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The Book of
Imaginary Beings

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PENGUIN BOOKS

The A Bao A Qu

If one wishes to gaze upon the most marvelous landscape in the world, one must go to the topmost story of the Tower of Victory in Chitor. There, one will find a circular terrace from which one commands a view clear to the horizon, all around. A spiral staircase leads up to this terrace, and yet the only persons who dare venture up the stairs are those who do not believe in the fable, which goes like this:

On the staircase of the Tower of Victory, there has lived from the beginning of time the A Bao A Qu, which is sensitive to the virtues possessed by human souls. It lives upon the first step in a state of lethargy, and comes to conscious life only when someone climbs the stairs. The vibration of the person as he approaches infuses the creature with life, and an inward light begins to glow within it. At the same time, its body and its virtually translucent skin begin to ripple and stir. When a person climbs the stairs, the A Bao A Qu follows almost on the person's heels, climbing up after him, clinging to the edge of the curved treads worn down by the feet of generations of pilgrims. On each step, the creature's color grows more intense, its form becomes more perfect, and the light that emanates from it shines ever brighter. Proof of the creature's sensitivity is the fact that it achieves its perfect form only when it reaches the topmost step, when the person who has climbed the stairs has become a fully evolved and realized spirit. In all other cases, the A Bao A Qu remains as though paralyzed, midway up the staircase, its body incomplete, its color still undefined, its light unsteady. When it cannot achieve its perfect form, the A Bao A Qu suffers great pain, and its moaning is a barely

perceptible murmur similar to the whisper of silk. But when the man or woman that revives the creature is filled with purity, the A Bao A Qu is able to reach the topmost step, completely formed and radiating a clear blue light. Its return to life is brief, however, for when the pilgrim descends the stairs again, the A Bao A Qu rolls down to the first step once more, where, now muted and resembling some faded picture with vague outlines, it awaits the next visitor to the Tower. The creature becomes fully visible only when it reaches the midpoint of the staircase, where the extensions of its body (which, like little arms, help it to climb the stairs) take on clear definition. There are those who say that it can see with its entire body, and that its skin feels like that of a peach. Down through all the centuries, the A Bao A Qu has reached perfection only once.

Captain Richard Francis Burton records the legend of the A Bao A Qu in one of the notes to his version of *The Thousand and One Nights*.