



Dragon Tales

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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 reprovved 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 maidservant 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

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.

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 corner of a great hall.

"What place is this?" asked Liu.

"The Palace of the Divine Void."

Looking round, Liu saw that this palace was filled with every precious object known to man. The pillars were of white jade, the steps of jasper; the couches were of coral, the screens of crystal. The emerald lintels were set with cut glass, while the rainbow-coloured beams were inlaid with amber. And the whole created an impression of strange beauty and unfathomable depth which defied description.

The Dragon King was a long time in coming, and Liu asked the warrior, "Where is the Lord of Dongting?"

"His Majesty is in the Dark Pearl Pavilion," was the reply.

"He is discussing the Fire Canon with the Sun Priest, but will have finished soon."

"What is the Fire Canon?" Liu wanted to know.

"Our king is a dragon," was the reply, "So water is his element, and with one drop of water he can flood mountains and valleys. The priest is a man, so fire is his element, and with one torch he can burn down a whole palace. Since the properties of the elements differ, they have different effects. As the Sun Priest is expert in the laws of men, our king has asked him over for a talk."

He had barely finished speaking when the palace gate opened, a mist seemed to gather and there appeared a man in purple holding a jasper sceptre. The warrior leaped to attention, crying, "This is our king!" Then he went forward to report Liu's arrival.

The Dragon King looked at Liu and asked, "Are you not of the world of men?"

Liu replied that he was, and bowed. The king greeted him in return and asked him to be seated.

"Our watery kingdom is dark and deep, and I am ignorant," said the Dragon King. "What has brought you, sir, from such a distance?"

"I am of the same district as Your Majesty," replied Liu. "I was born in the south, but have studied in the northwest. Not long ago, after failing in the examination, I was riding by the Jing River when I came upon your daughter herding sheep in the open country. Exposed to wind and rain, she was a pitiful

sight. When questioned, she told me she had come to such a pass because of her husband's unkindness and his parents' neglect. I assure you, her tears as she spoke went to my heart. Then she entrusted this letter to me and I promised to deliver it. That is why I am here." He took out the letter and passed it to the king.

After reading the missive, the king covered up his face and wept. "Though I am her old father," he lamented, "I have been like a man blind and deaf, unaware that my child was suffering far away, while you, a stranger, came to her rescue. As long as I live, I shall never forget your kindness." He gave way to weeping, and all the attendants shed tears.

Presently a palace eunuch approached the king, who handed him the letter with orders to tell the women in the inner palace. Soon wailing was heard from within and in alarm the king bade his attendants, "Quickly tell the women not to make so much noise, or the Prince of Qiantang may hear them!"

"Who is this prince?" asked Liu.

"My younger brother," said the Dragon King. "He used to be the Prince of the Qiantang River, but has now retired."

"Why must you keep it from him?"

"Because he is overbold," was the reply. "The nine years of flood in the time of the ancient sage King Yao was due to one of his rages. Not long ago he quarrelled with the angels in heaven and flooded the five mountains. Thanks to a few good deeds I had to my credit, the heavenly emperor par-