

THE BLACK PEARL AND THE WHITE PEARL

“Come, children, your grandfather wishes to speak to you”. Xia and her brother Ying followed their mother into Old Li’s rooms. They loved their grandfather but there was always something a little frightening about passing through his red lacquered doors.

Grandfather Li was sitting cross-legged on the raised platform where he now spent most of his daylight hours. The children, who when younger were allowed to jump onto the carpeted platform and marvel at the woven tigers and curl in Old Li’s lap, felt a new constraint. It was partly that they were older now, and partly that today there was something different about grandfather. He sat very still and seemed a little stern.

“Sit down, my children” he said, and then spent a long time carefully looking down at them and sipping his tea. Finally he nodded to himself. “Yes, you are old enough. I have decided that it is time you learned the legends.”

Xia, the eldest by less than the time it took to clean and wrap her, turned towards her twin brother. Her eyes carried a message that they were to say nothing and to sit absolutely still. This was the moment that they had heard about from as far back as they could remember and she knew that it marked a turning point, a step on the path to adulthood.

“You have only known peace, my children” began grandfather, “and so have all of us alive today and for many generations back, but it was not always so. There was a time, long long ago, when all harmony was lost. War broke out between the provinces, and even between villages and families. The love between men and women turned to bitterness, and children were lost and bewildered. Farmers destroyed the irrigation ditches and crops of their neighbours, and soon hunger added to the misery of the people.

“Some appealed to the gods of heaven for mercy and others turned to the older spirits of the earth. Yet even this became grounds for hatred and fury, as the followers of the different religions came to blows and burned each others’ temples. It was as though a fiery darkness had fallen on the whole civilised world and many gave up hope”.

“Now in those days our own family was blessed with a powerful leader. Because of his courage and great strength he was known as Warrior Li, although he was gentle by nature. You children of course have kowtowed and burned incense in front of his portrait since you were babies. But until now you have never known why.

“Warrior Li watched with great pain as the conflict raged. He was a strong man and able to intervene physically in most disputes, but now he felt helpless and saw that his strength was like dust in the wind. He could neither eat nor sleep and just lay on his bed in the heaviness of despair. Then one afternoon he finally did fall asleep and a vision came to him in a dream.

He was standing by the edge of a wide river when suddenly the waters parted and the Great Dragon, Empress of the Underworld, rose up immense above him and then her great head, dripping with weeds from the river bed, swooped down towards Li as if to consume him. But at the last moment, when Li was almost choked by the dragon's fishy breath, the head slowed and something round and black dropped from the dragon's mouth to fall at Li's feet. And in a moment the dragon was gone.

"Before Li could bend down to examine what had been dropped, he became aware of a great noise from the sky and a shadow came between him and the sun. Looking up, Li saw the mightiest of all eagles, the Lord of the Sky, dropping towards him with its giant talons outstretched as though to pierce and destroy him, but at the last moment with a fierce beating of its wings, the eagle slowed to hover above Li and something white fell from its mouth onto the ground and in a moment the eagle was gone.

"And as Li looked down he saw that the two objects, the black and the white, had fused together into a ball that was neither black nor white and as it began to spin he felt a sense of peace unlike any he had ever known, and a voice came from somewhere deep within him saying "You must descend to fetch the black pearl, and you must rise up to find the white pearl. Only by doing this can harmony be restored and all things follow their proper course".

"When he awoke, Li immediately rose and prepared a small travelling bag. Without saying goodbye, he walked deep into the forest for three days and as the sun was rising on the fourth day he came to the Cave of Darkness which was known as the gateway of the Underworld. Without pausing, he plunged into the cave and was not seen again for many months. Those who met Li after he finally emerged said that he looked as though he had undergone a terrible ordeal. His face was lined and his hair and beard had turned entirely white. Warrior Li rarely spoke about his time in the cave but people understood that in his search for the black pearl he had ventured into the darkest realms. Deep in the bowels of the earth he had witnessed death and decay and terrible loss. He was assailed by visions of hell and taunted by demons. Yet something inside Warrior Li remained unshaken and eventually the visions and the demons faded away. And it was then, in the very womb of the earth, that he discovered that it was the decay and dissolution of all things that gave birth to new life and this wisdom he concentrated into his belly in the form of the black pearl.

"When he had rested for seven days, Warrior Li set forth again. This time he walked across the Great Plain to the foot of the Kunlun Mountains. He was seen to climb beyond the last human habitation and then he disappeared from view. In the vaults of the sky, under the unblinking eye of the sun, Li wandered, and fasted and cried out to heaven. The terrible sun burnt all the moisture out of him and his skin became like old leather and his bones like the bleached branches of a broken tree. Finally at the highest point of the highest peak he resolved to sit without moving until his task was finished. And as he sat, and the light of heaven poured onto his head, he took it down through the channels of his body until it

concentrated in his belly in the form of a white pearl.. Then the black pearl and the white pearl embraced each other and swirled and intermingled and he was flooded with the same feeling of peace and harmony as he had experienced in his vision.

“And what do you think Li did when he came down the mountain, children? Do you think he went round telling everyone what he had learnt and trying to teach them to be at peace.” Xia and Ying looked at each other but they knew they were not expected to speak. “No, my children, he did absolutely nothing. He simply went back to his village and took up his life just as before, cultivating his garden, sipping tea in the evenings, sitting quietly with friends. But something strange began to happen. The village grew peaceful, neighbours forgot why they had been arguing, men and women rediscovered their passion for each other and the children played and laughed again. Soon the provinces made peace, and inside the temples, spontaneously, a new image began to be seen, of a circle made of intertwining black and white hemispheres, each containing a dot of the other colour.

“Warrior Li lived a long life and was buried in honour. He laid claim to nothing and it seemed that whatever had changed had done so of its own accord. Yet somehow the villagers knew that Warrior Li had played a part and from the day he came back from the mountains, he was renamed Wise Li.

The children rose and bowed before their grandfather and his veined hands stroked their heads. Then they walked out through the red lacquered doors, and feeling tired, they went to lie down and fell asleep in each other’s arms.

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