

THE DRAGON'S PEARL

On the banks of a great lake, where no fish swam, lived young Tchang and his mother. They worked a meager patch of scrubby land which barely gave them enough to eat. One fine day, the young man decided to go and ask the Great God of the West why so much work brought only poverty.

He kissed his mother good-by, gathered some provisions and set off for the hostile western lands. For 49 days he walked through thick forests. Then, at the end of his strength, he came to a farm where an old woman lived with her daughter. The daughter was very beautiful, but could not speak. She had been born mute. The old woman offered him food and a bed for the night; when he told her where he was going, she asked: "Could you ask the Great God of the West why my daughter can't speak? I cannot go myself, because I am too old."

Tchang agreed willingly and walked for he said. another 49 days through the mountains. When he was almost worn out, he saw a house. An old man who lived there gave him food and a place to sleep. When Tchang told him about his quest, he asked: "My legs are too weak to carry me there, but could you ask for me why my trees bear no fruit?" Tchang agreed and set off west. That evening he came to a big, rushing river, with no bridge, ford, or stepping stones. His journey seemed over and all his hard wasted.

Then the waters foamed and a dragon appeared. Tchang noticed that his wings tiny, but in his forehead was a gleaming pearl. The dragon asked why he wanted to cross, an Tchang explained. That's a good reason. Get on my back!" said the dragon. "When you get there, ask the god why I can't fly like other dragons."

At last Tchang saw the end of his journey; a palace with a thousand rooms high on a mountain. He climbed to the gates and was shown to the Great God's chamber. He was a severe, white-haired old man, wearing the robes of an emperor. "Your long and dangerous journey gives you the right to ask three questions, but if you ask more I cannot reply to any of them,"

Tchang was disappointed; if he asked the t hree questions he had promised, he could not ask his own. But he kept his word. Next morning he received his three friends' answers, and set off without his own.

When he reached the river bank, the dragon was waiting impatiently. "The Great God of the West says that you must do a good deed; then he will

give you the power to fly." The dragon took Tchang over the river, then said without hesitation: "Since you are so generous and have nothing of value, I'll give you the most precious thing I own; the pearl on my head." He took off the pearl and gave it to the boy. As Tchang thanked him, he rose up into the air.

When Tchang reached the old man's house, he told him to dig under the lemon-tree. There they found nine golden jars, from which pure water sprang. The trees were suddenly covered with blossom. The old man gave Tchang one of the magic jars. At his next stop, Tchang spoke to the beautiful young girl, and she answered him! Overcome with joy, she kissed the boy, and her mother said: "Marry my daughter, you will be a fine husband for her!" Tchang stayed with them for nine nights, then took his wife to meet his mother.

The poor old woman had cried so much that she had gone blind. He dared not tell her that he had no answer to her question; but then he remembered the pearl. When she touched it, a bright light sprang out of it and hit her eyes. She could see again!

The magic pearl also brought fish to the lake, and made the land fertile. Tchang, his mother and his lovely wife lived happily ever after and each year the generous dragon came to visit them.