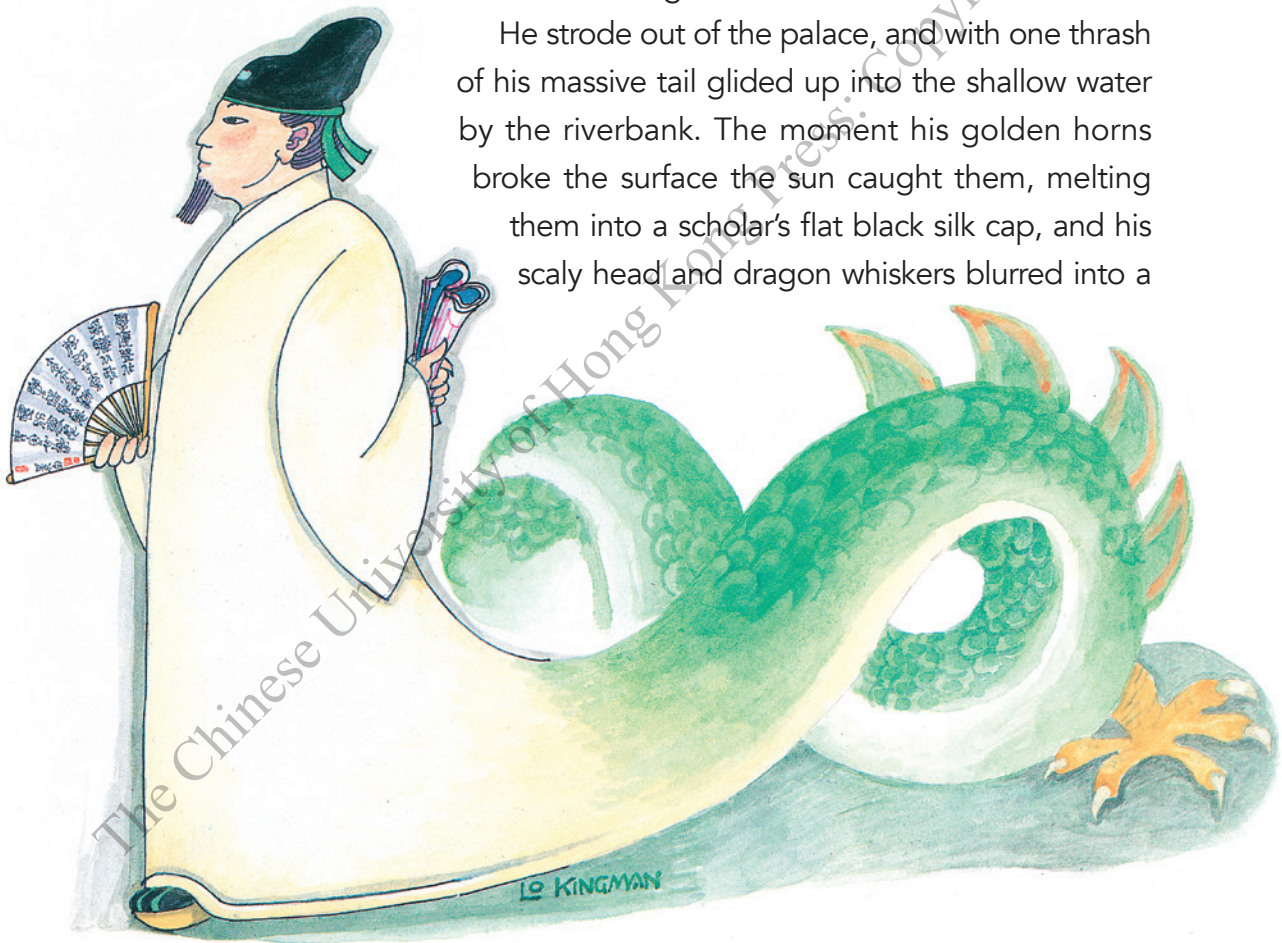


"No, not at all Sire," a wise old counsellor stepped forward bowing low, "May I suggest that Your Majesty go to the city in disguise to find out the truth of this matter? If there is such a wicked soothsayer you can punish him, but if it is a mistake then no harm is done."

The Dragon King gazed at him thoughtfully, then he nodded, "A good plan. I shall change myself into a scholar and go to see what this man is doing."

He strode out of the palace, and with one thrash of his massive tail glided up into the shallow water by the riverbank. The moment his golden horns broke the surface the sun caught them, melting them into a scholar's flat black silk cap, and his scaly head and dragon whiskers blurred into a



dignified and bearded face. His fearsome body changed into a tall and stately figure clad in a robe of palest silk, and his glistening claws had hardly touched the shore before they became fine black shoes. With a satisfied smile he settled his cap on his head, took out his fan, and walked in through the gates of Chang'an.

Waiting for a string of camels to pass at the entrance to West Gate Street, he saw a crowd gathered outside a house a little way along. "That must be the place," he thought, and snapped his fan shut against the palm of his hand. As soon as the way was clear he joined the group of onlookers, who fell back respectfully at the sight of so imposing a gentleman.

The soothsayer was sitting behind a long desk in a room opening onto the street. It was elegantly furnished; its fragrant incense, exquisite paintings and calligraphy, precious writing brushes and inkstones, all proclaimed the erudition of this famous man.

The Dragon King went in and bowed a polite greeting. The soothsayer responded courteously, seated him in the place of honour and called for tea to be served. "Sir, what is it you wish to ask me?" he enquired.

The Dragon King replied, "Kindly tell me if you can Sir, what the weather will be like tomorrow, and where the fish will gather."

The soothsayer glanced keenly at him, then nodded thoughtfully. He consulted a chart spread out on his desk and selected a slim volume from the set of books beside him. After studying them for



a few moments, he raised his hand and made a rapid calculation on his fingers. Finally he sat back in his chair stroking his beard. His severe expression and piercing black eyes made the Dragon King feel uncomfortable.

"Well?" he said.

The soothsayer gazed at him, "There will be plenty of mist and rain, and the fish will gather in the Long Pool to the west of the city."

"Exactly how much rain will fall, and at precisely what time?" enquired the Dragon King.

"Tomorrow at the hour of the Dragon, from 7 to 9 in the morning, it will be cloudy; at the hour of the Snake, from 9 to 11, it will thunder; at the hour of the Horse, from 11 to 1 in the afternoon, it will begin to rain, and go on until the hour of the Sheep between 1 and 3. Altogether three inches and forty-eight drops of rain will fall."

The Dragon King smiled, "I hope you're not joking about this. If it does rain precisely as you forecast, I shall express my thanks with pieces of gold. But if it doesn't rain, or if it isn't exactly as you predict, I promise you I shall not fail to expose your trickery. I shall come and smash in your shop front, tear down your sign, and drive you out of Chang'an so that you can't deceive people any more."

The soothsayer replied pleasantly, "Please do as you wish Sir."

"I shall return tomorrow you may be sure." The Dragon King rose and took his leave.

He hurried straight back to his Palace where all his court was waiting to hear what had happened.

"Did you see him Your Majesty?" they asked.

The Dragon King scowled. "Yes, I saw the man. He's just a windbag. I'll soon get rid of him! When I asked him to forecast the

weather he dared to tell me, yes me who determines these things, the exact time and amount it will rain tomorrow. He played right into my hands. I told him that I would give him gold if he's right, but that I'd wreck his place and throw him out of the city if he's wrong."

All the great water families hooted in derision, "Your Majesty's the one to command the rain. How could a mere soothsayer dare to talk such nonsense."

Suddenly a voice rang out above them. "Dragon King of the Jing River! Receive the Heavenly Decree." And a messenger clad in shining gold came floating down through the green water. Hurriedly the Dragon King straightened his robe, offered up incense, and kneeling, accepted the command from the Jade God of the Heavens. When he read it he found to his astonishment that it ordered him to arrange the weather for the next day exactly as the soothsayer had predicted.

He turned pale with anger, "How can this man know more than I do?" He threw himself down on his throne. "If he is such a favourite of the gods, how can I protect my water subjects from him?"

A hot-blooded general spoke up indignantly, "Your Majesty, your loyal subjects will never permit anyone in the world to defy you. Surely a very slight change in the amount and the time of the rain will do no harm and will not be reported to the Jade God of the Heavens; as long as the soothsayer's forecast is not exact to the very minute and to the last drop, you have won, and you can go back and turn him out!"