



# *The Two Jugglers*

A Chinese Wonder Book

Chinese

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*Intermediate*

*15 min read*

One beautiful spring day two men strolled into the public square of a well-known Chinese city. They were plainly dressed and looked like ordinary countrymen who had come in to see the sights. Judging by their faces, they were father and son. The elder, a wrinkled man of perhaps fifty, wore a scant grey beard. The younger had a small box on his shoulder.

At the hour when these strangers entered the public square, a large crowd had gathered, for it was a feast day, and every one was bent on having a good time. All the people seemed very happy. Some, seated in little open-air booths, were eating, drinking, and smoking. Others were buying odds and ends from the street-vendors, tossing coins, and playing various games of chance.

The two men walked about aimlessly. They seemed to have no friends among the pleasure-seekers. At last, however, as they stood reading a public notice posted at the entrance of the town-hall or yamen, a bystander asked them who they were.

“Oh, we are jugglers from a distant province,” said the elder, smiling and pointing towards the box. “We can do many tricks for the amusement of the people.”

Soon it was spread about among the crowd that two famous jugglers had just arrived from the capital, and that they were able to perform many wonderful deeds. Now it happened that the mandarin or mayor of the city, at that very moment was entertaining a number of guests in the yamen. They had just finished eating, and the

host was wondering what he should do to amuse his friends, when a servant told him of the jugglers.

“Ask them what they can do,” said the mandarin eagerly. “I will pay them well if they can really amuse us, but I want something more than the old tricks of knife-throwing and balancing. They must show us something new.”

The servant went outside and spoke to the jugglers: “The great man bids you tell him what you can do. If you can amuse his visitors he will bring them out to the private grand stand, and let you perform before them and the people who are gathered together.”

“Tell your honourable master,” said the elder, whom we shall call Chang, “that, try us as he will, he will not be disappointed. Tell him that we come from the unknown land of dreams and visions, that we can turn rocks into mountains, rivers into oceans, mice into elephants, in short, that there is nothing in magic too difficult for us to do.”

The official was delighted when he heard the report of his servant. “Now we may have a little fun,” he said to his guests, “for there are jugglers outside who will perform their wonderful tricks before us.”

The guests filed out on to the grand stand at one side of the public square. The mandarin commanded that a rope should be stretched across so as to leave an open space in full view of the crowd, where the two Changs might give their exhibition.

For a time the two strangers entertained the people with some of the simpler tricks, such as spinning plates in the air, tossing bowls up and catching them on chopsticks, making flowers grow from empty pots, and transforming one object into another. At last, however, the mandarin cried out: “These tricks are very good of their kind, but how about those idle boasts of changing rivers into oceans and mice into elephants? Did you not say that you came from the land of dreams? These tricks you have done are stale and shopworn. Have you nothing new with which to regale my guests on this holiday?”

“Most certainly, your excellency. But surely you would not have a labourer do more than his employer requires? Would that not be quite contrary to the teachings of our fathers? Be assured, sir, anything that you demand I can do for you. Only say the word.”

The mandarin laughed outright at this boasting language. “Take care, my man! Do not go too far with your promises. There are too many impostors around for me to believe every stranger. Hark you! no lying, for if you

lie in the presence of my guests, I shall take great pleasure in having you beaten.”

“My words are quite true, your excellency,” repeated Chang earnestly. “What have we to gain by deceit, we who have performed our miracles before the countless hosts of yonder Western Heaven?”

“Ha, ha! hear the braggarts!” shouted the guests. “What shall we command them to do?”

For a moment they consulted together, whispering and laughing.

“I have it,” cried the host finally. “Our feast was short of fruit, since this is the off season. Suppose we let this fellow supply us. Here, fellow, produce us a peach, and be quick about it. We have no time for fooling.”

“What, masters, a peach?” exclaimed the elder Chang in mock dismay. “Surely at this season you do not expect a peach.”

“Caught at his own game,” laughed the guests, and the people began to hoot derisively.

“But, father, you promised to do anything he required,” urged the son. “If he asks even a peach, how can you refuse and at the same time save your face?”

“Hear the boy talk,” mumbled the father, “and yet, perhaps he’s right. Very well, masters,” turning to the crowd, “if it’s a peach you want, why, a peach you shall have, even though I must send into the garden of the Western Heaven for the fruit.”

The people became silent and the mandarin’s guests forgot to laugh. The old man, still muttering, opened the box from which he had been taking the magic bowls, plates, and other articles. “To think of people wanting peaches at this season! What is the world coming to?”

After fumbling in the box for some moments he drew out a skein of golden thread, fine spun and as light as gossamer. No sooner had he unwound a portion of this thread than a sudden gust of wind carried it up into the air above the heads of the onlookers. Faster and faster the old man paid out the magic coil, higher and higher the free end rose into the heavens, until, strain his eyes as he would, no one present could see into what far-region it had vanished.

“Wonderful, wonderful!” shouted the people with one voice, “the old man is a fairy.”

For a moment they forgot all about the mandarin, the jugglers, and the peach, so amazed were they at

beholding the flight of the magic thread.

At last the old man seemed satisfied with the distance to which his cord had sailed, and, with a bow to the spectators, he tied the end to a large wooden pillar which helped to support the roof of the grand stand. For a moment the structure trembled and swayed as if it too would be carried off into the blue ether, the guests turned pale and clutched their chairs for support, but not even the mandarin dared to speak, so sure were they now that they were in the presence of fairies.

“Everything is ready for the journey,” said old Chang calmly.

“What! shall you leave us?” asked the mayor, finding his voice again.

“I? Oh, no, my old bones are not spry enough for quick climbing. My son here will bring us the magic peach. He is handsome and active enough to enter that heavenly garden. Graceful, oh graceful is that peach tree—of course, you remember the line from the poem—and a graceful man must pluck the fruit.”

The mandarin was still more surprised at the juggler’s knowledge of a famous poem from the classics. It made him and his friends all the more certain that the newcomers were indeed fairies.



“Higher and higher he climbed.” Illustration by Li Chu T’ang, published in A Chinese Wonder Book by Norman Hinsdale Pittman (1919), E.P. Dutton and Company.

The young man at a sign from his father tightened his belt and the bands about his ankles, and then, with a graceful gesture to the astonished people, sprang upon the magic string, balanced himself for a moment on the steep incline, and then ran as nimbly up as a sailor would have mounted a rope ladder. Higher and higher he climbed till he seemed no bigger than a lark ascending into the blue sky, and then, like some tiny speck, far, far away, on the western horizon.

The people gazed in open-mouthed wonder. They were struck dumb and filled with some nameless fear; they hardly dared to look at the enchanter who stood calmly in their midst, smoking his long-stemmed pipe.

The mandarin, ashamed of having laughed at and threatened this man who was clearly a fairy, did not know what to say. He snapped his long finger nails and looked at his guests in mute astonishment. The visitors silently drank their tea, and the crowd of sightseers craned their necks in a vain effort to catch sight of the vanished fairy. Only one in all that assembly, a bright-eyed little boy of eight, dared to break the silence, and he caused a hearty burst of merriment by crying out, “Oh, daddy, will the bad young man fly off into the sky and leave his poor father all alone?”

The greybeard laughed loudly with the others, and tossed the lad a copper. “Ah, the good boy,” he said smiling, “he has been well trained to love his father; no fear of foreign ways spoiling his filial piety.”

After a few moments of waiting, old Chang laid aside his pipe and fixed his eyes once more on the western sky. “It is coming,” he said quietly. “The peach will soon be here.”

Suddenly he held out his hand as if to catch some falling object, but, look as they would, the people could see nothing. Swish! thud! it came like a streak of light, and, lo, there in the magician’s fingers was a peach, the most beautiful specimen the people had ever seen, large and rosy. “Straight from the garden of the gods,” said Chang, handing the fruit to the mandarin, “a peach in the Second Moon, and the snow hardly off the ground.”

Trembling with excitement, the official took the peach and cut it open. It was large enough for all his guests to have a taste, and such a taste it was! They smacked their lips and wished for more, secretly thinking that never again would ordinary fruit be worth the eating.

But all this time the old juggler, magician, fairy or whatever you choose to call him, was looking anxiously into the sky. The result of this trick was more than he had bargained for. True, he had been able to produce the magic peach which the mandarin had called for, but his son, where was his son? He shaded his eyes and looked far up into the blue heavens, and so did the people, but no one could catch a glimpse of the departed youth.

“Oh, my son, my son,” cried the old man in despair, “how cruel is the fate that has robbed me of you, the only prop of my declining years! Oh, my boy, my boy, would that I had not sent you on so perilous a journey! Who now will look after my grave when I am gone?”

Suddenly the silken cord on which the young man had sped so daringly into the sky, gave a quick jerk which almost toppled over the post to which it was tied, and there, before the very eyes of the people, it fell from the lofty height, a silken pile on the ground in front of them.

The greybeard uttered a loud cry and covered his face with his hands. “Alas! the whole story is plain enough,” he sobbed. “My boy was caught in the act of plucking the magic peach from the garden of the gods, and they have thrown him into prison. Woe is me! Ah! woe is me!”

The mandarin and his friends were deeply touched by the old man’s grief, and tried in vain to comfort him. “Perhaps he will return,” they said. “Have courage!”

“Yes, but in what a shape?” replied the magician. “See! even now they are restoring him to his father.”

The people looked, and they saw twirling and twisting through the air the young man’s arm. It fell upon the ground in front of them at the fairy’s feet. Next came the head, a leg, the body. One by one before the gasping, shuddering people, the parts of the unfortunate young man were restored to his father.

After the first outburst of wild, frantic grief the old man by a great effort gained control of his feelings, and began to gather up these parts, putting them tenderly into the wooden box.

By this time many of the spectators were weeping at the sight of the father’s affliction. “Come,” said the mandarin at last, deeply moved, “let us present the old man with sufficient money to give his boy a decent burial.”

All present agreed willingly, for there is no sight in China that causes greater pity than that of an aged parent robbed by death of an only son. The copper cash fell in a shower at the juggler’s feet, and soon tears of gratitude

were mingled with those of sorrow. He gathered up the money and tied it in a large black cloth. Then a wonderful change came over his face. He seemed all of a sudden to forget his grief. Turning to the box, he raised the lid. The people heard him say: "Come, my son; the crowd is waiting for you to thank them. Hurry up! They have been very kind to us."

In an instant the box was thrown open with a bang, and before the mandarin and his friends, before the eyes of all the sightseers the young man, strong and whole once more, stepped forth and bowed, clasping his hands and giving the national salute.

For a moment all were silent. Then, as the wonder of the whole thing dawned upon them, the people broke forth into a tumult of shouts, laughter, and compliments. "The fairies have surely come to visit us!" they shouted. "The city will be blessed with good fortune! Perhaps it is Fairy Old Boy himself who is among us!"

The mandarin rose and addressed the jugglers, thanking them in the name of the city for their visit and for the taste they had given to him and his guests of the peach from the heavenly orchard.

Even as he spoke, the magic box opened again; the two fairies disappeared inside, the lid closed, and the chest rose from the ground above the heads of the people. For a moment it floated round in a circle like some homing pigeon trying to find its bearings before starting on a return journey. Then, with a sudden burst of speed, it shot off into the heavens and vanished from the sight of those below, and not a thing remained as proof of the strange visitors except the magic peach seed that lay beside the teacups on the mandarin's table.

According to the most ancient writings there is now nothing left to tell of this story. It has been declared, however, by later scholars that the official and his friends who had eaten the magic peach, at once began to feel a change in their lives. While, before the coming of the fairies, they had lived unfairly, accepting bribes and taking part in many shameful practices, now, after tasting of the heavenly fruit, they began to grow better. The people soon began to honour and love them, saying, "Surely these great men are not like others of their kind, for these men are just and honest in their dealings with us. They seem not to be ruling for their own reward!"

However this may be, we do know that before many years their city became the centre of the greatest peach-growing section of China, and even yet when strangers walk in the orchards and look up admiringly at the beautiful sweet-smelling fruit, the natives sometimes ask proudly, “And have you never heard about the wonderful peach which was the beginning of all our orchards, the magic peach the fairies brought us from the Western Heaven?”

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