

CHINESE FOLK-LORE

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Chinese folk-lore by J. Macgowan

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J. MACGOWAN

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FOLK-LORE**

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BY THE

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I.—A CHAPTER ON FAIRIES - - - - -	1
II.—THE INFAMOUS CHOW SIN AND THE BEAUTIFUL T'A KI - - - - -	12
III.—THE FAIRY AND THE PEAR SELLER - - -	24
IV.—THE LOVE ADVENTURES OF THE FOX FAIRY, PRINCE HU - - - - -	29
V.—YU KONG THE ATHLETE - - - - -	41
VI.—LI, THE MAN WITH THE IRON STAFF - - -	49
VII.—WONG SING; OR, HOW THE FORTUNES OF A ROYAL FAMILY WERE RESTORED BY A FAIRY -	63
VIII.—THE STIRRING ADVENTURES OF THE SCHOLAR WANG	77
IX.—THE MYSTERIOUS PEACH - - - - -	89
X.—THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF THE SCHOLAR SIU	103
XI.—THE ROMANTIC STORY OF THE PHENIX FAIRY -	113
XII.—MR. TANG, THE FILLIAL SON - - - - -	127
XIII.—SOAT-LIP AND THE YOUTHFUL FAIRY - - -	140
XIV.—THE KING OF THE NINE MOUNTAINS - - -	152
XV.—THE FAIRY SCHOLAR - - - - -	166
XVI.—PHENIX, THE BEAUTIFUL FOX FAIRY - - -	177
XVII.—THE SCHOLAR HAI, AND THE FAIRY SONGSTER, LADY KWEY - - - - -	187
XVIII.—MR. WANG AND THE TAOIST ABBOTT - - -	199
XIX.—THE KING OF THE SNAKES - - - - -	212
XX.—HOW AN EXPECTANT PRIME MINISTER WAS CURED OF HIS AMBITION BY THE INGENIOUS DEVICE OF A FAIRY - - - - -	225



CHINESE FOLK-LORE

I.

A CHAPTER ON FAIRIES.

THE Chinese have the most profound belief in the existence of fairies. In their imagination, the hills and the mountains that are supposed to be the favourite resorts of these mysterious beings are all peopled with them, and from there they descend into the plains, and mingling in the guise of men and women amongst the masses of this Empire carry out their benevolent purposes in aiding the distressed and the forlorn.

The conceptions that people generally have about them are necessarily of a vague and indefinite character. They are fully convinced, however, that they are highly intelligent and with large and loving sympathies for everything human, and they also believe just as strongly that they have played an active part in connection with men during all the centuries of the past, and that, in the great crises through which men have been called to pass, they have made it a point to be present to help men come through their trials and to survive the calamities that might otherwise have destroyed them. During the changes of dynasties, and in times of revolution and anarchy when men's lives are accounted of little value, these benign beings are supposed specially to manifest themselves to aid as far as possible in alleviating human misery and in suggesting modes of escape from impending disasters.

Many names of benevolent fairies are mentioned who have thus appeared and who have distinguished themselves by the active part they have taken in times of great peril to

the men of the Middle Kingdom. Lau-tze is one of these. By ordinary historians he is looked upon simply as a great man who was born about the close of the sixth century B.C., and who became the founder of the Taoist system of philosophy. The romancists, however, and the students of fairy lore have a very different theory about him. They declare that he was originally a fairy, and that on several occasions he left the Western Heaven and became a man, in order that he might rescue men from the sorrows that the bad government of some vicious and unprincipled king was bringing on the country.

They appeal to his very name as an evidence that he did not enter into life as ordinary mortals do. Lau-tze translated into English means the aged son; for that most veracious thing, tradition, positively affirms that eighty-one years elapsed before his mother could give him birth, and that when finally he was born the hair with which his head was covered was as white as snow, whilst three wrinkles furrowed his forehead and gave him a prematurely old appearance.

That Lau-tze had various incarnations is very widely believed by the readers of fairy lore. It is positively asserted for example that he appeared during the latter days of the Sheng dynasty (B.C. 1766-1121), when the unprincipled conduct of its last king was causing rebellion among his nobles, and alienation of heart among his people generally. In the interests of the nation as a whole, Lau-tze had no hesitation whatever in espousing the popular side, and it is believed that he not only gave valuable advice to Prince Wu, the founder of the dynasty that succeeded the one just overthrown, viz., the Chow (B.C. 1122-255), but also that the countless spirits that he summoned from the unseen world fought on the side of the rebellious nobles and finally secured them the victory.

Prince Wu, the founder of the great Chow dynasty, is a famous man in the annals of China, and his name is always linked with those of the distinguished Kings Yao and Shun, who, in the estimation of the Chinese, are the beautiful rulers, whose reign brought untold blessings upon the

Flowerly Land. That this prince was so successful in the government of China was mainly due, it is believed, to the influence that this fairy counsellor exercised over him, and to the wise counsels that he was able to give him in all the emergencies in which he was placed.

It is said that whilst Lau-tze was in the service of King Wu, he was sent on an embassy to the far-off Roman Empire on an errand of mercy. News had reached China that the prisoners in Rome were treated with exceptional cruelty, and that prison life was of such an exceedingly barbarous character that few were able to survive the hardships they had to endure. Lau-tze's heart was deeply moved with the pathetic stories that he heard from the travellers who had journeyed far into the regions of the West, and he determined that he would go and see for himself whether men were so brutally treated as had been described to him. Human life in Rome was as dear to him as it was in the more favoured land of China, and he could not remain content until he had done his utmost to alleviate the ills that men were enduring in the terrible prisons of that famous capital.

Approaching King Wu one morning he begged for leave of absence for a few months, as he had most important business which he wished to transact and which would ill brook any delay. Permission having been given, Lau-tze walked a little way out of the city, when a mighty eagle, that a moment ago had been but a speck on the blue sky, came swifter than the swiftest arrow that had ever been sped from bow straight to where he was standing, and allowing him to be seated on its back, flew with incredible swiftness away towards the setting sun. Before the day was gone, Lau-tze was standing within the seven-hilled city, habited in the guise of a stranger who had come to visit the wonders of this far-famed town.

Making his way to one of the largest prisons in the place in order that he might see for himself whether the prisoners were really treated as badly as had been reported he found the condition of things a thousand times worse than any language could possibly describe. The atmosphere was fetid with the evil odours that everywhere prevailed, whilst

cruel tortures such as only could have been devised by minds from which the sentiment of pity had been for ever banished kept the unhappy prisoners in one long continued pain and misery.

The heart of Lau-tze was so deeply distressed by what he saw, that he began incontinently to loose the bonds of the wretched beings whose sighs and tears filled his whole soul with agony. Whilst he was engaged in this gracious act, the gaoler came in and, thunderstruck at such an act, he had him seized and conveyed by force to the palace of the Roman ruler, in order that he might decide what adequate punishment should be meted out to him for such an act of rebellion against the laws of the state. As such a deed was unknown in the annals of Rome, it was deemed that only the king himself could decide what should be done with a man who dared commit so great a crime as this. The result, however, was very different from what these men whose souls had been steeped in cruelty had expected. When Lau-tze was dragged into the presence of the sovereign there was something about him that seemed to quench the fiery passion that had flamed up within the king's breast when he had listened to the accusation that had been made. He had no idea, indeed, that the man who stood before him was a fairy that had come from the far-off Western Heaven, full of a purpose to ease the sorrows of men, wherever he found them in need of that divine sympathy which is such a sweetener of human life everywhere. Still there was something about this stranger that commanded his attention, such as ordinary men had never done before. Lau-tze defended himself against the misconception that he was conspiring against the State, and pleaded the cause of the unhappy prisoners with such eloquence that the stern ruler was moved to compassion, and orders were given that in all the prisons in Rome a more merciful system of treatment should be at once adopted and carried out.

It is confidently asserted that Lau-tze has since that early period appeared in every dynasty, sometimes once and sometimes more frequently in each, just as any great emergency in the life of the nation seemed to demand his presence