



## An Idler Who Became an Ox

**T**here once lived a man who was disgusted with work very much. While all of his family members kept themselves busy with their assignment, he idled away his time even without lifting a finger.

One day his wife asked him to work in the field with all others during the busy farming season.

He grimaced, “Don’t annoy me any longer.”

“This is not intended to annoy you. But if you dislike work in this manner, how shall you feed

your family?”

Seeing that it would be difficult for him to keep lying in his room any longer, he decided to part from his family. From a chest he stealthily took out two bundles of hemp cloth his wife had laboriously woven.

On a mountain ridge in the rear of his house he found a thatched cottage he had never seen before. An old man was making a strange article inside the small house.

“What is that?” He asked the old man.

He merely smiled. "Why do you ask?"

"Because it looks so queer. For what use are you making it?"

"If you are so curious, I'll tell you." The old man lifted the article and said, "This is the head of an ox." It was a mask shaped like the ox head.

"For what purpose are you going to use it?"

"Why am I making an article that is useless? No one is more stupid than a man who makes a useless article."

The young man thought to himself, "A senseless old man! It would be better for him to idle away his time lying down."

When the young man was about to leave, the old man told him, "There is certainly a man who dislikes work in this world. If such a person puts on this mask, he will surely strike good luck."

"Are you sure?"

"Trying once is better than hearing one hundred times. Wear this right now."

He gave the strange mask to him. The young man put on the mask hurriedly in the hope that it would bring him good fortune.

The old man covered the young man's shoulders with a mat made of ox hide he had been sitting on.

Strangely enough, he could not take off the mask once he covered his face with it. Furthermore, the hide mat clung so tight to his body that he couldn't remove it.

The old man rose up and bridled him with a rope. "Now you are an ox, follow me."

The old man went out with the reins in his hand.

In surprise, the young man uttered his disgust. But his voice sounded as if an ox cried. This was strange indeed.

He walked on all fours like an ox.

Whipping the wriggling young man, the old man ordered him to obey his commands.

**I**t was the market place in the town to which the old man took the young man. Walking a long distance, they found many cattle. The young man, joining the cattle, had to wait until a buyer emerged.

The young man who became an ox was sold to a farmer. The old man told the farmer, "If this ox is fed with a radish, he will die. Be careful lest he should be led to a radish farm."

"This is really a strange ox." Shaking his head, the farmer who bought him, drove him to his home.

From the day on, the young man who became an ox had to do one painstaking job after another. He had to carry a heavy load on his back. He had to





-85 Soon



pull a plough in the field. He had to tackle a laborious assignment all day long. But the farmer never let him idle away.

When he cried because of fatigue, the farmer used to whip him relentlessly.

“I’m a human being, not an ox.”

The farmer could not understand this appeal. It sounded to him like a cry.

Time passed but there was no means for the young man to restore his human nature. When he thought over his lot in the stable at night, he grew sad and indignant.

He regretted his past days of idleness.

He thought that it would be better for him to die than to live only to be engaged in hard work, but it was difficult for him to die.

At this moment, the past conversation between the old man and the farmer flickered in his head. “This ox will die if he is fed with a radish.”

Grinding his teeth, the ox made the determination, “I shall die if I eat a radish.”

On his way home from the field, the ox pulled up two radishes and ate them while his master was not watching him.

A strange phenomenon took place. His head transformed into a mask. He could also remove the mask and the hide.

The radishes he ate to die helped him become a human being again. Freeing himself from the ox mask, the young man emerged before the farmer.

He was greatly astonished upon seeing his ox transform into a human being. The young man told him what really happened. Parting from the farmer, he crossed the ridge on which the thatched cottage stood where the old man made the ox mask. But the house had completely vanished to nowhere. What he found there instead were the two bundles of hemp cloth he had taken with him.

Shouldering the cloth, he returned home. From then on, he became a diligent worker. The villagers thought that the old man must have been a fox. The pass was named Fox Ridge 5



85  
Soon

Illustration by Lee Soon-Jae