



CHINA

Li Chi Slays the Serpent

Here is a maiden who will not be sacrificed!

ONCE, LONG AGO, in a cleft in the northwest portion of the great Yung Mountains, there lived a giant serpent. He was many *lis* long, and to span his body would have taken ten hands.

If the serpent had remained only in the cleft, eating rabbits and mice and an occasional deer, no one would have thought anything of it. Serpents often dwelled in the mountains in those days.

But this serpent had crept down into the valley on moonless nights and taken off first sheep, then oxen, and finally it almost swallowed a magistrate's daughter who was visiting the home of an elderly aunt, though she managed to escape and run home.

The local people became terrified. Wouldn't you be, if a gigantic serpent, larger than a tree, was devouring your livestock and threatening a child?

So, the villagers sent word to the military commander of the nearby capital city. And, as is often the case, he was a friend of the magistrate whose daughter had been nearly devoured.

The commander sent out soldiers to slay the dragon. Ten men marched

out—and only one marched back. The rest had been eaten by the monster, who now had a taste for human flesh.

The serpent made its desires known through the dreams of mediums and charlatans and seers.

"Bring me a sweet and succulent young maiden," the serpent told them. "No more soldiers, if you please. They are too tough and not particularly pleasant. Once a year, on the eighth day of the eighth month, deliver the girl to my cave. If you do so, I will leave your flocks and soldiers alone."

Helpless, the commander and the magistrate consulted with the most important men of the city and the villages nearby. At last, reluctantly, they decided they had no choice. So they began selecting the daughters of criminals and servants, one a year, for nine years. With bound hands and feet, the girls were delivered to the cleft in the rock that was the serpent's cave.

Nine years.

Nine girls.

IN THE TENTH YEAR the men began once again their search for the perfect sweet and succulent maiden, to have her bound and ready for the eighth month.

Now, there was a man in the countryside below the Yung Mountains named Li Tan. He had six daughters and no sons. His youngest daughter—Li Chi—came to him as the search went on.

"Father," she said, "let me be the girl sent to the serpent."

Li Tan refused.

His wife refused.

"We will not let you die in the mouth of this monster," they said.

Li Chi bowed to them. "Dear parents," she said, "since you have brought forth six daughters and no sons, it is as if you were childless. I am nothing. I am the sixth nothing in this family." (For in those days girls were considered of no value in a Chinese family.)

"You are not 'nothing' to us," said her parents.

"Nevertheless, I cannot take care of you when you are old," Li Chi continued. "I only waste your food and clothing. What would be wrong in selling me to the serpent seekers and getting a bit of money for yourselves?"

But her parents would not let her go. So Li Chi sneaked out of the house that very night and, in secret, presented herself to the authorities.

"But do not bind my hands and feet," she said. "Give me, rather, a sharp sword and a snake-hunting dog."

"What can you, a mere girl, do that ten men could not?" they asked.

"What does it matter if I go armed or unarmed?" asked Li Chi.

"You are right," said the authorities. "The serpent will have you in the end." And they gave her a sharp sword and the best serpent-hunting dog that could be found, for they were relieved not to have to search further.

WHEN THE EIGHTH DAY of the eighth month arrived, Li Chi readied herself. She took several pecks of rice balls moistened with malt sugar and put them in a sack. Then, with the sack over her left shoulder and the sword over her right, she whistled up the dog and started up the steep Yung Mountains. Soldiers trailed behind her to make certain that she did not turn back.

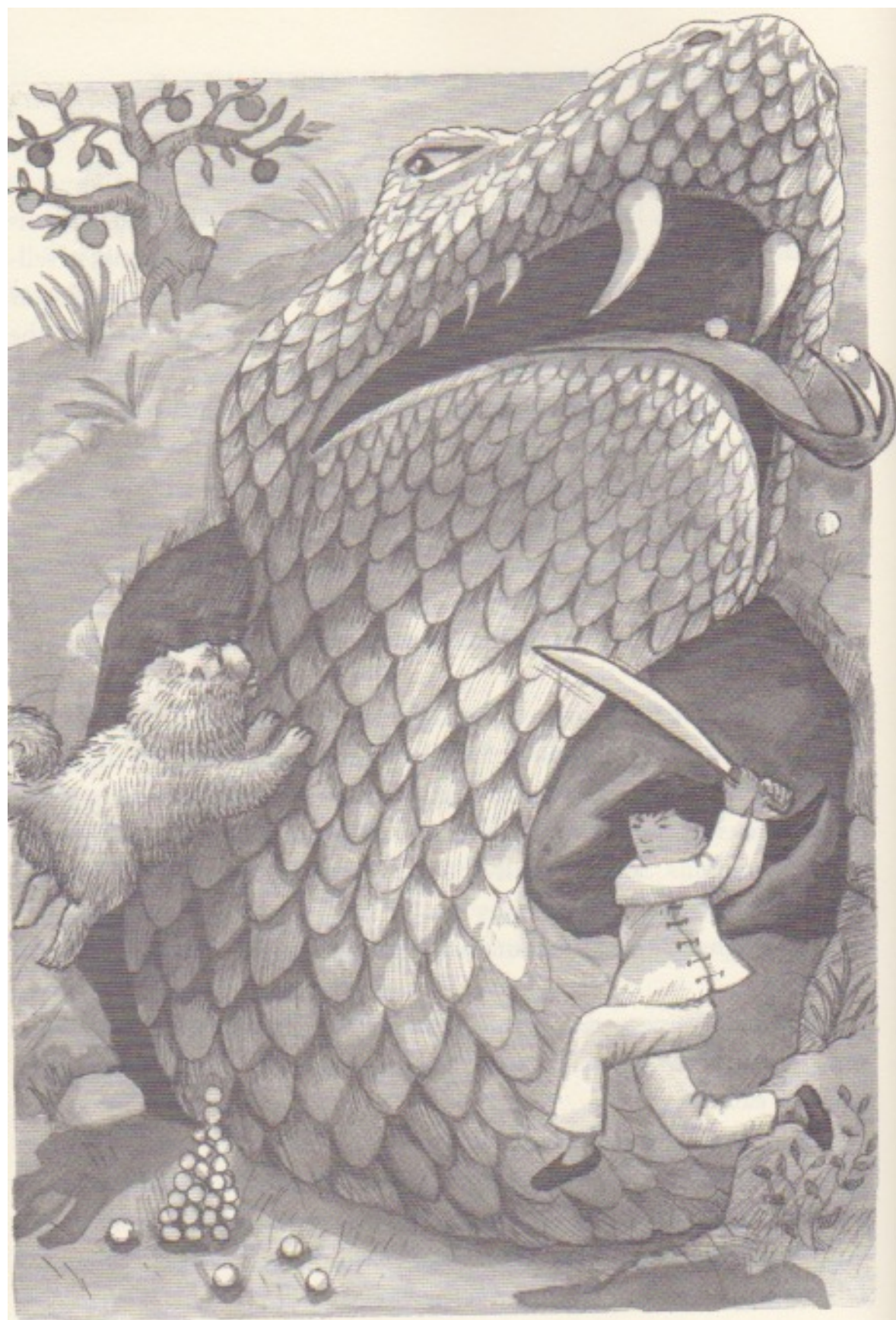
All day she climbed without stopping, and never a word she spoke to the men.

At last she came to the serpent's cave and only then turned to the captain of the troop. "Take your men back," she said. "It would not do to have them be eaten."

The men were grateful to leave.

As soon as they were out of sight, Li Chi got out the rice balls and put them at the mouth of the cave, lined up one on top of the other.

"Oh serpent!" she called. "Eat these sweet rice balls and not poor pitiful me." And she wept loudly, as if she were afraid.



The serpent, smelling both the rice balls and the succulent girl, slithered out of the cave, headfirst. And that head was as large as a barrel.

"I shall eat the rice balls, and then I shall eat you, as well," it hissed.

Opening its mouth wide to bite down on the sticky balls, the serpent momentarily obscured its own eyesight. That was the very moment Li Chi unleashed the snake-hunting dog.

The dog made no distinction between a small adder and a great serpent, and it bit hard on the back of the serpent's neck.

The serpent tried to shake off the dog but could not.

Then Li Chi came up from behind with the sword and scored deep gashes into the serpent's neck.

At this the serpent tried to back up and could not, so deep and awful were its wounds. So it tried instead to slide out farther to give itself more room to fight. But at each new length of its body, Li Chi struck with the sword and the snake-hunting dog bit with its sharp teeth.

And very soon the serpent was bloodied all over. And very soon after that, it shook all over. And then it died.

Li Chi waited until she was certain the serpent was dead, and then she went into the cave, where she found the skulls of the nine girls. She sighed, brought them out one by one by one, and put them into the sack, saying, "For your timidity you were devoured. How pitiful that is."

Then she went back down the mountain path, with the snake-hunting dog trotting behind.

It is said that the king of Yueh learned of these events from a ballad singer and made Li Chi his queen. It is further said that he appointed Li Tan as his chief magistrate of the district around the Yung Mountains. Li Chi's mother was given many honors, and her sisters were married off to noblemen. In this way, the girls brought honor and riches to the family.

And from that day to this—owing to the power and determination of one girl—the Yung Mountains have been free of monster serpents.