

then wiped clean and replaced in its sheath
hip.
From that day on, no traveller ever again had his
disturbed in the pavilion south of Anyang.



The Rainmakers

In the ordinary course of events, we mortals merely have to accept whatever weather is sent to us. Nor do we have much warning in advance of what is coming. But now and again someone has chanced upon the rainmakers at work, and once upon a time one man even assisted them, though the result was not altogether a happy one.

It was by a chance encounter that Li Yung, a farmer, was able to save his wheat harvest. It came about when he was sent on an official errand to a town some distance away. Returning, he spent the night all alone in an old temple. In the middle of the night he was roused from his sleep by a loud banging on the stout temple door.

'Open up!' cried a voice from outside. 'We've come to borrow the thunder-cart.'

'Who wants it?' came the reply from within the temple.

'The King of Chieh-hsiu.'

Now Chieh-hsiu was the name of the district in which Li Yung's farm lay, and so he listened with particular care to what followed.

'What does he want it for?' came again from within the temple.

'He wishes to take in the wheat harvest,' those within replied.

There was a long pause, while Li Yung trembled to think that his wheat harvest was in danger.

Then the voice from inside spoke up again. 'Our King says the cart is in use just at the moment, and you'll have to wait a while.'

This time there was a longer pause. It was ended at last by a loud rumbling noise which came from outside. Li Yung looked out and beheld five or six spirit-men carrying candles and escorting a large cart, which they led toward the messenger from Chieh-hsiu. The rear of the procession was brought up by a number of men carrying a gigantic banner composed of separate streamers, each of which sparkled brightly. They presented the banner before the messenger, who counted aloud the number of streamers. There were eighteen. He nodded his head in satisfaction, and led the procession away.

As soon as the noise had died away Li Yung rushed out into the black of night and somehow or other found his way back to Chieh-hsiu. Though it was not yet dawn he roused every one of his neighbours by hammering at the doors and yelling. 'The thunder-spirits are coming to steal our wheat! Come quickly and gather in your harvest!'

But the neighbours only laughed at him and went back to bed. Li Yung dashed off to his field, where by working frantically he managed to reap and gather in his wheat. By the time he had finished it was broad daylight. He took his wife and children up on to a low rise overlooking the village, and watched the sky anxiously. They had not

been there a few minutes when a cloud like thick black smoke rose up from behind the mountains. In no time at all it covered the sky. Torrential rain began to fall, thunder pealed and rolled, and Li Yung counted eighteen distinct flashes of lightning.

When the storm had passed the crops were ruined. The people of Chieh-hsiu were angry with Li Yung. The story spread that he had been practising black magic to enrich himself at the expense of his neighbours—they forgot how they had ignored his warning and laughed at him. So indignant did they become that in the end they took him to court. But there he told the whole story, and the magistrate, realizing that it was no more than a lucky chance which had shown Li Yung the rainmakers at work, pronounced him innocent and released him.

The man who once helped to bring the rain was also named Li, but he was no poor farmer but a warrior, Li Ching, who later became Duke of Wei. As a young man he was very fond of hunting. He used to go each year to the Ling mountains, where he would stay in a little village in a valley. The old men of the village thought a great deal of him and treated him most hospitably, and as the years went by his friendship with them deepened.

Towards the end of one long day of sport, just as he was thinking of returning to the village for the night, he caught sight of a fine stag above him on the hill-side. He spurred on his horse and gave chase. The stag made for a high ridge and sped along it like the wind. Li Ching, his blood up, followed; but his horse was tiring. The ridge sloped gently down into a wide, wooded valley. He failed to catch up with the stag before it reached the edge of the trees, and there he lost it. Out on the hillside there had still

been some light, but here, among the thickets, it was already dark. Li Ching soon realized that in trying to find the way out of the wood he was in reality plunging deeper and deeper into it. He was hopelessly lost.

He dismounted and looked about him: it was a frightening place, the grey wraiths of tree-trunks seeming to move and glide in the darkness, the silence broken only by the occasional mournful howl of a monkey. He led his horse forward, not knowing even what he was hoping to find.

The last thing he expected was a human habitation in the midst of this desolate forest. Yet in the distance across a glade a point of warm light glowed. He crossed the glade towards it. White in the gloom rose high walls surrounding a large house. The great door was lacquered red and shone in the light of a bronze lantern. Li Ching hammered on the door with his fists. For a long time there was no response, but at last the door swung open and a servant appeared.

'I was hunting on the hill-side and lost my way in these woods,' said Li Ching. 'Can you give me shelter here for the night?'

'My masters are both away,' said the servant. 'There is only the old lady at home. I don't think she will allow you to stay here.'

'Please give her my respects and ask her if it is possible,' Li Ching requested.

The servant returned with the reply. 'My mistress was at first unwilling, but since you are lost and it is dark she will receive you. Please follow me.'

He led Li Ching into a hall, where a maid announced the entrance of the mistress of the house. She was about fifty years of age, dressed in plain but elegant style, and

evidently a person of breeding. Li bowed to her, and she returned his greeting.

'Really it is not fitting that I should entertain you here when my sons are not at home,' she said. 'But I do not think you would be able to find your way out of the wood in the darkness.' Then she added, 'My sons will be returning soon. They make rather a lot of noise when they come in, but please do not let it alarm you.'

She arranged for him to be given a meal, which was sumptuous, but consisted almost entirely of various kinds of fish. Then servants brought in bedding, sheets and pillows, all soft and clean and pleasantly scented. When they went out again they locked the door on the outside.

Tired though he was, Li Ching was unable to go to sleep at once. He found himself wondering who these people could be, living in a mansion in the heart of a desolate forest. Why should the sons make such a noise when they came in—and where would they come from, so late in the night? Why had his door been locked on the outside? And something else puzzled him: why did they seem to eat nothing but fish?

He was still sitting on the edge of his bed trying to think of an answer when midnight came, and with it a loud banging on the gate.

A voice roared from outside the gate. 'Command of Heaven: the eldest master is to deliver rain over a radius of seven hundred miles. The rain is to cease at dawn, and there is to be neither omission nor undue violence.'

Li Ching next heard the lady of the house say, 'What am I to do? Neither of my sons is at home, and there is no time to send for them. None of the servants can undertake such a task, and yet I shall be punished if the rain is not delivered. Oh, what am I to do?'

Then a servant said, 'Would it not be possible to request the help of our guest? He seems to be above the common run of men.'

The lady expressed her delight at the suggestion, then knocked at Li Ching's door and asked, 'Are you awake, sir? I should like a word with you.'

Li Ching rose and went out to her.

'I must tell you,' began the lady, 'that this is no house of mortals, but a dragon palace.' ('So that is why they eat only fish,' thought Li Ching.) 'As you well know, we dragons are responsible for the bringing of rain. I have just received an order for delivery. But my elder son is attending a wedding in the Eastern Sea, and my younger son is escorting his sister home. Both of them are thousands of miles from here, it would be impossible to summon them in time. I wonder if you would help us in this emergency? It would not take you very long.'

'I'm afraid I'm only an ordinary human being,' said Li Ching. 'I am not a bad horseman, but I have had no experience of riding the clouds. However, I should like to be able to help you in return for your hospitality. If you will show me what I have to do, I will try my best.'

A piebald horse was led forward. The lady called for the rain-jar. To Li Ching's surprise this proved to be quite a tiny jar, which the lady fastened to the piebald's saddle.

'There is nothing difficult about it if you will simply do as I say,' she said to him. 'You will not need to use reins or whip. Simply let the horse have his head, but whenever he stops and neighs, there you must shake one drop of rain from the jar on to his mane. Be very careful that you use no more than one drop each time.'

And so Li Ching mounted and set out on his mission. The piebald rose into the air, higher and higher. At first Li Ching dug in his thighs from fear of falling, but soon he realized that the horse was as steady as a rock. It was hard to believe that he was travelling above the clouds—yet the wind flew past him like a flight of arrows, and beneath him lightning played and thunder rumbled. The horse stopped and neighed, and Li Ching followed his instructions, dipped a finger in the jar and shook one drop of water on to the piebald's mane. This happened several times, and each time when he had done it the clouds opened beneath him.

Eventually the horse stopped above a place which Li Ching recognized. It was the mountain village in which he had been staying while he hunted.

'The people of this village have been very good to me,' he said to himself. 'I have received a great deal of hospitality from them, and I have never found any way of repaying their kindness. But these last few weeks have been a time of drought; the crops are parched, and here am I sitting with the rain in my hands. I will give them a good downpour to water their crops.'

And so this time he shook not one drop but twenty drops of rain on to the piebald's mane before moving on. This was in fact the last of the stopping-places. The horse made straight for the house in the woods, and there Li Ching found the lady waiting for him. To his astonishment she was weeping. As he dismounted she cried out to him, 'Why did you not do as I said? I asked you to shake one drop of water on to the horse's mane, and you used twenty! The reason I said one drop is that one drop from the rain-jar causes one foot of rain on earth. And there is that poor valley, in the middle of the night,

flooded out by twenty feet of rain! None of the inhabitants can have escaped!

Her tears burst forth again. She turned her back to him and removed a shawl from round her shoulders, revealing angry red weals across them. 'I have been punished with eighty strokes of the rod,' she told him. 'My sons will be punished also for having neglected their duty.'

Li Ching was filled with horror by the consequences of his act of kindness. Noting his remorse, the lady went on. 'Of course, you are only a mortal and could not be expected to understand the art of rainmaking. I must not be angry with you. But I am afraid of what my sons will say if they find you here. You had better leave at once.'

She clapped her hands, and two young slave-girls entered, one through a doorway in the east wall of the hall, one through a doorway in the west wall. Both were outstandingly beautiful. 'Here in the depths of the forest,' said the lady, 'we have nothing with which to reward you for your labours on our behalf. All I can offer you is these girls. You may take one or both: but be very careful in your choice.'

Li Ching looked at the two girls. He found that one was smiling at him; the other was glaring at him with a hostile expression. He said to himself, 'I am a hunter and fond of fighting. If I choose the girl who is smiling at me the lady will think I am chicken-hearted.' And to the lady he said, 'I would not presume to accept both. I will take the girl who came through the doorway in the west wall, and who now is glaring at me so fiercely.'

'So that is your choice,' said the lady with a wise smile. She led the girl up to him, and then, before she sent them away, she put into Li Ching's hand a bag full of large, flawless pearls.

Li Ching looked back when he had ridden with his bride a few paces from the house, but there was no longer any sign of it. Dawn came, and he found his way with ease back to the mountain village. As he had feared, it was a sight to chill the flesh. Only the roofs of the huts showed above the muddy waters of the lake which now filled the valley. But as it had happened, he had been clumsy and slow in taking the twenty drops from the rain-jar. The people of the village, warned by the storm of thunder and lightning, had had time to escape up the hillside, where Li now found them bewailing the destruction of their homes.

He comforted them as best he could, then rode off to sell the pearls the lady had given him. With the fortune they brought him he was able to feed the villagers until their land was reclaimed, and build a fine new village for them where the old one had stood.

In later life, as Duke of Wei, Li Ching won undying fame as a general. This was because he had chosen the slave-girl who came through the doorway in the west wall, the girl who had scowled at him. It is often said, 'Ministers of state come from east of the mountains, generals come from the west.' If Li Ching had chosen the smiling girl who came through the doorway in the east wall, he would have become a minister of state; if he had presumed to accept both the girls, then he would have been both general and minister at the same time.