

Tales of the Monkey King

by
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CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

A stone monkey is born, finds a monkey tribe, becomes king, and seeks to learn the secret of immortality from a Great Sage.



The story of Monkey begins with a large stone. Back when the earth was created, this stone fell from the heavens, landing in the Middle Kingdom in the land of Ngao Lai.

For eons, the stone rested quietly on the peak of the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits. For eons, the sunlight engendered life in the stone until, one day, the stone cracked like an egg. Out bounded a monkey! Born full-grown, he was an average-looking creature, curious and active, like all monkeys, but not, on first sight, anything really special. He gave himself the name “Stone Monkey.” Feeling hungry and a little lonely, he set out to explore.

A few days later, just as he was beginning to feel very lonely—simians are social creatures—he came upon a large troop of monkeys. He immediately joined them and was content. The animals, who called themselves the Monkey Tribe of the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits, had no real home. They spent their days roaming their mountain, playing, and searching for food. Each day flowed into the next—day by day, season by season. But one day in midsummer, the troop came to an enormous waterfall barring their way between two mountains.



“What’s behind the water? Can there be treasure? Could there be monsters? Whoever is brave enough to explore deserves to be our king!” they chattered.

Meek monkeys hid in the trees. Brave ones climbed the cliff. From its edge, they could see two rainbows glistening in the spray. Stone Monkey took a deep breath. Without hesitation, he flung himself through the waterfall. His monkey friends screamed in terror!

To their surprise—and probably his—he didn’t drown. He landed on a stone ledge on the far side of the crashing water. From that ledge, an iron bridge led to an enormous marble pavilion set in a cavern. Marble tables held bowls of fruit. Marble chairs stood invitingly. Carved on the pavilion’s marble entrance were the words, “Mountain of Flowers and Fruits, Land of Happiness, Cavern of Waters.” This was a monkey paradise.

Whooping with joy, Stone Monkey leapt back through the “water curtain” and invited the troop to their new home—a home clearly designed just for their happiness. The excited group immediately elected Stone Monkey their king. As any newly chosen Middle Kingdom emperor would have done, he took a new name, “Mei Hou Wang,” meaning “Perfect Monkey King.” He lost no time in appointing monkey dukes, monkey ministers, and monkey officials. Soon his court was just as recognizable by anyone from the Middle Kingdom’s Imperial Court. It was certainly just as full of busy officials scurrying back and forth.

And just like the Middle Kingdom’s Imperial Court, a major duty of the monkey court was to hold important celebrations. One day during a celebration involving play, carousing, singing, and dancing, and the drinking of much fermented peach juice, an old monkey minister suddenly collapsed!

“Alas, our Great Minister for East Mountain Peaches has reached the end of his cycle. His spirit now will be judged. May he be reborn to the rank he earned because of his virtuous life,” the monkey chamberlain told Monkey King.

Now, kings are so busy that sometimes they don’t notice as much as they should. For years, Monkey King had seen new monkeys born and noticed old monkeys disappear, but this was the first time he realized that these old monkeys had *died*. Horrors! Could it happen to him?

From that day, he no longer enjoyed eating, drinking, or playing. It seemed that being king did not exempt him from the cycle of life and death. His mood was so dark that the entire troop became depressed. Their fur no longer shone. Instead of leaping from branch to branch, they crept along the forest floors. Finally, a group of monkey ministers went to consult a sage monkey who had lived longer than all of them. He was famed for his wisdom.

The sage came to address Monkey King:

“Your weeping and wailing have distressed your subjects. Your duty as king is to hearten them, not to worry them. Indeed, all beings and even all objects have a beginning and an end. All living beings are subject to the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. Only those of extraordinary virtues, who have lived thousands of pure lives,

can climb higher on the ladder of life, until they are freed from the endless chain of birth and death. Those who do, become saints, immortals, and even Buddhas.”

“Oh, Monkey Sage, your words are true, but I am a monkey born of a stone. Why should I be subject to the cycle of birth and rebirth? Is there any way to become immortal?” asked Monkey King.

“Oh, Great King, only a few great sages and magicians have achieved immortality, even though many can live ten thousand years. You are not like the others in our monkey tribe, so you may succeed. But you must find a great sage and become his disciple. Perfection in anything—even freedom from death—can come only from learning,” the Sage Monkey advised.

So Monkey King decided to leave his kingdom and search for a great sage. He appointed his most trusted monkey duke as regent to care for the kingdom. The monkeys built him a boat so he could follow the river away from the kingdom. They stole human clothes for him to wear and filled his boat with dried fruits.



Monkey King was about as tall as a ten-year-old boy, and he walked upright. With clothes covering his light brown fur, and a cap on his head, and with his tail tucked

discretely down a pant leg, he looked more or less like a very hairy human child. If you saw him, you would think him very odd-looking, but you wouldn't have run screaming to your mother.

For nine years, Monkey King wandered from mountain to mountain, from village to village, from river to river, looking for a great sage who could teach him the Way to Immortality. There were magicians, there were charlatans, there were sages, there were priests with magical powers, but no great sages.

Reaching a dark, dense forest at the very border of the Middle Kingdom, he lost heart and decided to return home. But on the last day as he prepared to turn back, he heard someone chanting a mantra. Through the brush, he could see a woodsman casually chopping down trees with his bare hands! Amazed, Monkey King leapt out and knelt before the man.

"O, Great Immortal Sage, accept me as your disciple. Your powers are beyond compare," he praised.

The woodsman laughed so hard that he fell over.

"Strange monkey being, I am no sage. I am, as you see, a woodsman. I have a family and an aged parent to support. Years ago, I was injured. We would all have starved if the Great Sage who lives in the Cavern of the Moon on this mountain had not taken pity on me. Not only did he cure me, he taught me a mantra to keep me strong. It allows my hands to fell trees. Go to him if you seek learning."

He took Monkey to the gates of the Cavern of the Moon where the Great Sage and his students lived. Monkey King knelt at the gates.

"Great Sage," he said, "to come to you, I crossed rivers, and mountains, and seas. I never slept in one place twice for nine years. I am no ordinary monkey. I was born of stone. I am King of the Monkey Tribe on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits. I beg you to accept me as a disciple."

Now, the Great Sage was all knowing. Of course, Monkey King was destined to be his pupil. Though he put on a stern face, he allowed Monkey King to enter. Monkey King was given a stern lecture on the very strict regimen at the school. He was told to accept the humblest and dirtiest tasks. As Monkey King had no human name, the Great Sage named him. He was given the clan name "Hou," or *monkey* in Chinese, and the last name of "Souen," and first name of "Wu Kung," *he who penetrates the void with thought*.

