

The Pearl of Great Worth

My native home is Shenchowfu, Hunan, China. Our city is built along the Ran River, a tributary of the great Yangtze. Ours is a mountainous country of most compelling beauty. We had three pagodas to protect the city and govern the "wind and water," or weather. The number-one pagoda was almost directly across from our home. Number two and number three were downriver from us. Actually, we did not have three pagodas. Our city was only big enough for two and one-half or maybe two and three-fourths pagodas. Number-three pagoda bore the brunt of this problem. Each time that the pagoda was completed, lightning would strike and break the top off. So number three always had its top missing.

As a child I used to play along the river and, of course, in it. Our city was old and completely Chinese, so there were many delightful landmarks and legends to fit them. The people of Old China did not tear their country apart and sell it as real estate, as we do in the good old USA. Instead, they cherished their ancient land of beauty and tradition, and they knew the peace that comes to those who place spiritual values above the almighty dollar.

One interesting landmark was a small island south of the city, along the river. It was not really an island. Actually a creek entering the river split apart, forming a Y-shaped entrance. Plank bridges connected the road as it continued south. On this so-called island stood a large bull fig tree, possibly the largest bull fig tree that I have ever seen. (But that was long ago, and I was prejudiced by the imagination of a child.) Any day that you walk south along the river and pass by the tree, you will observe fresh incense burning and the ashes of Temple Money—also other marks of worship. In other words, people worshiped the giant fig tree on the island. Why? I'll tell you why. When the river rose, the tree rose; and when the river dropped, the tree, likewise, dropped its level.

Anyone who has studied surveying knows that trees do not change their elevation. I mean, no matter where a big tree grows, near a river or on a mountain, its level never changes. Its top can grow taller but its trunk at the base never changes its level in one hundred years or more.

Wise old men told me the secret of our magic fig tree. There was a "Pearl of Great Worth" beneath it. A Pearl of Great Worth can make the land under which it is buried rise and fall at will.

If you do not know what a Pearl of Great Worth is, look at a Chinese drawing of a dragon. Notice the fiery ball that precedes the dragon. The dragon is chasing the fireball. The fireball is a Pearl of Great Worth.

It seems that many years ago the city of Shenchow had dragon trouble. A large dragon pursuing a fiery pearl continually swooped down over our city. The hot breath of the dragon and the fiery ball singed the local flora and house-tops. Many fires were started.

Something had to be done. The question was, what? It was then that Sho Min, a local scholar and mystic, came forth with an idea. He had his men dig a well on the small island south of town. On the island he placed a highly polished piece of white brass. To the brass mirror was attached a rope. When the Pearl of Great Worth, or fireball, saw itself mirrored on the ground, it thought it had seen one of its own kind and dived down to join its fellow pearl, the dragon in hot pursuit. As the fireball approached the mirror, Sho Min pulled the rope, and into the well dropped the pearl. Sho Min directed his men to fill in the well with earth, so as to bury the pearl. Having done this, the pearl would easily have escaped. Fiery pearls cannot easily be held by earth and rock alone. But Sho Min knew a secret. He planted a bull fig over the pearl, and, as everyone knows, a fig tree has a magic spirit.

Ever since that time the Pearl of Great Worth has been buried beneath the giant fig tree, and although it makes the tree rise and fall at will, it simply cannot escape its prison.

Of course, the dragon having no pearl to chase, left the vicinity of Shenchow and went elsewhere, probably to the Pacific Ocean, where many dragons live and often cause storms.

Even today the people sometimes see Pearls of Great Worth flashing across the sky of Hunan. The more modern newspapers of China calmly refer to these phenomena as unidentified flying objects. But you and I and the people of Shenchow know better, don't we?