“The Homecoming” By, Laurence Yep

Once there was a woodcutter who minded everyone’s business but his own. If you were digging a hole, he knew a better way to grip the shovel. If you were cooking a fish, he knew a better recipe. As his village said, he knew a little of everything and most of nothing.

If his wife and children hadn’t made palm leaf fans, the family would have starved. Finally his wife got tired of everyone laughing at them. “You’re supposed to be a woodcutter. Go up to the hill and cut some firewood.”

“Any fool can do that.” The woodcutter picked up his hatchet. “In the mountains there’s plenty of tall oak. That’s what burns best.”

His wife pointed out the window. “But there’s a stand of pine just over the ridge top.”

Her husband looked pained. “Pine won’t sell as well. I’ll take my load into town, where folk are too busy to cut their own. Then I’ll come back with loads of cash.” With a laugh, he shouldered his long pole. After he cut the wood, he would tie it into two big bundles and place each at the end of the pole. Then he would balance the load on his shoulder.

Waving good-bye to his children, he left their house; but his wife walked right with him. “What are you doing?” he asked.

His wife folded her arms as they walked along. “Escorting you.”

He slowed down by a boy who was making a kite out of paper and rice paste. “That thing will never fly. You should—”

His wife caught his arm and pulled him along. “Don’t be such a busybody.”

“If a neighbor’s doing something wrong, it’s the charitable thing to set that person straight.” He tried to stop by a man who was feeding his ducks. “Say, friend.

Those ducks’ll get fatter if—”

His wife yanked him away and gave him a good shake. “Do I have to blindfold you? We have two children to feed.”

“I’m not lazy,” he grumbled.

She kept dragging him out of the village. “I never said you were. You can do the work of two people when no one else is around. You’re just too easily distracted.”

She went with him to the very edge of the fields and sent him on his way. “Remember,” she called after him. “Don’t talk to anyone.”

He walked with long, steady strides through the wooded hills. “I’ll show her. It isn’t how often you do something, it’s how you do it. I’ll cut twice the wood and sell it for double the price and come back in half the time.”

Complaining loudly to himself, he moved deep into the mountains. I want just the right sort of oak, he thought to himself. As he walked along, he kept an eye out for a likely tree.

He didn’t see the funny old man until he bumped into him. “Oof, watch where you’re going,” the old man said.

The old man had a head that bulged as big as a melon. He was dressed in a yellow robe embroidered with storks and pine trees.

Playing chess with the old man was another man so fat he could not close his robe. In his hand he had a large fan painted with drinking scenes.

The fat man wagged a finger at the old man. “Don’t try to change the subject. I’ve got you. It’s checkmate in two moves.”

The funny old man looked back at the chessboard. The lines were a bright red on yellow paper, and the chess pieces were flat disks with words painted in gold on their tops.

“Is it now, is it now?” the funny old man mused.

The woodcutter remembered his wife’s warning. But he said to himself, “I’m not actually talking to them. I’m advising them.” So he put down his hatchet and pole. “Actually, if you moved that piece”—he jabbed at a disk—”and moved it there”—he pointed at a spot on the board—”you’d have him.”

But the old man moved a different disk.

The fat man scratched the top of his bald head. “Now how’d you think of that?”

The woodcutter rubbed his chin. “Yes, how did you think of that?” But then he nodded his head and pointed to one of the fat man’s disks. “Still, if you shifted that one, you’d win.”

However, the fat man ignored him as he made another move.

“Well,” the woodcutter said to the old man, “you’ve got him now.”

But the old man paid him no more mind than the fat man. “Hmmm,” he murmured, and set his chin on his fist as he studied the board.

The woodcutter became so caught up in the game that he squatted down. “I know what you have to do. I’ll be right here just in case you need to ask.”

Neither man said anything to the woodcutter. They just went on playing, and as they played, the woodcutter became more and more fascinated. He forgot about chopping wood. He even forgot about going home.

When it was night, the funny old man opened a big basket and lifted out a lantern covered with stars. He hung it from a tree and the game went on. Night passed on into day, but the woodcutter was as involved in the game now as the two men.

“Let’s take a break.” The old man slipped a peach from one big sleeve. The peach was big as the woodcutter’s fist, and it filled the woods with a sweet aroma.

“You’re just stalling for time,” the fat man said. “Move.”

“I’m hungry,” the old man complained, and took a big bite. However, he shoved a piece along the board. When he held the peach out to the fat man, the fat man bit into it hungrily.

Alternating moves and bites, they went on until there was nothing left of the peach except the peach stone. “I fell much better now,” the old man said, and threw the stone over his shoulder.

As the two men had eaten the peach, the woodcutter had discovered that he was famished, but the only thing was the peach stone. “Maybe I can suck on this stone and forget about being hungry. But I wish one of them would ask me for help. We could finish this game a lot quicker.”

He tucked the stone into his mouth and tasted some of the peach juices. Instantly, he felt himself filled with energy. Goodness, he thought, I feel like there were lightning bolts zipping around inside me. And he went on watching the game with new energy.

After seven days, the old man stopped and stretched. “I think we’re going to have to call this game a draw.”

The fat man sighed. “I agree.” He began to pick up the pieces.

The woodcutter spat out the stone. “But you could win easily.”

The old man finally noticed him. “Are you still here?”

The woodcutter thought that this was his chance now to do a good deed. (4) “It’s been a most interesting game. However, if you—”

But the old man made shooing motions with his hands. “You should’ve gone home long ago.”

“But I—” began the woodcutter.

The fat man rose. “Go home. It may already be too late.”

That’s funny thing to say, the woodcutter thought. He turned around to get his things. But big, fat mushrooms had sprouted among the roots of the trees. A brown carpet surrounded him. He brushed the mushrooms aside until he found a rusty hatchet blade. He couldn’t find a trace of the hatchet shaft or of his carrying pole.

Puzzled, he picked up the hatchet blade. “This can’t be mine. My hatchet was practically new. Have you two gentlemen seen it?” He turned around again, but the two men had disappeared along with the chessboard and chess pieces.

“That’s gratitude for you.” Picking up the rusty hatchet blade, the woodcutter tried to make his way back through the woods; but he could not find the way he had come up. “It’s like someone rearranged all the trees.”

Somehow he made his way out of the mountains. However, fields and villages now stood where there had once been wooded hills. “What are you doing here?” he asked a farmer.

“What are you?” the farmer snorted, and went back to working in his field.

The woodcutter thought about telling him that he was swinging his hoe wrong, but he remembered what the two men had said. So he hurried home instead.

The woodcutter followed the river until he reached his own village, but as he walked through the fields, he didn’t recognize one person. There was even a pond before the village gates. It had never been there before. He broke into a run, but there was a different house in the spot where his home had been. Even so, he burst into the place.

Two strange children looked up from the table, and a strange woman picked up a broom. “Out!”

The woodcutter raised his arms protectively. “Wait, I live here.”

But the woman beat the woodcutter with a broom until he retreated into the street. By now, a crowd had gathered. The woodcutter looked around desperately “What’s happened to my village? Doesn’t anyone know me?”

The village schoolteacher had come out of the school. He asked the woodcutter his name, and when the woodcutter told him, the schoolteacher pulled at his whiskers. “That name sounds familiar, but it can’t be.”

With the crowd following them, he led the woodcutter to the clan temple. “I collect odd, interesting stories.” The schoolteacher got out a thick book. “There’s a strange incident in the clan book.” He leafed through the book toward the beginning and pointed to a name. “A woodcutter left the village and never came back.” He added quietly. “But that was several thousand years ago.”

“That’s impossible,” the woodcutter insisted. “I just stayed away to watch two men play a game of chess.”

he schoolteacher sighed. “The two men must have been saints. Time doesn’t pass for them as it does for us.”

And at that moment, the woodcutter remembered his wife’s warning.

But it was too late now.