

THE SERPENT SLAYER



In the dark time of the year, when the days are short and a cold wind blows from the north, a serpent came to live in an old cave on the mountain of Yung Ling. This serpent was longer than the longest street in the village at the mountain's foot and wider than an ox and cart. Wherever it slithered, it left behind a trail of poisonous slime that turned the earth black and lifeless.

The serpent fed on any flesh it could find — fish, birds, deer, rabbits, and the occasional villager who happened to stray too close to its lair. Soon it had devoured all the animals on the mountain and began to make forays into the farms and fields of the villagers, stealing away their livestock. The people were terrified and called on the magistrate to act quickly, before their entire town was destroyed.

The magistrate, who was just as frightened of the serpent as the rest of the villagers were, had no idea what to do. In desperation he called for a sorcerer. That is how the sorcerer called Qifu the Greedy came to Yung Ling, eager to profit from the people's misfortune.

Qifu arranged for the magistrate to pay him an exorbitant fee, and he demanded that the villagers lodge him in the largest house in Yung Ling and supply him daily with the finest wines and all manner of delicacies to eat. After being assured that he would be well provided for, he locked himself in the house, explaining that he would need three days and three nights to meditate on the villagers' problem.

When the three days had passed, Qifu emerged from his house looking very solemn. "The serpent has come to Yung Ling as a punishment for the secret evil thoughts of the villagers. It demands sacrifice," he announced. "For three days and three nights I have

spoken with the serpent in my dreams. I have felt the fire of its breath, smelled its terrible stench. On your behalf, I made a bargain with the mighty worm. Each year, on the first day of the eighth month, you must send it a maiden from the village. In exchange for the maiden, the serpent agrees to leave you in peace. Otherwise, it will destroy you all."

The villagers were horrified at the idea of sending their daughters to feed the serpent. But they were in awe of the powerful sorcerer, and no one dared to question him, especially after the magistrate publicly congratulated Qifu for his wise plan. And so every year on the first day of the eighth month, a fourteen-year-old girl was chosen by lottery and forced to climb the barren mountain to offer herself to the serpent. The girls were eaten alive by the voracious snake, and their families were so frightened that they didn't even dare climb the mountain to retrieve their daughters' bones and give them a proper burial.

Now, this arrangement pleased Qifu very much, for he had put himself in charge of the lottery. The villagers reimbursed him handsomely for his work and allowed him to continue living in his grand house. Furthermore, he soon grew rich on bribes taken from wealthy families who didn't want their daughters sent off to the mountain to be eaten alive by the terrible serpent. Then he would seek out one of the families so poor that they had no money to feed all their children anyway, and he would persuade them to give up one of their daughters in exchange for a small fee.

For the people of Yung Ling, it was as if a black cloud had permanently settled over their village. Yet the serpent bothered them very little now, only occasionally coming down the mountain to steal an ox or pig for itself, and no one knew what else to do, so they accepted this sad condition as their fate.

The sacrifices continued for nine years, until the year that Li Chi turned fourteen. Li Chi was the daughter of a poor family, and she had grown up watching her neighbors and cousins be sent off, year after year, to feed the hungry serpent. The longer she thought about how these young, innocent girls were required to sacrifice their lives before they had even begun to live, the angrier she became. At last she decided that it was time somebody did something about this snake, and since no one else seemed willing to do it, she realized she must take action herself.

As the day of the lottery drew near, Li Chi went to her parents and bowed respectfully. "Dearest Father and Mother," she said, "I have decided to offer myself to the serpent this year. Then the sorcerer will give you money. Also, there will be one less child to feed, and you won't have to pay my dowry."

Her parents were horrified, of course, and forbade her to speak of it again. But Li Chi was determined, and she secretly went to Qifu and told him that she wished to be chosen for the sacrifice. Qifu was delighted: With every passing year, it became more and more difficult to find girls from poor families, and cajoling the parents into giving up their

Why
does
she
offer
herself?

Why
do they
offer
a way
with
this?

What do
we now
know
about
Li Chi?

What is
Li Chi's
goal?

daughters was always so unpleasant. He quickly sent a small sum of money to Li Chi's parents to seal the bargain.

He even agreed to her odd request that the town officials give her a good sword, a fearless hunting dog, a parcel of food, a clay bowl, and some fire-making flint. So this foolish child thinks she can fight the serpent, he said to himself, laughing. What harm can it do? The serpent would devour her even if she went with an army of the emperor's strongest soldiers. If she imagines herself to be the people's savior, at least she will walk up the mountain without crying or screaming.

On the first day of the eighth month, Qifu led Li Chi slowly up the mountain path toward the serpent's cave. Qifu had grown so fat from rich living that it was difficult for him to walk, and when they were only halfway up the mountain, he pointed her in the right direction and turned back to the village. Li Chi continued alone, accompanied only by the little dog the magistrate had given her.

She knew she was approaching the serpent's den by the stench that hung in the air. The ground near the cave was black and sticky, and the air was hot from the giant worm's fiery breath. The dog growled in fear and pressed himself against Li Chi's leg. But Li Chi patted his head and murmured words of encouragement, and the bray little animal did not run away. Soon they rounded a turn in the path and saw before them the serpent's cave, a black malodorous pit in the side of the mountain. Inside, the serpent lay sleeping. The entire mountain seemed to shudder with the rhythm of its snoring.

Li Chi's heart was pounding, and she was afraid she would faint from the terrible smell. Gathering her courage, she took out her clay bowl, placed it on a flat rock near the entrance to the cave, collected some branches, and built a fire around it. Then she took from her parcel of food a jar of sweet flour, a pot of honey, and a lotus-wrapped packet of rice balls.

As her little dog watched with bright, curious eyes, Li Chi sprinkled the flour into the bowl. She poured the honey over it and mixed it with a stick. Then she added the rice balls to the syrup. Soon the air seemed to brighten with the delicious odor of cooking rice and honey.

The serpent, roused from his midday dreaming by the sweet scent, slithered to the cave's entrance. First his great head emerged, with eyes shining like palace mirrors, and then his enormous body hunched itself out of the cave.

Li Chi and her dog leapt to one side as the serpent launched itself in a great curling wave, then dove directly into the boiling stew.

With a horrible worm-scream, the serpent recoiled, twisting its ghastly head in pain and rage. At that moment the fearless dog sprang and bit off one of its eyes, scratching the other with his claws. The serpent screamed again and humped itself to attack, but before it could strike, Li Chi lifted her sword and brought it down with all her strength on the

Why's
she
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The Serpent Slayer

serpent's head. Again and again she struck, until finally the head was severed from the serpent's body and rolled onto the bloody sand. With a great shudder, the enormous snake went limp.

Li Chi sank to the ground. Her face and body were covered with the disgusting blood of the serpent, and she was trembling with exhaustion and fear. Now that the snake was dead, she couldn't imagine how she had found the courage to kill it. For many hours she lay motionless on the side of the mountain, with her faithful dog beside her.

Finally, as the sun dipped behind the mountain, Li Chi gathered what little strength remained to her and forced herself to go into the serpent's den. There she gathered the bones of the nine girls who had come before her and died such terrible deaths. She tied them into her bundle and carried them back down the mountain so that their families could give them a proper burial.

But even when she showed the bones to the villagers, they did not believe her story. Only after Li Chi had led a few of the bravest men up the mountain path so that they could see the serpent's body with their own eyes did the villagers accept that it was really dead. Then there was great rejoicing in Yung Ling, and a celebration was held to honor the brave young girl who had freed them from the serpent's evil hold. Everyone attended except for Qifu the sorcerer, who had mysteriously disappeared after word of Li Chi's victory reached the village, and the magistrate, who lost his position and fell into disgrace.

The townspeople allowed Li Chi to keep her dog, of course, and from that day forward, he never left his mistress's side. Li Chi herself eventually married, had many children and more than fifty grandchildren, and lived to be a hundred years old. The people of Yung Ling have never forgotten her. To this day any visitor to Yung Ling is sure to hear the story of Li Chi the Serpent Slayer.

What did Li Chi need to
kill the serpent?
How/Why was she able to do it
when no one else could?
Why would someone tell this story?

“The Serpent Slayer”

Words you might need to know...

Page 1

flesh: meat and skin

Devour: to eat up

Magistrate: a judge; an official in a town who can enforce the laws

Desperation: the worry and anger you feel when you don't know how to deal with a bad situation

Exorbitant: much too high in price or amount.

Emerge: to come out

Solemn: serious

Sacrifice: to give up someone or something valuable

Page 2

Stench: bad smell

Maiden: girl

Barren: lifeless; empty

Voracious: very hungry

Reimbursed: paid back money

Handsomely: very attractively (if you pay someone handsomely, you pay them a lot)

Bribe: to give someone money so that they will help you do something dishonest or illegal

Seek: search

Dowry: A long time ago, when a girl married, her family would give her husband a gift of money and property. The larger a woman's dowry, the more men would want to marry her.

Cajoling: talk someone into something; urge and persuade them; beg

Page 3

Savior: a person who saves someone or something from trouble

Malodorous: having a very bad smell

Recoil: to jerk back quickly in surprise or fear

Ghastly: Dreadful, horrible

Page 4

Severed: cut off

Exhaustion: the feeling of being extremely tired

Motionless: not moving, still

Rejoice: celebrate

Disgrace: a loss of respect; shame