



The King of Huai Nan

The Chinese Fairy Book

Chinese

Intermediate

6 min read

The King of Huai Nan was a learned man of the Han dynasty. Since he was of the blood royal the emperor had given him a kingdom in fee. He cultivated the society of scholars, could interpret signs and foretell the future. Together with his scholars he had compiled the book which bears his name.

One day, eight aged men came to see him. They all had white beards and white hair. The gate-keeper announced them to the King. The King wished to try them, so he sent back the gate-keeper to put difficulties in the way of their entrance. The latter said to them: "Our King is striving to learn the art of immortal life. You gentlemen are old and feeble. How can you be of aid to him? It is unnecessary for you to pay him a visit."

The eight old men smiled and said: "Oh, and are we too old to suit you? Well, then we will make ourselves young!" And before they had finished speaking they had turned themselves into boys of fourteen and fifteen, with hair-knots as black as silk and faces like peach-blossoms. The gate-keeper was frightened, and at once informed the King of what had happened. When the King heard it, he did not even take time to slip into his shoes, but hurried out barefoot to receive them. He led them into his palace, had rugs of brocade spread for them, and beds of ivory set up, fragrant herbs burned and tables of gold and precious stones set in front of them. Then he bowed before them as pupils do before a teacher, and told them how glad he was that they had come.

The eight boys changed into old men again and said: "Do you wish to go to school to us, O King? Each one of us is master of a particular art. One of us can call up wind and rain, cause clouds and mists to gather, rivers to flow and mountains to heave themselves up, if he wills it so. The second can cause high mountains to split asunder and check great streams in their course. He can tame tigers and panthers and soothe serpents and dragons. Spirits and gods do his bidding. The third can send out doubles, transform himself into other shapes, make himself invisible, cause whole armies to disappear, and turn day into night. The fourth can walk through the air and clouds, can stroll on the surface of the waves, pass through walls and rocks and cover a thousand miles in a single breath. The fifth can enter fire without burning, and water without drowning. The winter frost cannot chill him, nor the summer heat burn him. The sixth can create and transform living creatures if he feel inclined.

He can form birds and beasts, grasses and trees. He can move houses and castles. The seventh can bake lime so that it turns to gold, and cook lead so that it turns to silver; he can mingle water and stone so that the bubbles effervesce and turn into pearls. The eighth can ride on dragons and cranes to the eight poles of the world, converse with the immortals, and stand in the presence of the Great Pure One."

The King kept them beside him from morning to night, entertained them and had them show him what they could do. And, true enough, they could do everything just as they had said. And now the King began to distill the elixir of life with their aid. He had finished, but not yet imbibed it when a misfortune overtook his family. His son had been playing with a courtier and the latter had heedlessly wounded him. Fearing that the prince might punish him, he joined other discontented persons and excited a revolt. And the emperor, when he heard

of it, sent one of his captains to judge between the King and the rebels.

The eight aged men spoke: "It is now time to go. This misfortune has been sent you from heaven, O King! Had it not befallen you, you would not have been able to resolve to leave the splendors and glories of this world!"

They led him on to a mountain. There they offered sacrifices to heaven, and buried gold in the earth. Then they ascended into the skies in bright daylight. The footprints of the eight aged men and of the king were imprinted in the rock of the mountain, and may be seen there to this very day. Before they had left the castle, however, they had set what was left of the elixir of life out in the courtyard. Hens and hounds picked and licked it up, and all flew up into the skies. In Huai Nan to this very day the crowing of cocks and the barking of hounds may be heard up in the skies, and it is said that these are the creatures who followed the King at the time.

One of the King's servants, however, followed him to an island in the sea, whence he sent him back. He told that the King himself had not yet ascended to the skies, but had only become immortal and was wandering about the world. When the emperor heard of the matter he regretted greatly that he had sent soldiers into the King's land and thus driven him out. He called in magicians to aid him, in hope of meeting the eight old men himself. Yet, for all that he spent great sums, he was not successful. The magicians only cheated him.

Note: The King of Huai Nan was named Liu An. He belonged to the Han dynasty. He dabbled largely in magic, and drew to his court many magicians whose labors are collected in the philosophical work which bears his name. Liu An lived at the time of the Emperor Wu (see No. 34). The latter having no heirs, Liu An entered into a conspiracy which, however, was discovered. As a consequence he killed himself, 122 B.C. Our fairy-tale presents these events in their legendary transformation.

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