

*CAT-KIN AND
THE QUEEN MOTHER*

Korean Fairy Tales

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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 snow white 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."

All of a sudden the air seemed heavy with sweet perfume, and a silver mist like a cloud spread over her house and garden. Then a bright dazzling light flooded everything and there stood before her a glistening chariot, made of blue jade with golden wheels. It was drawn by milk-white horses and on a seat of shining silver sat the Western Heavenly Queen Mother herself.

Attendant upon the Mother Queen were thousands of the most beautiful maidens, who were all dressed in resplendent robes. They wore amber ornaments, and silver girdles, and necklaces of precious stones and silken robes with many tassels. Their feet were shod with gold embroidered velvet slippers, and on their heads were caps of gold studded with glittering gems. Cat-kin could hardly count the rich ornaments, necklaces, breast chains and the jade wands, like sceptres, which they held in their hands. These were shaped like lotus flowers. The faces of all these maidens were rosy, their eyes sparkled, and all had small hands and feet.

In a voice of great sweetness that sounded like music the Heavenly Queen Mother looked at Catkin and spoke to her, saying:

" Come forward, little maid, fear not. I shall take you with me to my palace, in the Island of Gems and give you all you want, besides showering blessings on your people, if you will come."

Cat-kin did not feel at all timid or frightened but came boldly forward and knelt at the base of the chariot.

The Mother Queen first touched her with her milk-white jade wand, that was carved like a lotus bud, and made the little girl rise.

In a moment more, a silver chariot, with wheels made of turquoise and drawn by two young milk white dragons, wheeled up close to her, and the attendant lady in golden robes bade her step in.

The dragons were fierce, powerful, fire-breathing creatures, with wide spreading wings, and their bodies and tails together were of the length of whales, while their eyes darted fire. Yet Cat-kin was not at all afraid, and thought it was great fun. Then up through and far above the clouds the host of bright beings flew. They followed the Queen Mother's chariot until, far away, they poised in mid-sky.

Catkin was then told to look over the side of the chariot to the earth and ocean, mile., and miles below. She was asked if she could recognize her father's cottage, but she could not. The whole village looked only like a grey mass of thatched roofs, and she could pick out only the temple.

There, spread out, was the great sea, as blue as a sapphire, and in places deep green, like an emerald, but she could see no ships nor any coast or shores, nor any ranges of mountains, nor signs of the land of Korea. Nothing but ripples and waves were visible. Yet in the center of the azure sea was an island. The trees were emeralds and the roofs of the houses were of gold, and the windows diamonds. These were so full of light that no lamps were necessary.

Beautiful beings, all maidens, as lovely in garb and face as those who filled the train of the Queen Mother, walked or played, or sang in the gardens. Or swam and sported in the sapphire waves, or rowed and sailed about in boats that seemed as if made of marble, they were so white.

At a signal from the Queen the singing ceased. Then there rose up wave upon wave of sweetest melody from the players on instruments who were in the gardens below.

Cat-kin thought she heard at intervals the chorus, sounding out the words, rising upward like pulses, through the air, "Welcome lovely mortal! Our Queen invites and we greet thee! Manifold be her gifts to thee and thine! Come, thou honored among all Korean maidens! Come to us and join our band and we shall love thee as one of ourselves."

In the wink of a falcon's eye --- so short a time it seemed --- the Mother Queen and her host descended.

As the chariots touched the island, a bevy of radiant maidens came forward, some to attend the Queen Mother and some to lead Cat-kin into her own room in the palace. There the most gorgeous robes were put on her, beside a cap bejeweled with glittering, precious stones of various colors, and a pair of gold-embroidered velvet slippers.

Cat-kin was surprised when one of the shining maidens set a royal tiara adorned with five gems upon her brow.

"For Me?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes for you, whom the Heavenly Mother Queen would honor."

"And what do these five gems, jade, crystal, malachite, amber and agate signify?" asked Cat-kin.

"Ah, that is not for us to tell you, but the Queen Mother ordered these. Tomorrow she will explain to you the secret of each gem."

Cat-kin walked about freely, enjoying the lovely sights and sounds. She also ate with keen appetite and to her full of the delicacies set on the table before her. Yet never once did she feel sleepy, nor see any beds, nor hear anyone talk of retiring. She wondered what they meant when they said "tomorrow"; for she could see no sun or moon or twilight. However, she did not think long about such things, and

by and by forgot all about them.

When the entire court and all the hosts of the Queen Mother's attendants had assembled, Her Majesty's chamberlain read the proclamation, which declared that the Queen looked with great favor upon the Korean people, and had decided to bestow great gifts upon them. For this purpose, she had selected and brought to her palace the Korean maid named Cat-kin, to endow them through this, their daughter, with five precious traits of disposition and character. In token of gracious thought and tender love, Her Majesty would now present and explain the meaning of the five precious gems. These were jade, crystal, malachite, amber, and agate.

Cat-kin kneeled down before the Queen, who placed in Cat-kin's hands the shining gems, while an attendant fairy took them from her opened palm and placed each one of them on vermilion velvet, edged with gold. Then five maidens stood by, each with a gem laid on a cushion.

After the ceremony of presentation was over, the Queen made a speech, which told the Korean maiden's fortune and her future.

Cat-kin would be sent back over the clouds and ocean to the King's palace in the capital of her home land, and there be made a princess. Many nobles and king's sons from other countries, hearing of her beauty and her wonderful visit to the Island of Gems would come to pay her court as suitors. Many would ask for her hand, to be wedded to her; but she was to marry none but the king's son, a prince of her own people.

"Take these gems, fair maiden, and bestow their virtues and what they mean upon your people," said the Queen. "A thousand years from now --- as men count time --- we together will' visit Korea again."

Then both the Queen and Cat-kin, stepping into the silver chariot, drawn by the fire-breathing dragons, plunged on and mounted up into space. First they sailed above the clouds and then dipped downwards, steering to Korea and over the mountains, bearing their precious charge to the capital. They reached the ground in a cloud and the wheels of the chariot stood still before the palace gate.

Yet before any mortal eyes could see their, full forms, the Queen Mother and the dragons had disappeared, and Cat-kin stood alone, a resplendent maiden of dazzling appearance and in the robes given by the Heavenly Queen Mother, which all recognized at once as coming from the Island of Gems.

A throng of court ladies and palace attendants and a long line of nobles and princes were already waiting for the maiden, who they knew came gift-laden from the Queen Mother, of whom all had heard from childhood. The five gems were laid, each in a covered casket of perfumed wood, encrusted with gold on top and inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Escorted into the throne room by a bevy of princesses, the Heavenly Mother's gifts in the five caskets were reverently placed on silken fans, spread out on a table having on its top the five cushions of crimson velvet.

Then, by lot and word of the diviners, the choice of a first drawing was awarded to a prince of fair

face and mien. The other four nobles, one by one and in turn, approached and each was allowed to choose one of the caskets, all of which looked alike, and none was to be opened until the possessor was in his own home.

Now these were the gifts for body and mind, of which the polished gems were the tokens. According as each prince chose and received, so with the trait, which each gem signified, would his children and posterity be endowed. In the course of centuries, these would become the national features, of twenty millions of Koreans.

One by one the caskets were opened by each prince, and therein he discovered what was a trait in the character of the Korean people. These were:

Procrastination --- Putting off until tomorrow, or some other time, what ought to be done today, and keeping back not only one person but the whole nation.

Hospitality --- Always glad to see friends, to entertain people, even strangers, and to take care of relations, even to the making of one's self poor -- a habit carried too far as the years and centuries rolled on.

Inexactness --- The habit of not usually thinking clearly, counting correctly, or stating facts precisely, and when telling a story of "blowing a conch," that is, of exaggerating.

Love of family --- How the mothers and fathers in Korea do love their children, their kinsfolk and their relatives!

Sense of humor --- A Korean can always see the funny side of things. He loves to joke and he bears his troubles well, because he likes to smile. As for the girls, they laugh as easily as the rain falls, or the flowers bloom.

And what the Queen Mother predicted came true. Just as five fingers make up the hand, so the average people among the Koreans are known by the five traits, for better or for worse.