

The Taoist Priest of Lao-Shan

By P'u Sung-ling

There lived in our village a Mr. Wang, the seventh son in an old family. This gentleman had a *penchant* for the Taoist religion; and hearing that at Lao-shan there were plenty of Immortals,¹ shouldered his knapsack and went off for a tour thither. Ascending a peak of the mountain he reached a secluded monastery, where he found a priest sitting on a rush mat, with long hair flowing over his neck, and a pleasant expression on his face. Making a low bow, Wang addressed him thus: "Mysterious indeed is the doctrine: I pray you, Sir, instruct me therein." "Delicately nurtured and wanting in energy as you are," replied the priest, "I fear you could not support the fatigue." "Try me," said Wang. So when the disciples, who were very many in number, collected together at dusk, Wang joined them in making obeisance to the priest, and remained with them in the monastery. Very early next morning the priest summoned Wang, and giving him a hatchet sent him out with the others to cut firewood. Wang respectfully obeyed, continuing to work for over a month until his hands and feet were so swollen and blistered that he secretly meditated returning home. One evening when he came back he found two strangers sitting drinking with his master. It being already dark, and no lamp or candles having been brought in, the old priest took some scissors and cut out a circular piece of paper like a mirror, which he proceeded to stick against the wall. Immediately it became a dazzling moon, by the light of which you could have seen a hair or a bead of corn. The disciples all came crowding round to wait upon them, but one of the strangers said, "On a festive occasion like this we ought all to enjoy ourselves together." Accordingly he took a kettle of wine from the table and presented it to the disciples, bidding them drink each his fill; whereupon our friend Wang began to wonder how seven or eight of them could all be served out of a single kettle. The disciples, too, rushed about in search of cups, each struggling to get the first drink for fear the wine should be exhausted. Nevertheless, all the candidates failed to empty the kettle, at which they were very much astonished, when suddenly one of the strangers said, "You have given us a fine bright moon; but it's dull work drinking by ourselves. Why not call Ch'ang-ngo² to join us?" He then seized a chop-stick and threw it into the moon, whereupon a lovely girl stepped forth from its beams. At first she was only a foot high, but on reaching the ground lengthened to the ordinary size of woman. She had a slender waist and a beautiful neck, and went most gracefully through the Red Garment figure.³ When this was finished she sang the following words

Ye fairies! ye fairies! I'm coming back soon,
Too lonely and cold is my home in the moon.

¹ The "angels" of Taoism—immortality in a happy land being the reward held out for a life on earth in accordance with the doctrines of Tao.

Taoist priests are believed by some to possess an elixir of immortality in the form of a precious liquor; others again hold that the elixir consists solely in a virtuous conduct of life.

² The beautiful wife of a legendary chieftain, named Hou I, who flourished about 2500 B.C. She is said to have stolen from her husband the elixir of immortality, and to have fled with it to the moon.

³ The name of a celebrated *pas seul* of antiquity.

Her voice was clear and well sustained, ringing like the notes of a flageolet, and when she had concluded her song she pirouetted round and jumped up on the table, where, with every eye fixed in astonishment upon her, she once more became a chop-stick. The three friends laughed loudly, and one of them said, "We are very jolly to-night, but I have hardly room for any more wine. Will you drink a parting glass with me in the palace of the moon?" They then took up the table and walked into the moon, where they could be seen drinking so plainly that their eyebrows and beards appeared like reflections in a looking-glass. By-and-by the moon became obscured; and when the disciples brought a lighted candle they found the priest sitting in the dark alone. The viands, however, were still upon the table and the mirror-like piece of paper on the wall. "Have you all had enough to drink?" asked the priest; to which they answered that they had. "In that case," said he, "you had better get to bed, so as not to be behind-hand with your wood-cutting in the morning." So they all went off, and among them Wang, who was delighted at what he had seen, and thought no more of returning home. But after a time he could not stand it any longer; and as the priest taught him no magical arts he determined not to wait, but went to him and said, "Sir, I travelled many long miles for the benefit of your instruction. If you will not teach me the secret of Immortality, let me at any rate learn some trifling trick, and thus soothe my cravings for a knowledge of your art. I have now been here two or three months, doing nothing but chop firewood, out in the morning and back at night, work to which I was never accustomed in my own home." "Did I not tell you," replied the priest, "that you would never support the fatigue? Tomorrow I will start you on your way home." "Sir," said Wang, "I have worked for you a long time. Teach me some small art, that my coming here may not have been wholly in vain." "What art?" asked the priest. "Well," answered Wang, "I have noticed that whenever you walk about anywhere, walls and so on are no obstacle to you. Teach me this, and I'll be satisfied." The priest laughingly assented, and taught Wang a formula which he bade him recite. When he had done so he told him to walk through the wall; but Wang, seeing the wall in front of him, didn't like to walk at it. As, however, the priest bade him try, he walked quietly up to it and was there stopped. The priest here called out, "Don't go so slowly. Put your head down and rush at it," So Wang stepped back a few paces and went at it full speed; and the wall yielding to him as he passed, in a moment he found himself outside. Delighted at this, he went in to thank the priest, who told him to be careful in the use of his power, or otherwise there would be no response, handing him at the same time some money for his expenses on the way. When Wang got home, he went about bragging of his Taoist friends and his contempt for walls in general; but as his wife disbelieved his story, he set about going through the performance as before. Stepping back from the wall, he rushed at it full speed with his head down; but coming in contact with the hard bricks, finished up in a heap on the floor. His wife picked him up and found he had a bump on his forehead as big as a large egg, at which she roared with laughter; but Wang was overwhelmed with rage and shame, and cursed the old priest for his base ingratitude.