

The Mad Priest

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain mad priest, whose name I do not know, lived in a temple on the hills. He would sing and cry by turns, without any apparent reason; and once somebody saw him boiling a stone for his dinner. At the autumn festival of the 9th day of the 9th moon, an official of the district went up in that direction for the usual picnic, taking with him his chair and his red umbrellas. After luncheon he was passing by the temple, and had hardly reached the door, when out rushed the priest, barefooted and ragged, and, himself opening a yellow umbrella, cried out as the attendants of a mandarin do when ordering the people to stand back. He then approached the official, and made as though he were jesting at him; at which the latter was extremely indignant, and bade his servants drive the priest away. The priest moved off with the servants after him, and in another moment had thrown down his yellow umbrella, which split into a number of pieces, each piece changing immediately into a falcon, and flying about in all directions. The umbrella handle became a huge serpent, with red scales and glaring eyes; and then the party would have turned and fled, but that one of them declared it was only an optical delusion, and that the creature couldn't do any hurt. The speaker accordingly seized a knife and rushed at the serpent, which forthwith opened its mouth and swallowed its assailant whole. In a terrible fright the servants crowded round their master and hurried him away, not stopping to draw breath until they were fully a mile off. By-and-by several of them stealthily returned to see what was going on; and, on entering the temple, they found that both priest and serpent had disappeared. But from an old ash-tree hard by they heard a sound proceeding,—a sound, as it were, of a donkey panting; and at first they were afraid to go near, though after a while they ventured to peep through a hole in the tree, which was an old hollow trunk; and there, jammed hard and fast with his head downwards, was the rash assailant of the serpent. It being quite impossible to drag him out, they began at once to cut the tree away; but by the time they had set him free he was already perfectly unconscious. However, he ultimately came round and was carried home; but from this day the priest was never seen again.¹

¹ The story is intended as a satire on those puffed-up dignitaries who cannot even go to a picnic without all the retinue belonging to their particular rank.