line made by the water, I caused the elephant to be led on shore again, and then had the boat laden with stones of a uniform size and weight until it sank into the water up to the line reached when the elephant was on board. I then had the stones counted, and now I know the exact weight of the elephant."
Great were the rejoicings when Kan Lo had finished his explanation, and the spectators realized for the first time that he had really accomplished his task.

Special messengers were at once despatched to the palace to convey the intelligence to the Emperor, who was greatly relieved and much delighted. He directed that Kan Lo should be brought before him without delay, and when he came into the royal presence the Emperor warmly thanked him for having saved his country from a great dilemma and conferred on him as a reward the position of Prime Minister, though he was only a youth of twelve years of age. He also proclaimed a general holiday for three days, during which there were great rejoicings and festivities, every household being gaily decorated with lamps and festoons.

But great as was the joy on the part of the public, it was as nothing compared with that which reigned in the household of Kan Lo, to which hosts of friends and relations repaired to offer their congratulations and to join the feasting and revelry.

The fame of Kan Lo became widespread and, through his abilities, the Empire flourished. He was indeed a striking example of his saying that wisdom depends not on age, but that he who is without it may live in vain for one hundred years.