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IX. --- ELVES, FAIRIES, AND BROWNIES.

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IX. --- ELVES, FAIRIES, AND BROWNIES.

An accurate definition of the Chinese idea of elves and fairies is somewhat difficult. In many cases the word *shên* 神, spirit, or, as some will have it, God --- can only be translated by "elf" or "brownie," while on other occasions one is puzzled under what category to place creatures who play too important a part in Chinese belief to be omitted from these pages, while strictly answering to nothing known in the West. China, at all events, boasts an infinity of beings who are alleged to possess the general characteristics of our local sprites. As with us they are sometimes malicious and sometimes merely playful. But I fancy that, in the main, a more stern air of purpose runs through Chinese than through European fairy legend. The wildest native inventions have never endowed the fairy community with, "houses made all with mother-o'-pearl, an ivory tennis-court, a nutmeg parlour, a sapphire dairy-room, chambers of agate, &c., &c." [1] Still less do we find anything resembling Shakespeare's Queen Mab : ---

" Her waggon spokes made of long spinner's legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
The traces of the smallest spider's web
The collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film." [2]

We hear little amongst the Chinese of fairy sprites whose highest aim is mere amusement, their action being usually, as with a certain class of brownies in our own fairy pantheon, malignant. It is, by the way, interesting to note that while the words *alp* and *alf* (Swedish and English *elf*) equally signify a mountain, or demon of the mountains, [3] the Chinese most frequently assign a mountainous locality to the homes of their fairy folk. The celebrated mountain Kw'en Lun (崑崙) (usually identified with the Hindoo Kush) is said to be peopled with fairies who cultivate upon its terraces the "fields of sesamum and gardens of coriander seeds " which are eaten as ordinary food by those who possess the gift of Longevity. Here too is the "Lake of Gems" on whose borders dwells the fairy mother *Si wang mu* (西王母) and beside whose waters flourishes the *k'iung shu* or tree of life, described as 10,000 cubits in height, 1800 feet in circumference and supposed to bear fruit only once in 3,000 years., This fruit is bestowed by the fairies on their favourites, who thus become immortal. Other receipts for the " Elixir of Life" are peach-tree gum mixed with the powdered ash of the mulberry, and *tan* 丹 the elixir of gold, or *tan sha* 丹砂 the common name for cinnabar.

There are some curious resemblances between Chinese and Western superstitions on the subject of storm-fiends or fairies. Thus the storm-raiser in China is not unlike his prototype in Scotland. Sir James Melville in his *Memoirs*

tells us that " the spirit or devil that helped the Scottish witches to raise a storm in the sea of Norway

was cold as ice, and his body hard as iron; his face was terrible, his nose like the beak of an eagle, great burning eyes, his hands and legs hairy, with claws on his nails like a griffin." The Chinese demon of the storm is thus described in the Shan hai ching 山海經. " In Daylight mountain dwells the shên called Ke-mung. His shape is like a man with a dragon's head. He wanders about continually in the depths of the Chang river, and whenever he comes over or goes in there is sure to be a violent storm and rain."

Fairies in China indeed, as with us, usually possess the attribute of beauty. A well-known Chinese legend relates how two friends wandering amongst the ravines of their native mountains in search of herbs for medicinal purposes come to a fairy bridge where two maidens of more than earthly beauty are on guard. They invite them to the fairy land which lies on the other side of the bridge, and the invitation being accepted they become enamoured of the maidens, and pass what to them seems a short though blissful period of existence with the fairy folk. At length they desire to revisit their earthly homes and are allowed to return, when they find that seven generations have lived and died during their apparently short absence, they themselves having become centenarians.[4] Another version of the story is found in the *Liao chai chih yi*. About A.D. 60 or 70 two friends named Yüan Chao and Liu Ch'ên when wandering amongst the T'ien-t'ai mountains lost their way, and after wandering about for some time at length came upon a fairy retreat where two beautiful girls received them and fed them on *hu ma* 胡麻 (hemp, the Chinese *haschisch*). After spending what seems only a few days with their hostesses they return home and find to their astonishment that seven generations have passed away since they made the acquaintance of the maidens.[5] I may here remark that this Rip Van Winkle sort of story takes several forms in China, and a slight digression on this subject may be pardoned. A legend, related of Wang Chih, one of the patriarchs of the Taoist sect, involves him in a similar catastrophe with less obvious excuse than in the case of the two friends above mentioned.[6] Wandering one day in the mountains of Kü Chow to gather firewood "he entered a grotto in which some aged men were seated intent upon a game of chess. He laid down his axe and looked on at their game, in the course of which one of the old men handed him a thing in shape and size like a date stone, telling him to put it into his mouth. No sooner had he tasted it than 'he became oblivious of hunger and thirst.' After some time had elapsed, one of the players said, "It is long since you came here, you should go home now!" whereupon Wang Chili proceeding to pick up his axe found that its handle had mouldered into dust. On repairing to his home he found that centuries had passed since the time when he had left it for the mountains, and that no vestige of his kinsfolk remained. Retiring to a retreat among the hills he devoted himself to the rites of Taoism, and

page 99

finally attained to immortality --- a very un-Van-Winkle-like termination. to the legend.

The striking resemblance of these to legends popular throughout Europe needs no demonstration, they being in fact identical with Erse, Gaelic and Teutonic stories yet related in their respective neighbourhoods. The bridge in the first story is described as the "Azure bridge," the fairy home being known as the "Jasper city." "*Yao chi*" or the "Jasper lake" is the name given to a sheet of water which it is believed forms one of its chief attractions, and to speak of a Chinese lady as "a nymph of the Jasper lake " is to pay her the highest compliment for purity and beauty.

The somewhat particular, and at times pugnacious, "Brownie" is supposed to exist in China. Readers acquainted with our north-country folk-lore will be aware that a practice exists in many parts of the country of setting out milk &c. for the consumption of some household brownie; who performs willing labour for the benefit of its entertainer, the one proviso being that the brownies operations are never to be overlooked by mortal eye. It is curious, in this connection, to find such a Chinese legend as the following recorded (*T'an ching* 談徵, vol. 4) : --- "In the Ts'ê dynasty there was one Chang Ching, who went out one night and saw a woman on the south corner of his house who beckoned him to come to her; and when he came she said: -This is. your honour's mulberry ground, and I am the shên of this place: If you will make next year, in the middle of the first moon, some thick congee, and present it to me I will engage to make your mulberry trees. a hundred times more productive.' Having said this she disappeared. Ching made the congee and afterwards had a great crop of silkworms. Thence arose the practice of making thickened congee on the 15th of the first moon." Of the more truculent class of brownies we also hear a good deal in China. In an article on "Gunpowder and arms in China," published in a recent volume of the N. C. B. R. A. S. Transactions, the author, Mr. W. F. Mayers, quotes from the *Shin-i-king* the following: " Among the hills in the Western parts [of China ?] there exist beings in human shape, a foot or more in height, who are by nature very fearless. If attacked [or offended] they cause men to sicken with [alternate] heat and cold. They are called *Shan sao*." It was to frighten these brownies that the practice of burning bamboos, now-a-days substituted by fire-crackers, (as already alluded to,) was adopted. Another account makes the *Shan-sias* or *Shan-sao*, to be a species of bird which when attacked summons tigers to its aid and burns down dwelling houses. In any case these beings bear many points of resemblance to our own sprites, especially those that are malignant. A curious story, which may serve as the type of many such, is also given in the same volume as that from which the above is derived, the *locale* given being Lew-chew, which until very lately was deemed a dependency of China. It relates how a fairy in the guise of a beautiful woman is found bathing in a man's. well. He persuades her to marry him, and she remains with him for nine years, at the end of which time, despite the affection she has for their two children, she "glides upwards. into a cloud" and

page 100

disappears. We find a very similar story in the Arabian nights, and both Germany and the Shetland islands give us an almost identical legend.

A large proportion of the fairy tales of all countries are of course what grave scholars denominate "puerile"; but I need hardly apologise for giving the two following, which illustrate both the idea of diminutive stature attributed to fairies and the yet more common endowment of animals and insects with fairy power. In the work (*T'an ching*) above quoted from we read that the Emperor Yuen Tsung of Tang had imperial ink called Dragon fragrance. One day he saw in the ink little Taoist priests like flies walking about, and they called to him, "Live for ever! Your servants are the spiritual essence of ink, the ambassadors of the black pine. Whoever in the world has literary cultivation must have twelve of us dragon guests in his ink." This is not badly matched by the following: "A youth while sleeping was accosted by a maiden who asked him to accompany her for protection against some menaced danger, telling him she was a princess in disguise; but he turned away from her. Soon afterwards he heard the noise of humming and saw entangled in the web of a spider a bee about to be devoured. He released the bee, placed it upon the ink-slab, when by the impression of its feet it left

the character "Grateful" and flew away. He followed it with his eyes and saw it enter a honey-comb suspended above. The disguised princess was the bee." Sir John Bowring, who gives this story in almost the same words, adds, "It is easy to fancy that the character or sign meaning 'Gratitude' could be made by the impress of a bee's feet." I fear that the learned ex-governor of Hongkong was in this instance indulging in an exaggeration not unusual with him.

Chinese popular stories also abound with references to "kelpies" such as in Scotland are reported to haunt fords and ferries. A not less popular belief credits the monkey tribe with peculiar attributes as being possessed by fairies who make woman-stealing an ordinary avocation --- thus affording a curious parallel to a South-African superstition. In the *History of the White Monkey*, by Kung T'sing, we read that a man of Leang, who had a very pretty wife, was travelling and came to pass some time at Chang-toh. Warned by the people of the place that a local shên was given to stealing females he conceals his wife in an inner room: but, despite all his precautions, on the second night in the fourth watch she is abducted. After seeking her high and low amidst great perils he at length comes to a stone door in a mountain facing the East, and learns from women passing in and out that his wife is within. To effect her deliverance he is advised to provide two kilderkins of spirits, ten dogs and several pounds of hemp. With this the women in the cave promise to attempt the *shên's* capture. The *shên* accordingly sees and devours the dogs and drinks the spirits, when he is securely bound with the hemp. The husband being called in, finds an enormous monkey bound hand and foot to the bed, and Ngau-yang Hih (the husband) kills him, thus releasing all the females in his power.

Fairies who embody the powers of nature are firmly believed in. " The

page 101

Emperor Liang when tired fell asleep in the sunshine and dreamer that he was visited by a woman of celestial beauty. He asked whence she came and who she was. 'I live on the terrace of the Sun on the Enchanted Mountain. In the morning I am a cloud, in the evening a shower of rain.' " The popular credence which this legend obtains argues a very deep-seated belief in the fairy-like attributes of representatives of the powers of nature, and shows a close analogy to the Western legend of the ° Spirit of the Mist." -

But the Chinese people other spheres with Fairy inhabitants; and there is a touch of the imaginative in such beliefs which rather induces sympathy with than hostility to their tenour. The universal legend of the Man in the Moon takes in China a form that is at least as interesting as the ruder legends of more barbarous peoples. The " Goddess of the Palace of the Moon," Chang-o, appeals as much to our sympathies as, and rather more so than, the ancient beldame who in European folk-lore picks up perpetual sticks to satisfy the vengeful ideas of an ultra-sabbatical sect. Mr. G. C. Stent has aptly seized the idea of the Chinese versifier whom he translates: ---

On On a gold throne, whose radiating brightness
Dazzles the eyes--- enhaloing the scene,
Sits a fair form, arrayed in snowy whiteness.
---She is Chang-o, the beauteous Fairy Queen.
Rainbow-winged angels softly hover o'er her

Forming a canopy above the throne
A host of fairy beings stand before her
Each robed in light and girt with meteor zone."

Making every allowance for the polish of translation, the foregoing verses intimate a delicacy of perception that raises Chinese fairy folk-lore to the level of our own. It is scarcely necessary to quote, from European sources, verses which in sentiment express a similar idea.

Fairy Tales abound in Chinese resembling those in Arabic folk-lore. A very well-known legend relates how a celebrated musician, aspiring to wed a princess who played so exquisitely on the flute that all the birds, even to the eagle, came down from heaven to listen to her, was accepted, on chewing proof of this ability as her husband. "Too good to live," however, the pair were transformed into genii, and still occupy a place in the somewhat vast arcana of Chinese gods. Other legends relate to animals becoming endowed with the gift of speech. Thus Chwang-tzu the hero of a story which has been popularized by Mr. Stent under the heading "Fanning the Grave," is related to have reached a river, the banks of which were almost dry. Various small fishes thereupon petitioned him to "restore their much-needed element --- water --- representing that if he did not do so, they would all perish; and their request was acceded to. Ireland and Germany both give us similar legends.

To sum up, I am inclined to the conclusion that no very real distinction obtains in Chinese folk-lore between the various beings described in the West as demons, genii and fairies, though, as I have endeavoured to shew, supernatural creatures, possessing the attributes of each, are fully believed in. The constant application of the term *shên* 神 in this connection seems to me an argument against its adoption by Christian missionaries to express our own

page 102

conception of the Creator. It is singular, by the way, to find that just as we use the word "spirit" in two different senses when we say "God is a *spirit*" and "He is a man of spirit," the Chinese in like manner make the word *shên* do double duty. Of course the argument cuts both ways; but its inapplicability to the Chinese side lies in the fact that the language provides no word, for the *one ultimate cause*. Whatever word, our missionaries, agree upon must do some violence to the native idea. The subject is, however, too wide to be more than incidentally touched on here. Suffice it to say that both in the everyday language of the people and in popular literature *shên* conveys the idea of *gods, spirits, fairies or demons* only. A careful consideration of this fact is imperative in any discussion as to its adoption in Christian books to express the Hebrew "Jehovah."

NOTES

- [1] Brand's *Antiquities*, Vol. II, p. 499, quoted from Randolph's *Amyntas*.
- [2] Mercutio's speech, *Romeo and Juliet*.
- [3] Brand's *Antiquities*, Vol. II, p. 476.
- [4] Quoted in Sir J. Bowring's *Flowery Scroll*, p. 27.
- [5] *Ch. Reader's Manual*, p. 289.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 289.