THE SALTED MUSHROOM

By Phillis Gershator

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MANY Years ago in Yangzhou, where the Yangtze River joins the waters of the Grand Canal, the wealthiest man in the city was a salt merchant.

A *salt* merchant? Yes. Salt is a precious substance, essential for life. And this salt merchant controlled the shipments of salt through the entire Yangtze Valley, north to the Han River and south to Guangzhou, and he grew rich doing it, as rich as a king.

He was so rich he wanted everyone to see just how rich he was. The ceiling of his house was higher than the ceiling of the largest temple. It was so high he could not see the dragons carved on its beams. The lavishly painted screens were so long they went right out the sliding doors and into the garden. The huge bronze toilet he designed was so tall he had to climb up a ladder to reach it.

The salt merchant hired the finest cooks and gardeners in the land, and when anyone in his family took sick, he hired the finest doctors to cure them.

Unfortunately, one year, when his newest, youngest, and most beautiful wife, Yu-ke, took sick, doctor after doctor-no matter how much money he paid them-could not make her well.

"Certain illnesses cannot be cured," said one honest doctor. "I am afraid Yu-ke will die before her time."

"I won't allow it!" exclaimed the merchant. "She is the most beautiful woman in Yangzhou. If Yu-ke dies, then the rice merchant's wife will be the most beautiful. I am much richer than the rice merchant."

"I suggest you find the mushroom lady," said the doctor. "She sells mushrooms in the marketplace. Rumor has it she might have eaten the Mushroom of Immortality herself, for she is very, very old. Maybe she can help Yu-ke. It is your last and only hope."

The merchant immediately ordered his servants to find her. They did so, and she appeared before him, bowing deeply. "How may I serve you, Honorable Salt Merchant?"

"My youngest wife, Yu-ke, is dying. Is it true your medicines can make her well again?"

"Let me see your wife."

Yu-ke lay in her bed, shivering and pale beneath the quilts. Even in sickness, she looked so sweet and young the mushroom lady yearned to help her.

"Swallow this," she urged Yu-ke, crushing a tiny piece of mushroom in a spoonful of water.

Yu-ke said, "No," as though she didn't want to live.

The mushroom lady whispered, "I see a better future for you. You must live."

Yu-ke swallowed the mixture, and it revived her. The merchant was overjoyed. He gave the mushroom lady a gold coin for her services.

But as the days passed, thoughts of life and death preyed on his mind. "How close Yu-ke came to dying. Why, any one of us can die! Will I die before my time? I have so much wealth that I need to live on and on, to a very old age, to enjoy it all. In fact, why shouldn't I have all the time in the world? Why shouldn't I live forever?"

Very few people on earth become immortal, and no one in recent history had achieved this, as far as he knew-unless the stories were true about the old mushroom lady.

Is she really immortal?" he wondered. "Does she know the secret of immortality?" He did not want anyone to know what he was thinking. He was afraid his own servants would laugh at him and say he was becoming foolish. Some jealous people already called him a "salt fool" for his huge house, high ceilings, and inconvenient toilet.

The wealthy merchant secretly changed his clothes for those of an ordinary townsman. He left his sedan chair and servants at home and walked by himself to the market. He found the mushroom lady at her stand, where the mushrooms were set out in small baskets, arranged by size and color-all the mushrooms a man could ever want, except for one.

The merchant stood before her. She recognized him even in his simple clothing. "How may I serve you, Honorable Salt Merchant?" she asked.

"My wife is quite well now," he replied, "but in the event she becomes ill again, I wish to be prepared with the right medicine."

"The medicine I gave her was a bit of Lingzhi mushroom. It has extraordinary qualities when properly used. It is almost as valuable as salt," she answered with a small smile.

"I will pay you well for that mushroom. I heard a strange but intriguing rumor that it is the Mushroom of Immortality"

"Some people call it that," replied the old woman. "It is a powerful mushroom, but it must be used with caution."

"I must have it."

"I have no more, or I would sell it to you," the old lady lied.

"I insist that you find that mushroom for me. I will make it well worth your while."

"I am too old now to search for mushrooms. I buy them from other, younger folk."

Pointing to the young man who was watching them, the merchant said, "Then send that fellow to find the mushroom."

"No. That is my grandchild, Mou Wang. He is too young for such an expedition," she said, growing fearful, for the merchant's face was becoming red with anger.

The merchant was not used to resistance. Money had always paved the way for him. He could pay any price, and whatever he wanted was his. He never permitted others to use the word no. He paid them to say yes.

"You will do as I say," he threatened, "or I will take this boy from you. I will put him to work on the seacoast breaking up salt in the salt pans. Though he may not be old enough to hunt for mushrooms, he is old enough to withstand hard labor in the sun. He may even survive for a month or two."

The mushroom lady quickly gave in. "We will try to find that which you seek."

"Good! I knew you would see reason. Here, you will find I am very generous." He gave them a few coins and helped himself to a basket of Thunderballs, Stone Ears, and Devil's Umbrellas.

The old woman did have a bit of Lingzhi mushroom left. She had been keeping it for herself. She had no desire to live forever, but neither did she want to leave her grandchild alone after his parents had died in an accident in the dangerous gorges of

the Yangtze. When she felt her time to leave this world coming closer, she nibbled a tiny edge off the precious mushroom, and another year was hers. The mushroom would soon be gone, but the boy was grown now and almost on his own, and she could pass on to the next world with peace of mind.

"Grandmother, don't worry," Wang said, with more confidence than he felt. "I will find that mushroom."

"It is no easy task, Grandson. I was lucky to obtain a small one from a wizard many years ago. I have nibbled on it in my old age so that I could remain here with you. I still have a small piece. That piece I will give to the merchant."

"Please don't," Wang begged. "I am determined to go on this mushroom hunt."

"I will not stop you, but you'll never find the Lingzhi by yourself. You will need the wizard's help and you will have to walk a long ways to find him. My own legs are too weak now for that journey."

"My legs are strong, Grandmother."

His grandmother carefully described the route, and Wang followed her directions just as carefully.

When at last he reached the valley where Grandmother told him the wizard lived, no one seemed to know of any wizard. "There is an old Taoist hermit in the foothills," said a farmer. "Ask him."

Wang found the hermit by a hut in a wooded glen.

"Hello, Honorable Hermit," he said. "I've been told you might help me find the wizard."

"Why are you looking for him?"

"My grandmother, the mushroom lady, told me that only he knows where to find the Lingzhi mushroom. If we don't find one for the salt merchant, he will send me to the coast to break salt."

"Is that so terrible?"

"Yes, because then my grandmother and I will never see each other again."

"That is terrible," agreed the hermit.

"To prevent that from happening," Wang continued," Grandmother plans to give him the last bit of the mushroom she's been saving for herself. She is very old. Without the mushroom she will die. That is why I have come a long way to find the wizard."

"I see. Do you like riddles?" the hermit asked.

"Sometimes," Wang replied hesitantly.

"Come into my hut, and I'll tell you riddles."

The hermit served him "plain tea," clear boiled water. To Wang's surprise, it tasted like rich red tea.

"When is the sun at noon low on the horizon?" the hermit asked Wang.

"I don't know."

"When it is setting somewhere else!"

"Oh, I never would have guessed that one," Wang said.

"When you take a stick and cut it in half every day," said the hermit next, "how many days will it take to cut it all?"

"I don't know that one, either." Wang hid his head in his hands, knowing that if this were a test, he had not passed it.

"It will take forever!" said the hermit. "I have one more riddle for you. What can see the tip of a hair by night but cannot see a mountain by day?"

"I don't know."

The hermit laughed. "An owl! You see, son, all creatures have different gifts. That is the nature of things. And though you, too, are gifted in many ways, you are not a Taoist master. You will clearly need help in finding the mushroom you seek. My busy little guides will show you the way."

"Guides?" Wang repeated, looking around the hermit's empty hut.

"Yes. They will lead you to the honey flower. Golden dew drips from the blooming honey flower's petals, and in the spot where it falls, the Lingzhi grows. This is its season, so go forth with sharp eyes. Other mushrooms will show themselves to you in the soil, among the leaves, on dead trunks and branches, but you must not lose sight of your guides. Follow them without fail."

With that, he filled his mouth with rice and spat it out into the air. Each grain turned into a bee.

"*You* are the wizard!" cried Wang.

"Thank you, kind Wizard!" And out the door he ran, close behind the buzzing bees.

On and on he went, trying not to notice the tempting mushrooms peeping and poking and popping up everywhere, in clumps, in layers, in fairy rings…shaggy, puffy, pitted, smooth…ruby red, pearl white, sapphire blue…

Keeping his eyes on the bees, Wang ran, jumped, stumbled onward. The bees buzzed louder and louder until the buzz was like a dozen zithers playing all at once. At last he saw it, the honey flower! As big as a lotus blossom, its golden petals glowed in the sunlight. Sparkling golden dew dripped from its petals.

Wang looked on the ground, and there, beneath the flower, he saw a large and perfect Lingzhi. He wrapped it carefully in a clean white cloth.

He had been told to follow the bees, but what now? The bees were perched on the honey flower, buzzing softly.

I'll wait for the bees, Wang thought. Once they finish collecting pollen, they will lead me back to the wizard's hut.

He sat down to wait, but he couldn't keep his eyes open. Sleep overtook him.

The sound of buzzing grew stronger, as though the bees had increased in size a thousandfold. When the buzzing stopped, he awoke to find himself back at the marketplace in Yangzhou, at his grandmother's mushroom stand.

"My dearest child, safe and sound," she cried. "Thank you, merciful Goddess Kuanyin!"

Together, Wang and his grandmother brought the mushroom to the merchant's princely residence. Wang was astounded by the magnificence of the merchant's house and garden, and even more by the youth and sweetness of his lovely wife Yu-ke. Indeed, the young man and woman couldn't stop staring at each other.

"Let me caution you," said the old mushroom lady to the merchant. "This mushroom is very strong. You must use it in moderation. The Taoists believe that in life there is death and in death life, a truth we must not overlook.

"Just as a little salt makes food palatable, too much salt can ruin it," she continued. "So, too, the Lingzhi must be eaten in small amounts, with great caution."

"You don't have to tell me about salt, old woman. I know all there is to know about salt. Why do you think I am so rich? If this is the Mushroom of Immortality, I am satisfied. No cautionary words are necessary."

He salted the mushroom.

"No!" cried the mushroom lady. "Not all at once."

"Don't use the word no in my presence! Now I will live forever, enjoying my wealth for all eternity."

"Honorable Salt Merchant," she said in a softer voice, "you have not yet paid me."

The merchant perfectly understood the matter of payment. "Of course," he said, handing her a string of coins.

"Money," she said, "cannot buy a mushroom like this one. Instead, I ask you to decree that upon your death, your wife Yu-ke will become the bride of my grandson, Mou Wang."

She has obviously forgotten I am going to live forever, thought the merchant. Well, I will indulge her and so decree, and save a pile of money in the bargain.

After the business of payment had been completed, he popped the entire mushroom into his mouth and swallowed it.

The mushroom lady departed, knowing that the merchant had only seconds left to enjoy his wealth.

"He thinks that if a big house is good, a bigger one is better. If a bag of gold is good, a hundred bags are better. If a bite of mushroom is good, ten bites are better. But he is a fool," she told Wang, "a salt fool."

"Remember, my son," she said, when they returned to their own small house, "mushrooms may be magic, but they can also be deadly." And with those words of wisdom, she ate her last morsel of Lingzhi and lived long enough to see Wang and Yu-ke happily married.

Afterwords:

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Salt Pans and Salt Mines

by Phillis Gershator

In CHINA, MOST salt comes from the coast. Seawater is routed through a series of basins called salt pans until all the water evaporates in the sun. The salt that remains is broken up, pulverized,

and packed for shipping. During the seventeenth century, on the coast of Jiangsu province, sea salt factories supplied over 300,000 tons a year.

Salt also comes from dry salt lakes, rock salt, and brine wells, formed hundreds of millions of years ago when land in the area of Sichuan province was submerged by the ocean. Gradually the land lifted to become a mountain-ringed basin.

Shallow wells of underground brine, which is saltier than seawater and yields a purer salt, were tapped as early as the third century B.C. By the first century B.C., deeper wells were dug using derricks and drills with cast-iron drill bits. The drill was suspended from a derrick by bamboo cables and powered by men jumping on and off a lever to raise and lower the drill. Depths of up to 4,800 feet could be reached this way.

A nineteenth-century writer described the process he observed: "One day's labor may drill more than a foot…Sometimes it may take several days to drill one inch…Usually it takes four or five to some ten years to reach [brine]… If, at the depth of 3,000 feet, the amount of brine is still insufficient, the well is abandoned."

If enough brine is found, a hoisting machine brings the filled buckets to the surface. Laborers carry the buckets away, one bucket on each end of a shoulder pole, and pour the brine into bamboo pipes. The pipes lead to gas-fired evaporation works, where the brine is boiled in cast-iron pans.

Wells often contain natural gas below the brine level. The gas from just one well is enough to heat a few hundred to a few thousand pans, with the largest pans weighing as much as a thousand pounds. After the liquid evaporates, the salt is packaged and transported via road, river, and canal.

The Chinese were the first to drill brine wells, the first to undertake deep borehole drilling, the first to exploit natural gas for industrial purposes, and, to get around the high price of salt, the first to make soy sauce!

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Salt Fools

by Phillis Gershator

Though salt is a common and plentiful mineral, the merchants in China who transported and sold it became rich, so rich, especially between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, that they lived like princes. The most ostentatious salt merchants were called salt fools. "There was one who loved beautiful things," wrote an eighteenth-century observer. "From his gatekeepers to kitchenmaids, only

good-looking young persons were selected. On the other hand, there was one who was fond of ugly things… There was yet another who liked big things. He designed for himself a huge bronze urinal… five or six feet tall."

How did a simple staple like salt make these merchants so rich?

It started in the seventh century B.C. in the eastern state of Qi, about 400 years before the unification of China. Qi's capable duke and minister recognized that salt was a basic necessity, and that salt production could be controlled by the government. A state-run salt monopoly actually existed in the last centuries of the Han period (206 B.C.-A.D. 200). Its labor force consisted of prisoners and able-bodied "free" peasants drafted for an annual period of service without pay. They slaved away extracting and preparing salt-and built the roads and canals to transport it, too!

By the eighth century A.D., salt brought in a large portion of the government's revenue. As time went on, the system changed. Licenses were sold to salt producers and merchants for the exclusive right to make and sell salt in specific regions of the country. They had no competition and could charge whatever they wished. Government officials inspected the saltworks to make sure they were licensed and collected taxes on the amount of salt shipped.

Other licensed merchants sold smaller amounts to even smaller merchants and finally to peddlers who sold the salt to ordinary people. By the time it reached the individual shopper, salt was so expensive that a boatman or foot soldier paid about one-third of a day's wages per pound.