



King Mu of Dschou

The Chinese Fairy Book

Chinese

Intermediate
8 min read

In the days of King Mu of Dschou, a magician came out of the uttermost West, who could walk through water and fire, and pass through metal and stone. He could make mountains and rivers change place, shift about cities and castles, rise into emptiness without falling, strike against solid matter without finding it an obstruction; and he knew a thousand transformations in all their inexhaustible variety. And he could not only change the shape of things but he could change men's thoughts. The King honored him like a god, and served him as he would a master. He resigned his own apartments that the magician might be lodged in them, had beasts of sacrifice brought to offer him, and selected sweet singers to give him pleasure.

But the rooms in the King's palace were too humble—the magician could not dwell in them; and the King's singers were not musical enough to be allowed to be near him. So King Mu had a new palace built for him. The work of bricklayers and carpenters, of painters and stainers left nothing to be desired with regard to skill. The King's treasury was empty when the tower had reached its full height. It was a thousand fathoms high, and rose above the top of the mountain before the capital. The King selected maidens, the loveliest and most dainty, gave them fragrant essences, had their eyebrows curved in lines of beauty, and adorned their hair and ears with jewels.

He clothed them in fine cloth, and with white silks fluttering about them, and had their faces painted white and their eyebrows stained black. He had them put on armllets of precious stones and mix sweet-smelling herbs. They filled the palace and sang the songs of the ancient kings in order to please the magician. Every

month the most costly garments were brought him, and every morning the most delicate food. The magician allowed them to do so, and since he had no choice, made the best of it.

Not long afterward the magician invited the King to go traveling with him. The King grasped the magician's sleeve, and thus they flew up through the air to the middle of the skies. When they stopped they found they had reached the palace of the magician. It was built of gold and silver, and adorned with pearls and precious stones. It towered high over the clouds and rain; and none could say whereon it rested. To the eye it had the appearance of heaped-up clouds. All that it offered the senses was different from the things of the world of men. It seemed to the King as though he were bodily present in the midst of the purple depths of the city of the air, of the divine harmony of the spheres, where the Great God dwells. The King looked down, and his castles and pleasure-houses appeared to him like hills of earth and heaps of straw. And there the King remained for some decades and thought no more of his kingdom.

Then the magician again invited the King to go traveling with him once more. And in the place to which they came there was to be seen neither sun nor moon above, nor rivers or sea below. The King's dazzled eyes could not see the radiant shapes which showed themselves; the King's dulled ears could not hear the sounds which played about them. It seemed as though his body were dissolving in confusion; his thoughts began to stray, and consciousness threatened to leave him. So he begged the magician to return. The magician put his spell upon him, and it seemed to the King as though he were falling into empty space.

When he regained consciousness, he was sitting at the same place where he had been sitting when the magician had asked him to travel with him for the first time. The servants waiting on him were the same, and when he looked down, his goblet was not yet empty, and his food had not yet grown cold.

The King asked what had happened. And the servants answered, "The King sat for a space in silence."

Whereupon the King was quite bereft of reason, and it was three months before he regained his right mind. Then he questioned the magician. The magician said: "I was traveling with you in the spirit, O King! What need was there for the body to go along? And the place in which we stayed at that time was no less real than your own castle and your own gardens. But you are used only to permanent conditions, therefore visions which dissolve so suddenly appear strange to you."

The King was content with the explanation. He gave no further thought to the business of government and took no more interest in his servants, but resolved to travel afar. So he had the eight famous steeds harnessed,

and accompanied by a few faithful retainers, drove a thousand miles away. There he came to the country of the great hunters. The great hunters brought the King the blood of the white brant to drink, and washed his feet in the milk of mares and cows. When the King and his followers had quenched their thirst, they drove on and camped for the night on the slope of the Kunlun Mountain, south of the Red River.

The next day they climbed to the peak of Kunlun Mountain and gazed at the castle of the Lord of the Yellow Earth. Then they traveled on to the Queen-Mother of the West. Before they got there they had to pass the Weak River. This is a river whose waters will bear neither floats nor ships. All that attempts to float over it sinks into its depths. When the King reached the shore, fish and turtles, crabs and salamanders came swimming up and formed a bridge, so that he could drive across with the wagon.

It is said of the Queen-Mother of the West that she goes about with hair unkempt, with a bird's beak and tiger's teeth, and that she is skilled in playing the flute. Yet this is not her true figure, but that of a spirit who serves her, and rules over the Western sky. The Queen-Mother entertained King Mu in her castle by the Springs of Jade. And she gave him rock-marrow to drink and fed him with the fruit of the jade-trees.

Then she sang him a song and taught him a magic formula by means of which one could obtain long life. The Queen-Mother of the West gathers the immortals around her, and gives them to eat of the peaches of long life; and then they come to her with wagons with purple canopies, drawn by flying dragons. Ordinary mortals sink in the Weak River when they try to cross. But she was kindly disposed to King Mu.

When he took leave of her, he also went on to the spot where the sun turns in after running three thousand miles a day. Then he returned again to his kingdom.

When King Mu was a hundred years old, the Queen-Mother of the West drew near his palace and led him away with her into the clouds.

And from that day on he was seen no more.

Note: King Mu of Dschou reigned from 1001 to 946 B.C. With his name are associated the stories of the marvelous travels into the land of the far West, and especially to the Queen-Mother (who is identified by some with Juno). The peaches of immortality suggest the apples of the Hesperides. (Comp. with the story of "The Ape Sun Wu Kung.")

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