

Dragon Tales

**A Collection
of Chinese Stories**



Panda



Books

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First Edition 1988

Second Printing 1990

Third Printing 1994

Copyright 1988 by CHINESE LITERATURE PRESS

ISBN 7-5071-0024-3

ISBN 0-8351-2058-9

Published by CHINESE LITERATURE PRESS

Beijing 100037, China

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Preface

FOR all that it has never been seen, references to that mystic creature of ancient legend the dragon abound in the Chinese classics, and besides the *Book of Changes* "dragon flying in the sky", folk legends such as that of the flood dragon's journey to the sea have prompted speculation that the dragon was in antiquity a tribal totem whose image has over the centuries been enriched and taken on new guises to the point where it has a diversity of forms, each with its appropriate designation.

Described in legend as unique, miraculous and protean, the dragon has the ability to raise floods, bring thunder and lightning, summon up storms and transform itself at will; its mighty power is seen as the embodiment of all that is imposing and majestic. And the sovereigns of old China, no doubt in a bid to enlist the creature's limitless awe, likened themselves to embodiments of the dragon, clothing themselves in its almighty dignity. Thus the dragon became the symbol of princely power, acquiring by a deal of spurious analogy a concomitant sanctity proof against all blasphemy.

Yet to the minds of the common people it suggested, far from dread, an omen of good luck and fortune, an object of love and praise and the matter of many an excellent tale and legend down the ages.

The thirty-five stories collected here, drawn partly from classical literature and partly from traditional popular legend, include the tale of the ascent to heaven on a dragon's back of Huang Di, the race ancestor of the Chinese, a legend hoary enough to have been quoted in the first century BC in Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* and one which was to exert a far-reaching influence on the dragon's position in after ages. Yet the genre which endeared itself most and spread farthest was that of the dragoness, and this has been much pored over by folklorists and students of popular literature. Current among many of the peoples of China in variations according to their several manners and customs, this has provoked immortal pieces from the brushes of the past, prominent among them Li Chao-wei's "The Dragon King's Daughter" in the Tang Dynasty. Pu Songling's "The Rakshas and the Sea Market" is a powerful Qing Dynasty reworking of this theme, where the writer attacks the iniquities of the feudal system via the medium of a weird narrative of the dragon palace beneath the waves, where the dragon woman is a picture of oriental charm, virtuous in her beauty, urbane in her passion and punctilious towards love. "Li Jing" here ingeniously tells how man took over the function of the legendary dragon as a bringer of rain; "Short-Tailed Old Li" with its fight between the black dragon and the white dragon is a prime example of the many myths linking the names of mountains and rivers with dragons: these and many others, like the legend still current among the Dai that the dragon is the guardian of the village, are thought-provoking stories with a strong and curious appeal.

This volume may help to probe the mystery of how

and why the dragon, through all the natural accretions of cultural history millennia long, came to symbolize the spirit of the Chinese people.

Li Jing

IN the Tang Dynasty there was a Duke of Weiguo called Li Jing. Before becoming an official he used to go out hunting on Mount Lingshan, staying and having his meals there. The villagers wondered at him and would offer him rich food. With the passage of time they became close friends.

One day, coming across a herd of deer, he gave chase. The sun set, but he did not give up. As it was getting dark, he lost his way and could not get back. Foiled in his attempt, he was very vexed as he walked, but looking into the distance he discovered lamplight. He quickly made his way towards it. Reaching the place, he saw it was a mansion with a vermilion gate and surrounded by high walls. He knocked at the gate for a while until a man came out and asked who he was. Li Jing replied that he had lost his way and asked if he might put up in the mansion for the night.

"Our young masters are out," the man said. "Only the old lady is in. You may not come in."

Li Jing asked him to plead with the mistress. The man went in and reported, then returned. "She did not consent to your request at first, but considering that it is dark and you have lost your way, she has perforce to receive you."

So he was invited in. In a while a maid came. "Her

Ladyship," she announced.

About fifty, she wore a black skirt and white jacket and was possessed of an aristocratic grace.

Li Jing advanced and bowed to her.

"My sons are out," she said, returning his courtesy. "I should not have let you in, but it is too dark and you have lost your way. If I refused your request, where would you go? We dwell in the mountains. When my sons come home tonight there will be a commotion. I hope you will not be alarmed."

Soon the table was laid. The dishes set on it were fresh and delicious, with fish predominating. After the meal, the old lady retired. Two maids came bringing him clean, scented bedding and quilts, closed the door and fastened it, then left. Li Jing pondered over what had happened in the mountains. Night had fallen when he heard a noise outside. Wondering, he did not dare go to bed but sat up to listen. At midnight he heard hurried knocks at the gate and a response:

"The Heavenly decree has arrived. Your elder son is to send down rain for seven hundred li around the mountains, all by the fifth watch, none to stand or do any damage."

The respondent took the decree in and presented it to the lady.

Then the old lady was heard saying, "Neither of my sons has come back yet, and the decree to send the rain has arrived. We can not refuse it, and to postpone it would be to risk punishment. It is even too late to get word to him now. The servants aren't entitled to do it. What shall I do?"

"I found the visitor just now out of the common run," suggested a maid. "Shall we ask him to do it?"

Pleased, the lady went to knock at the door in person. "Have you gone to bed, young man? Come out for a moment, please."

Li Jing consented and went down the steps to meet her.

"This is not a residence of mortals, but a dragon palace," said the old lady. "My elder son is away at a wedding in the East Sea and my younger is escorting his sister, just when a Heavenly decree has arrived for rain to be sent down. They are more than ten thousand li away and could not be here in time even on cloud-back. Nor can I appoint others. May I ask you to take his place for the time being? Will you do that?"

"As a mortal, I cannot ride clouds. How shall I send down the rain? Teach me and I will," said Li Jing.

"If you do just as I say, you cannot go wrong," she said, and directed a page-boy to saddle a piebald horse and fetch a vessel, a little pot for the rain, which she had tied to the saddle. "As you ride," she warned him, "give the horse its head, and when it gallops and neighs, draw a drop of water from the pot and drop it on the mane. Be sure not to drop more than that."

Mounting, Li Jing hastened away. Suddenly he felt the horse rise and was surprised at its speed, as he was not aware that he was in the air. The wind was whirring past like an arrow, and thunder rumbled under his feet. Wherever it swelled, he dropped water. Suddenly through a rift in the clouds torn open by the lightning he caught sight of the village which he had stayed in.

"I put those villagers too much trouble," he thought. "Though they were very kind to me, I never repaid them. They are suffering from a burning drought, and the standing crops will be scorched. Now the rain is in

my hand, I must at least give them some water."

Calculating that one drop would not be enough to moisten the fields, he sent down twenty in succession. After a little the rain was finished, and he rode back, to find the lady weeping in the reception room.

"What a mess you have made!" she complained. "I told you to send down only one drop. What did you mean by pouring it twenty feet deep? A drop amounts to a foot of rain on the ground. By midnight the village was twenty feet deep. Not a soul will be seen there again. I have been reproved and received eighty lashes. See how my back is covered with bloodstains. And my sons are involved too. Are you convinced now?"

Chagrined and terror-stricken, Li Jing could not even give an answer.

"You are an earthling," continued the old lady. "You cannot understand the changes of cloud and rain, so I bear you no grudge. But I am afraid lest the Master Dragon should come here for you. He is a terror! Flee, quickly! But you have done me a favour, and I have not repaid you. Here in the mountains I have nothing but two slaves to offer you. You can take both of them or choose only one."

Presently two maidservants were ordered out. One came from the east corridor, elegant and pleasing to the eye, the other from the west, wearing an angry frown and standing there sullenly.

"I'm a hunter," thought Li Jing, "given to fighting with wild animals. If I choose a maidservant to please me, others will consider me a coward." So he said to the lady, "I will not take both. Since you offer me either, I prefer the scowling one."

"As you wish," said the lady with a smile.

Then he bowed to her and departed, with the maid-servant following behind. After a few paces, he turned and found that the mansion had vanished from sight, and so had the maid. He had no choice but to find his way back alone. When it was daylight, he saw that the village had become a wilderness of waters with only the tips of the branches of the biggest trees showing and not a soul to be seen.

Later he rose to military power, vanquishing invaders and accomplishing great things, but he never attained the rank of premier, no doubt because he had mistakenly chosen only one of the two slaves. The saying that premiers come from east of the pass and generals from the west does not in fact allude to directions. What was said of the slaves predicted his future: if he had taken both, he would have risen from general to premier.

Translated by Song Shouquan

The Dragon King's Daughter

DURING the Yi Feng period (AD 676-678), a scholar named Liu Yi failed in the official examination and, as he was returning to the Xiang River Valley, decided to go and take his leave of a fellow provincial who was staying at Jingyang. He had ridden about two miles when a bird flying up from the ground startled his horse and made it bolt, and it galloped two miles before he could stop it. Then he caught sight of a girl herding sheep by the roadside. She was amazingly beautiful but her finely arched eyebrows were knit, her clothes were soiled, and she was standing there listening intently as if awaiting someone's arrival.

"What has brought you to such a wretched state?" Liu asked.

The girl first expressed her gratitude with a smile; then, unable to restrain her tears, replied, "Unhappy creature that I am! Since you ask me the reason, how can I hide the deep resentment I feel? Listen then! I am the youngest daughter of the Dragon King of Dongting Lake. My parents married me to the second son of the Dragon King of the Jing River; but my husband, devoted to pleasure and led astray by his attendants, treated me more unkindly every day. I complained to his parents, but they were too fond of their son to take my part. When I persisted in complaining, they grew angry and banished me here." Having said this, she

broke down and sobbed.

"Dongting Lake is so far away," she went on. "It lies beyond the distant horizon, and I can get no word to my family. My heart is breaking and my eyes are worn out with watching, but there is no one to know my grief or pity me. Since you are going south and will pass near the lake, may I trouble you to take a letter?"

"I have a sense of justice," answered Liu, "and your story makes my blood boil. I only wish I had wings to fly there—why talk of trouble? But the lake is very deep, and I can only walk on land. How am I to convey your message? I fear I may be unable to get through, proving unworthy of your trust and failing in my own sincere wish to help you. Can you tell me how to make the journey?"

"I cannot say how I appreciate your kindness," said the girl, shedding tears. "If ever I receive a reply, I shall repay you even if it costs my life. Before you promised to help me, I dared not tell you how to reach my parents; but actually, to go to the lake is no harder than going to the capital."

Asked for directions, she told him, "South of the lake stands a big orange tree which is the sacred tree of the village. Take off this belt, put on another, and knock on the trunk three times. Someone will come to your call, and if you follow him you will have no difficulty. I have opened my heart to you as well as trusting you with my letter. Please tell my parents what you have heard. On no account fail me!"

Liu promised to do as she said. Then the girl took a letter from her pocket and handed it to him with a bow, all the while looking eastwards and weeping in a way that touched his heart.

When he had put the letter in his wallet, he inquired,

"May I ask why you herd sheep? Do deities also eat cattle?"

"No," she answered. "These are not sheep, but rain-bringers."

"What are they?"

"Thunder, lightning, and the like."

Liu looked at the sheep closely, and saw that they moved proudly with heads held high. They cropped the grass differently too, although they were the same size as ordinary sheep and had the same wool and horns.

"Now that I am going to act as your messenger," he said, "I hope in future, when you get back to the lake, you won't refuse to see me."

"Certainly not!" she exclaimed. "I shall treat you as a dear relative."

Then they bid each other goodbye, and he started east. After a few dozen yards he looked back, but both girl and sheep had disappeared.

That evening he reached the county town and said goodbye to his friend. It took him over a month to get home, and he went without delay to Dongting Lake. He found the orange tree south of the lake, changed his belt, faced the tree and knocked three times. A warrior came out of the water, and bowed to him. "Why have you come here, honourable sir?" he asked.

Without telling him the story, Liu simply answered, "To see your king."

The warrior parted the waves and pointed the way, saying to Liu as he led him down, "Close your eyes. We will be there in no time."

Liu did as he was told, and soon they reached a great palace where he saw clustered towers and pavilions, millions of gates and arches, and all the rare plants and trees of the world. The warrior asked him to wait at the