

The Chinese Fairy Tale

By Laurence Housman

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Tiki-pu was a small grub of a thing; but he had a true love of Art deep down in his soul. There it hung mewling and complaining, struggling to work its way out through the raw exterior that bound it.

Tiki-pu's master professed to be an artist: he had apprentices and students, who came daily to work under him, and a large studio littered about with the performances of himself and his pupils. On the walls hung also a few real works by the older men, all long since dead.

This studio Tiki-pu swept; for those who worked in it, he ground colors, washed brushes, and ran errands, bringing them their dog chops and bird's nest soup from the nearest eating house whenever they were too busy to go out to it themselves. He himself had to reed mainly on the breadcrumbs, which the students screwed into pellets for their drawings and then threw about upon the floor. It was on the floor, also, that he had to sleep at night.

Tiki-pu looked after the blinds and mended the paper windowpanes, which were often broken when the apprentices threw their brushes and maulsticks at him. Also he strained rice paper over the linen stretchers, ready for the painters to work on; and for a treat, now and then, a lazy one would allow him to mix a color for him. Then it was that Tiki-pu's soul came down into his fingertips, and his heart beat so that he gasped for joy. Oh, the yellows and the greens, and the lakes and the cobalts, and the purples which sprang from the blending of them! Sometimes it was all he could do to keep himself from crying out.

Tiki-pu, while he squatted and ground at the color powders, would listen to his master lecturing to the students. He knew by heart the names of all the painters and their schools and the name of the great leader of them all who had lived and passed from their midst more than three hundred years ago; he knew that too, a name like the sound of the wind, Wio-wani: the big picture at the end of the studio was by him.

That picture! To Tiki-pu it seemed worth all the rest of the world put together, He knew, too, the story which was told of it, making it as holy to his eyes as the tombs of his own ancestors. The apprentices joked over it, calling it "Wio-wani's back door," "Wio-wani's nightcap," and many other nicknames; but Tiki-pu was quite sure, since the picture was so beautiful, that the story must be true.

Wio-wani, at the end of a long life, had painted it; a garden full of trees and sunlight, with high—standing flowers and green paths, and in their midst a palace. "The place where I would like to rest," said Wio-wani, when it was finished.

So beautiful was it then, that the Emperor himself had come to see it; and gazing enviously at those peaceful walks and the palace nestling among the trees, had sighed and owned that he too would be glad of such a resting-place. Then Wio-wani stepped

into the picture and walked away along a path till he came, looking quite small and far off, to a low door in the palace wall. Opening it, he turned and beckoned to the Emperor; but the Emperor did not follow; so Wio-wani went in by himself and shut the door between himself and the world forever.

That happened three hundred years ago; but for Tiki-pu the story was as fresh and true as if it had happened yesterday. When he was left to himself in the studio, all alone and locked up for the night, Tiki-pu used to go and stare at the picture till it was too dark to see and at the little palace with the door in its wall by which Wio-wani had disappeared out of life. Then his soul would go down into his fingertips, and he would knock softly and fearfully at the beautifully painted door, saying, "Wio-wani, are you there?"

Little by little in the long thinking nights and the slow early mornings when lights began to creep back through the papered windows of the studio, Tiki-pu's soul became too much for him. He who could strain paper and grind colors and wash brushes had everything within reach for becoming an artist, if it was the will of Fate that he should be one.

He began timidly at first, but in a little while he grew bold. With the first wash of light he was up from his couch on the hard floor and was daubing his soul out on scraps and odds and ends and stolen pieces of rice paper.

Before long the short spell of daylight, which lay between dawn and the arrival of the apprentices to their work, did not suffice him. It took him so long to hide all traces of his doings, to wash out the brushes and rinse clean the paintpots he had used, and on the top of that to get the studio swept and dusted, that there was hardly time left him in which to indulge the itching of his fingers.

Driven by necessity, he became a pilferer of candle ends, picking them from their sockets in the lanterns, which the students carried on dark nights. Now and then one of these would remember that, when last used, his lantern had had a candle in it, and would accuse Tiki-pu of having stolen it. "It is true," he would confess; "I was hungry—I have eaten it." The lie was so probable, he was believed easily and was well beaten accordingly. Down in the ragged linings of his coat Tiki-pu could hear the candle ends rattling as the buffeting and chastisement fell upon him, and often he trembled lest his hoard should be discovered. But the truth of the matter never leaked out; and at night, as soon as he guessed that all the world outside was in bed, Tiki-pu would mount one of his candles on a wooden stand and paint by the light of it, blinding himself over his task, till the dawn came and gave him a better and cheaper light to work by.

Tiki-pu quite hugged himself over the results; he believed he was doing very well. "If only Wio-wani were here to teach me," thought he, "I would be in the way to becoming a great painter!"

The resolution came to him one night that Wio-wani *should* teach him. So he took a large piece of rice paper and strained it, and sitting down opposite "Wio-wani's back door," began painting. He had never set himself so big a task as this; by the dim stumbling light of his candle he strained his eyes nearly blind over the difficulties of it;

and at last was almost driven to despair. How the trees stood row behind row, with air and sunlight between, and how the path went in and out, winding its way up to the little door in the palace wall were mysteries he could not fathom. He peered and peered and dropped tears into his paintpots; but the secret of the mystery of such painting was far beyond him.

The door in the palace wall opened; out came a little old man and began walking down the pathway toward him.

The soul of Tiki-pu gave a sharp leap in his grubby little body. "That must be Wio-wani himself and no other!" cried his soul.

Tiki-pu pulled off his cap and threw himself down on the floor with reverent grovelings. When he dared to look up again, Wio-wani stood over him big and fine; just within the edge of his canvas he stood and reached out a hand.

"Come along with me, Tiki-pu!" said the great one.

"If you want to know how to paint, I will teach you."

"Oh, Wio-wani, were you there all the while?" cried Tiki-pu ecstatically, leaping up and clutching with his smeary little puds the hand, which the old man extended to him.

"I was there," said Wio-wani, "looking at you out of my little window. Come along in!"

Tiki-pu took a heave and swung himself into the picture and fairly capered when he found his feet among the flowers of Wio-wani's beautiful garden. Wio-wani had turned and was ambling gently back to the door of his palace, beckoning to the small one to follow him; and there stood Tiki-pu, opening his mouth like a fish to all the wonders that surrounded him. "Celestially, may I speak?" he said suddenly.

"Speak," replied Wio-wani; "what is it?"

"The Emperor, was he not the very flower of fools not to follow when you told him?"

"I cannot say," answered Wio-wani, "but he certainly was no artist."

Then he opened the door, that door which he had so beautifully painted, and led Tiki-pu in. And outside the little candle end sat and guttered by itself, till the wick fell overboard, and the flame kicked itself out, leaving the studio in darkness and solitude to wait for the growings of another dawn.

It was full day before Tiki-pu reappeared; he came running down the green path in great haste, jumped out of the frame onto the studio floor, and began tidying up his own messes of the night and the apprentices' of the previous day. Only just in time did he have things ready by the hour when his master and the others returned to their work.

All that day they kept scratching their left ears and could not think why; but Tiki-pu knew, for he was saying over to himself all the things that Wio-wani, the great painter, had been saying about them and their precious productions. And as he ground their colors for them and washed their brushes and filled his famished little body with the breadcrumbs they threw away, little they guessed from what an immeasurable distance

he looked down upon them all and had Wio-wani's word for it tickling his right ear all the day long.

Now before long Tiki-pu's master noticed a change in him; and though he bullied him and thrashed him and did all that a careful master should do, he could not get the change out of him. So in a short while he grew suspicious. "What is the boy up to?" he wondered. "I have my eye on him all day: it must be at night that he gets into mischief."

It did not take Tiki-pu's master a night's watching to find that something surreptitious was certainly going on. When it was dark, he took up his post outside the studio, to see whether by any chance Tiki-pu had some way of getting out; and before long he saw a faint light showing through the window. So he came and thrust his finger softly through one of the panes and put his eye to the hole.

There inside was a candle burning on a stand and Tiki-pu squatting with paintpots and brush in front of Wio-wani's last masterpiece.

"What fine piece of burglary is this?" thought he; "what serpent have I been harboring in my bosom? Is this beast of a grub of a boy thinking to make himself a painter and cut me out of my reputation and prosperity?" For even at that distance he could perceive plainly that the work of this boy went head and shoulders beyond his or that of any painter then living.

Presently Wio-wani opened his door and came down the path, as was his habit now each night, to call Tiki-pu to his lesson. He advanced to the front of his picture and beckoned for Tiki-pu to come in with him; and Tiki-pu's master grew clammy at the knees as he beheld Tiki-pu catch hold of Wio-wani's hand and jump into the picture and skip up the green path by Wio-wani's side and in through the little door that Wio-wani had painted so beautifully in the end wall of his palace!

For a time Tiki-pu's master stood glued to the spot with grief and horror. "Oh, you deadly little underling! Oh, you poisonous little caretaker, you parasite, you vampire, you fly in amber!" cried he. "Is that where you get your training? Is it there that you dare to go trespassing; into a picture that I purchased for my own pleasure and profit, and not at all for yours? Very soon we will see whom it really belongs to!"

He ripped out the paper of the largest window pane and pushed his way through into the studio. Then in great haste he took up paintpot and brush and sacrilegiously set himself to work upon Wio-wani's last masterpiece. In the place of the doorway by which Tiki-pu had entered, he painted a solid brick wall; twice over he painted it, making it two bricks thick; brick by brick he painted it and mortared every brick to its place. And when he had quite finished he laughed and called, "Good night, Tiki-pu!" and went home to be quite happy.

The next day all the apprentices were wondering what had become of Tiki-pu; but as the master himself said nothing and as another boy came to act as color grinder and brush washer to the establishment, they very soon forgot all about him.

In the studio the master used to sit at work with his students all about him and a mind full of ease and contentment. Now and then he would throw a glance across to

the bricked-up doorway of Wio-wani's palace and laugh to himself, thinking how well he had served out Tiki-pu for his treachery and presumption.

One day—it was five years after the disappearance of Tiki-pu—he was giving his apprentices a lecture on the glories and the beauties and the wonders of Wio-wani's painting—how nothing for color could excel, or for mystery could equal it. To add point to his eloquence, he stood waving his hands before Wio-wani's last masterpiece, and all his students and apprentices sat around him and looked.

Suddenly he stopped at mid-word and broke off in the full flight of his eloquence, as he saw something like a hand come and take down the top brick from the face of paint which he had laid over the little door in the palace wall, which Wio-wani had so beautifully painted. In another moment there was no doubt about it; brick by brick the wall was being pulled down, in spite of its double thickness.

The lecturer was altogether too dumbfounded and terrified to utter a word. He and all his apprentices stood around and stared while the demolition of the wall proceeded. Before long he recognized Wio-wani with his flowing white beard; it was his handiwork, this pulling down of the wall! He still had a brick in his hand when he stepped through the opening that he had made, and close after him stepped Tiki-pu!

Tiki-pu was grown tall and strong—he was even handsome; but for all that his old master recognized him and saw with an envious foreboding that under his arms he carried many rolls and stretchers and portfolios and other belongings of his craft. Clearly Tiki-pu was coming back into the world and was going to be a great painter.

Down the garden path came Wio-wani, and Tiki-pu walked after him; Tiki-pu was so tall that his head stood well over Wio-wani's shoulders—old man and young man together made a handsome pair.

How big Wio-wani grew as he walked down the avenues of his garden and into the foreground of his picture! And how big the brick in his hand! And ah, how angry he seemed!

Wio-wani came right down to the edge of the picture frame and held up the brick. "What did you do that for?" he asked.

"I ... didn't!" Tiki-pu's old master was beginning to reply; and the lie was still rolling on his tongue when the weight of the brickbat, hurled by the stout arm of Wio-wani, felled him. After that he never spoke again. That brickbat, which he himself had reared, became his own tombstone.

Just inside the picture frame stood Tiki-pu, kissing the wonderful hands of Wio-wani, which had taught him all their skill. "Good-bye, Tiki-pu!" said Wio-wani, embracing him tenderly. "Now I am sending my second self into the world. When you are tired and want rest, come back to me: old Wio-wani will take you in."

Tiki-pu was sobbing, and the tears were running down his cheeks as he stepped out of Wio-wani's wonderfully painted garden and stood once more upon earth. Turning, he saw the old man walking away along the path toward the little door under the palace wall. At the door Wio-wani turned back and waved his hand for the last time. Tiki-pu still stood watching him. Then the door opened and shut, and Wio-wani was gone. Softly as a flower the picture seemed to have folded its leaves over him.

Tiki-pu leaned a wet face against the picture and kissed the door in the palace wall, which Wio-wani had painted so beautifully. “O Wio-wani, dear master,” he cried, “are you there?”

He waited and called again, but no voice answered him.