



# KOREAN FAIRY TALES

Translated by WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS

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## **A NOTE TO THE FRIENDS OF KOREA**

Everywhere on earth the fairy world of each country is older and perhaps more enduring than the one we see and feel and tread upon. So I tell in this book the folk lore of the Korean people, and of the behavior of the particular kind of fairies that inhabit the Land of Morning Splendor. Yet, if I live long enough, I shall write the wonderful history of the Korean nation and civilization, which once so enriched Asia, and made possible the modern Japan such as we know today, of which fact the literature and art of both countries bear ample witness.

W. E. G.

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# FANCHA AND THE MAGPIE

A THOUSAND years ago or more, there was a tribe in the cold and desert land of the Tartars, north of Korea, which grew to be famous in that part of the world. The men let their hair grow long and then plaited it into a long braid that hung down their backs, but they shaved the front of their heads. These people were called Manchus.

Almost from babyhood they were trained to ride on horses, and in time they became such bold horsemen and warriors, that they swooped down in thousands like clouds from their mountain land into warmer and richer regions. They had terrible bows and arrows, spears and swords, and they won many victories, so that other tribes joined them. They captured great China and invaded Korea.

As long as they had been wandering tribes in the desert, they were poor and lived on plain food that the grassy plains and forests could furnish, such as nuts, herbs, the milk of mares, and mutton. Their clothes were made of the wool from their own sheep. They were not proud, except of their strength, and they never asked who their grandfathers were.

But it was very different when they came to be rulers of a vast empire, rich and great like China, which had books and writing and a history of thousands of years. The elegant Chinese gentlemen and nobles used to call their conquerors the “horsey Tartars.” So they learned to wash and perfume themselves, and to care for jade, and tea, and porcelain, and silk, and other things Chinese.

Now it came to pass that when these people out of the desert sat on the thrones, and wore crowns on their heads, and dressed in satin, with jeweled robes and velvet shoes, they wanted to know who had been their ancestors long ago, and whence they came.

It would not do to believe that the fathers and mothers of so mighty a race were once common folks who in the distant deserts lived on acorns and pine nuts, with horse meat often, and mutton occasionally, and mare's milk for dessert, or that they dressed in sheep skin and tended horses like stable boys.

Oh no! If the common folks, whom they now governed and made obey them, knew that the nobles who now lived in Peking and bullied the Koreans were once only stable and butcher boys, and had no houses but lived only in tents, there would surely be trouble. These Koreans and Chinese might disobey and rebel. They might even cut off their pigtails, which the Tartars had forced them to wear, and clip their locks, like men in Europe and America. These white-faced and bearded foreigners they called "Southern Barbarians," because their ships came up from the south by way of India.

"What shall we do to make the Chinese and Koreans think we are somebody?" asked the Chinese Emperor of his wise men.

In the council it was the custom to ask first the younger men to tell what they thought about it, and for the oldest and wisest to speak last. They talked over the matter a long time. Finally one graybeard took off his goggles and made answer. He had on his nose a pair of horn-rimmed green glasses, bigger than those which anyone else wore. These it was supposed enabled him to look farther into the past and the future than his fellows. For the bigger the goggles, the more learned a man was supposed to be. He looked as wise as a stuffed owl, and was very fat. He spoke last, after all the younger counsellors had been invited to give their opinions. Behind his back they called him Green Lamps, because of his goggles and their color.

Now in Korea and China it is not polite to keep your spectacles on your nose, when you look into the face of any person to whom you are talking. So pulling off his goggles old Green Lamps got down on his knees. Then he performed the kowtow. That was done by knocking the matting of the floor with his forehead nine times. Green

Lamps nearly broke his stiff bones in doing it, and then he addressed the Emperor, whose title was the Son of Heaven, as follows:

“Sire, the common people will not respect us unless we can show that our far-off ancestors were not born like plain folks, but came down from Heaven. There is an old woman, nearly two cycles or one hundred and seventeen years old, who tells the children about our distant forebears, who dropped out of the sky. Shall I call her in?”

“What is her name?” inquired His Imperial Majesty.

“Mrs. Crinkles, they call her, O Son of Heaven,” answered Green Lamps.

“Summon her before me instantly,” said the Emperor, and he waved his lotus-bud sceptre.

Now Green Lamps was a foxy old fellow. He wanted to get even higher in the Emperor’s favor and had expected this. So, having the old lady ready in another room of the palace, he went out and brought her in. She was all ready to tell her story, with which she had interested the children for a long time. It was the same story which her grandmother had told, when around the fire on winter nights young and old gathered to hear, while the winds howled and the snow covered the land. Once, Mrs. Crinkles was a rosy maid, but now in Peking she was the oldest living person among the Tartars.

The young women called her Mrs. Crinkles because of her face which was so wrinkled and puckered. Once while the old lady was telling her story a mischievous maiden started to count how many wrinkles and puckers, the old lady had in her face, but after reaching seventy-four she stopped, for fear there might be one pucker for every year; and the number 117 for some reason was thought to be unlucky.

In hobbled Mrs. Crinkles. She was already bowed with the weight of years so that when she bowed still lower the court chamberlain, remarking that it beat the kowtow itself, excused her from making the nine prostrations of her stiff old bones. In fact it

was feared that if she got down, she could never get up again. So she was allowed to sit and begin her story.

Her speech was not in the polished Chinese tongue, which for ages since Confucius has been refined by poets and scholars and literary ladies and gentlemen, but was in plain Tartar, or Manchu. Yet the general style of her narrative was very fine. As the old lady told it with animation and fine gestures all eyes sparkled and the Emperor's visage—they called it the Dragon Countenance—beamed with delight.

This was the narrative:

On the other side of the Ever White Mountains, which divide Korea from Manchuria, is the Land of Lakes. On one of these, as in a mirror, the glorious blue sky and the forms of the snow covered, majestic mountains are reflected. At night when the stars come out the waveless mirror is spangled with jewels. The fame of this crystal clear flood and the lovely tints which the sunrise and sunset daily made upon it reached even to the skies. There were three lovely virgins who dwelt in the Heavenly palaces and they wanted to come down and bathe in the water of this lake and live on its shores.

Permission was given them by the Lord of Heaven, and descending to the earth they were as happy as fairies could be. They never tired of their enjoyment, seeing their own beautiful faces in the mirror of the lake. When they rose early in the morning, to see the golden sun rise and tint the clouds and waters, it seemed like music when song answered song. When the light breezes rippled the surface of the lake they clapped their hands with delight and at bedtime they were lulled to sleep by the waves lapping on the quiet shore.

They fell in love with the beautiful land and became so charmed with it that in time they forgot about their old home and never wished to go back again into the skies. They were very kind to all living things and especially to the magpies. These feathered



creatures were very plentiful and tame, so the maidens made pets of them and chose the magpie as their sacred bird.

Fond of gazing into the blue above and bathing in the liquid blue beneath, the three sisters went often into the lake. Leaving their robes on the pebbly beach, the youngest one always stepped last into the crystal waters. One day they noticed a magpie flying far above them in the air, which seemed to motion as if it had a message to deliver. On coming near they saw that it bore in its bill a blood-red fruit. Descending near where their clothes lay on the beach it poised for a moment, and then dropped the red fruit on the garment of the youngest of the sisters.

Rushing out of the water they sat down to talk over the wonderful incident. Then they agreed that this gift of the bird, which was sacred in their eyes, was a happy omen and meant that something good was to follow, though the magpie, after circling around their heads, flew away. They divided the fruit, which had a most delicious taste, enjoying it also as a message from Heaven.

From this divine token brought by a magpie, the sacred bird, the youngest of the virgins conceived and bore a son. They named the baby boy Golden Family Stem, for they felt sure that he would grow up and become the founder of a dynasty of kings, who should take the name of Great Bright from the shining water near which he was born.

The young mother brought up her boy to believe that he was not like ordinary mortals but was Heaven-born, and therefore should be noble in all his actions. When he grew up he was to be a prince of peace healing the quarrels of men, which should bring happiness and prosperity to them and to all the world.

So in the shadow of the great mountains, which were so high that they seemed to touch the sky and were as the shadows of the eternal world itself, he grew up. Nothing did he love more than to watch the play of light and shade on these mountain sides and

in the valleys, as well as in the reflections on the fair face of the lake. These were to him as the smile of the Great Guardian Spirit.

But by and by his dear mother's breath ceased and she "entered into the icy caves of the dead," and he found himself an orphan with no one near him; for long since the other two virgins had gone away he knew not where.

Left alone instead of staying among the mountains the boy resolved to take the name of Fancha, or Heaven-born, and to go out into the world and lead men.

He at once set about to build a boat and in this, when finished, he floated down the outlet of the lake into a river. It happened that he landed at a place where three tribes or clans were at war, each one with the other. They were rude enough fellows, accustomed to brawls, and they cared nothing about other common fellows who were like themselves and no better.

But when they saw this noble youth alone and unarmed step fearlessly over the gunwale of the boat and advance to meet them in a friendly way, they were mightily impressed at his noble appearance and his courage in coming among them. When he told them the story of his birth, and that his mother had called him her Heaven-born son, they one and all shouted "Our chief!" and put on him the signs and tokens of lordship over them.

At once the Heaven-born youth became a great leader. At the head of his brave warriors he was always victorious, but he never provoked war. Other tribes flocked to his standard and in time he built a city, and for his wife and queen married a princess in the principal tribe, the daughter of a great chief, and several sons were born in his home.

But wars continued, for the custom of fighting was too old to be given up at once. In one of the battles he and all his sons except one, who was named Fancha, were killed. This one was chased by the enemy for a long distance over the open plains; for they

hoped to capture him and make him their prisoner, before he could get into the forest and hide.

But when Fancha reached a dense dark wood a deliverer came to him in the form of the sacred bird, the magpie. This creature settled on his head, and Fancha at once took it to be the token of safety and to have been sent from Heaven.

When his pursuers rushed into the forest and began their glances among the trees looking around for the lad's hiding place, he stood as still as a post. They seeing the bird supposed the figure was a piece of dried wood or the splinter of a tree struck by lightning, and rushed on and past him. By and by they gave up the hunt: by which time, Fancha had escaped to a place of safety.

"The rest of the story Your Majesty knows," concluded the old lady, "for Fancha was your ancestor of seventeen generations ago."

The great Emperor of all the Chinas was intensely interested and deeply moved at the story of the aged woman, and he loaded her with presents and honors, and created for her the office of Chief Story-Teller to the Imperial children. Besides this he made provision for her comfort as long as she lived. With a vermilion pencil he wrote with his own hand the order that when she "ascended to the skies" she should be buried in a gilded sandal-wood coffin, receive a state funeral, have a marble tablet over her grave, and be awarded posthumous honors.

As for old Green Lamps he was raised one degree higher in office, given the honors of wearing a jade button on his cap, and the right to ride in his palanquin nearer the Imperial palace door than any other mandarin, except the prime minister.

# THE KING OF THE FLOWERS

KOREA is the land of beautiful scenery and lovely flowers. Snow white and ruby red are their chief colors. In the spring time when the ice has melted and the rivers have poured their floods into the sea, the whole country blushes with the pink bloom of azaleas. The glens are white with lilies of the valley. The breezes as they sweep the land come laden with perfume.

The girls mark the season of the year and the time of the month by the blossoms even more than by the almanac, for they keep in mind the calendar of the flowers. Daughters that are especially beloved of their parents are named from the blossoms, and the Korean house-father, when affectionate, speaks of his wife as the plum tree. An old song says: The homesick husband, long away from his dear ones, inquires of a fellow townsman newly arrived:

“ ‘Have you seen my native land?  
Come tell me all you know;  
Did just before the old home door  
The plum tree blossoms show?’ ”

And the stranger answers promptly:

“ ‘They were in bloom, though pale, ’tis true,  
And sad, from waiting long for you.’ ”

This is like the Scotsman who calls his wife his “bonnie briar bush,” for in the Land

of Morning Glow, they have a language of flowers. Each plant and blossom has a meaning and either delightful or disagreeable associations. It is a compliment to speak of a girl as a pear blossom, for the pear is one of the most glorious of trees and its blooms are lovely to behold. It would hardly do, however, to call her a cinnamon rose, for this flower has evil associations. The gee-sang, as the Koreans pronounce the name of the gei-sha, as the Japanese call the dancing girls, are associated with the cinnamon rose, for did not the sages tell this story?

Twelve centuries ago lived the renowned scholar Sul Chong, the greatest of all the learned men of Korea. His head was as full of knowledge as a persimmon is of pulp, and his ideas were as numerous as the seeds in a pomegranate. He taught his countrymen all that was in the books of China, and in the temple of Confucius his portrait hangs to this day. He lived in the kingdom of Silla, in the days of its glory, when ships from Japan and China sailed into its seaports and the Arabs from Bagdad brought their pretty wares to exchange for gold, ginseng, camphor, porcelain, cinnamon, ginger and tiger skins, to take to their renowned Caliph and his turbaned nobles at court, of whom we read in the “Arabian Nights.”

When the King of Silla, Sin Mun, was living in luxury and filling his palace with too many pretty dancing girls, who distracted his mind from attending properly to the affairs of state, Sul Chung warned his master against the increasing influence of these women by telling him the following story:

Once upon a time, in spring, the Peony, king of the flowers, blossomed so gorgeously that it became the admiration of all the lovers of beauty in the whole country. Hundreds of people made long journeys to the capital of Silla to see the bright blossoms. In the king's gardens, on very tall stalks, the many branches were heavily laden with large red flowers. These were indeed lovely to behold, but the king of the whole garden was a single peony, grown on one stem, so that all the strength and

nourishment of the plant were concentrated in that unique royal bloom. All saluted this flower as king.

When all the other flowers heard of their king's glory, they came to pay their respects at the floral court, of which the Peony was sovereign. All the trees sent their choicest blooms as envoys. In one glorious procession of perfume and color the Peach, Plum, Pear, Apple, and Persimmon trooped in, each making its obeisance to the monarch of all flowers. All these tree blossoms prided themselves on their being so useful to man as harbingers of the delicious fruits to come.

Then, among the bright throng appeared sprightly young virgin flowers, the Tea-Rose, in pearl-tinted frock; the Azalea, in pink; the Lily, in white; the Strawberry Blossom; and a score of other pretty creatures of the garden. Last of all appeared the Cinnamon Rose. She tripped nimbly along in a green skirt and red jacket, with haughty air and breath of spice.

One after the other they were presented to King Peony, and gracefully made their salute. But of them all, the king seemed most to favor Miss Cinnamon Flower. He let the others pass out from the Court, but lingered long with the spicy visitor, spending much time in her society, as if smitten with her charms. By and by he invited Miss Cinnamon Rose to come and live in the palace, and leaving his ministers to carry on the government, he spent all his time in her society. She was installed in a place near His Majesty and seemed always to have his ear and attention, even when the king's prime minister had to wait long for an audience, or even a word. Miss Cinnamon Rose seemed to be the real ruler instead of the king himself.

But one day there came to the palace the flower called Old Man. He looked exactly like an aged beggar dressed in sackcloth and leaning on a staff. Respectfully bowing, he asked if he might share the hospitality of the king's palace. He was welcomed and fed, partaking of the royal bounty. When at last he was given audience of King Peony,



and was invited to speak, he said:

“Out along the road, Your Majesty, I heard of your rich feast and good things to eat. Now I hear that you need medicine. Although you dress in Chinese silk and none are equal to you in the magnificence of your robes and the splendor of your Court, yet you are much like me in your wants, and you need a common knife string, as well as I. Is it not so?”

“You are quite right, Old Man,” replied the king. “Yet I like this Cinnamon Rose and want her with me. I cannot do without her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Yet, is it not true that if you keep company with the wise and prudent, your reign will be long, powerful and glorious? But if you consort with the foolish your house will fall? Did not three dynasties of the emperors of Great China fall because of the beautiful women who tempted their Majesties to forget their duties? If it were so with the ancients, how much more so is it now?”

The king blushed, even to a deep crimson. He confessed his faults and reformed his life.

It is said the lesson was not lost on the real human king. He dismissed his harem, sent away the dancing girls and ruled wisely till the day of his death.

# CAT-KIN AND THE QUEEN MOTHER

KOREA is called the Land of the Plum Blossom, but in winter the rivers freeze over. Then the men cut through the ice which is often several feet thick, to catch with their fishing lines and hooks the fish that swim in the water beneath. Yet they are very glad to welcome any sign of the coming spring, and they watch eagerly for the pussy willows to show themselves.

Now there was a farmer who lived in Nai-po, which is the grain garden of the Korean peninsula, who wanted a little daughter, though other parents cared more for sons.

One day farmer Pak, for that was his name, discovered a pussy willow which seemed to him, after the long winter, like a light shining in a dark place. He plucked it and carried proudly home this branch full of fuzzy little buds. This was in sign of his happiness at the return of spring. He was tired of ice and snow and now he knew that soon the gloomy hills would burst into a glory of bright colors from the blooming flowers, and look like an army with flags.

That same day his prayers were answered and a little girl was born into his home. Giving the pussy willow to his wife, he said: "We shall name our baby Cat-kin, that is Little Puss."

Cat-kin never saw a cradle, for the Korean mothers carry their babies on their backs. She was soon out of infancy, and then it was not long before she was standing up and toddling about and playing with her doggie and pet bull. These little pets on four legs usually take the place of kittens in a country home in Korea, for the cats are wild and do not allow children to fondle them.

Long before she was a dozen years old, Cat-kin became very fond of fairy stories,

of which Korea has a great many, besides thousands of tales of wonderful people and animals and what happened to them. She often looked up towards the high hills and distant mountains, where she thought the fairies, dragons, ogres and tigers lived. Here also dwelt the sen-nin or mountain spirits, wise and good, of whom the old people talked and the soldiers painted on their banners when they went to war.

When about eight years old, Cat-kin wanted very much to walk up towards the north star, which her father showed her shining in the heavens. He had once traveled up into one of the Northern provinces, where during the daytime he could see afar off the great snowwhite mass of the Ever White Mountain rising up to meet the azure sky. There, at the top he had heard, lay the Dragon Prince's Pool, out of which flowed the two rivers that made Korea an island. One was named the Tumen and the other the Yalu, after the beautiful green and blue sheen on the feathers of a drake's back, so richly colored were its shining waters. When her father told of his travels, Cat-kin also longed to go north to get to the very top and touch the sky.

But this she knew she could not do, even if she had had long legs and were as strong as a man, for the tigers were very numerous and always roaming about. These yellow and black striped brutes were man-eaters. They loved nothing better for a good dinner than a young girl.

So as she did not know any way of getting to the top of the Ever White Mountain and of seeing the deep blue waters of the Pool, except by riding on the back of a dragon, which she sometimes dreamed of, she kept waiting and waiting for one of these flying creatures to come, yet it never came.

Cat-kin was bound to have the fairies visit her, if possible. So one day, sitting under a persimmon tree and reading a story, she held the book in one hand, while she struck the ground several times, saying earnestly:

“Earth-spirit, earth-spirit, come to me; come up and see me.”

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