

THE DRAGON'S CLAW

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Author

WORLD TRAVELER

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JULY 1927

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Volume

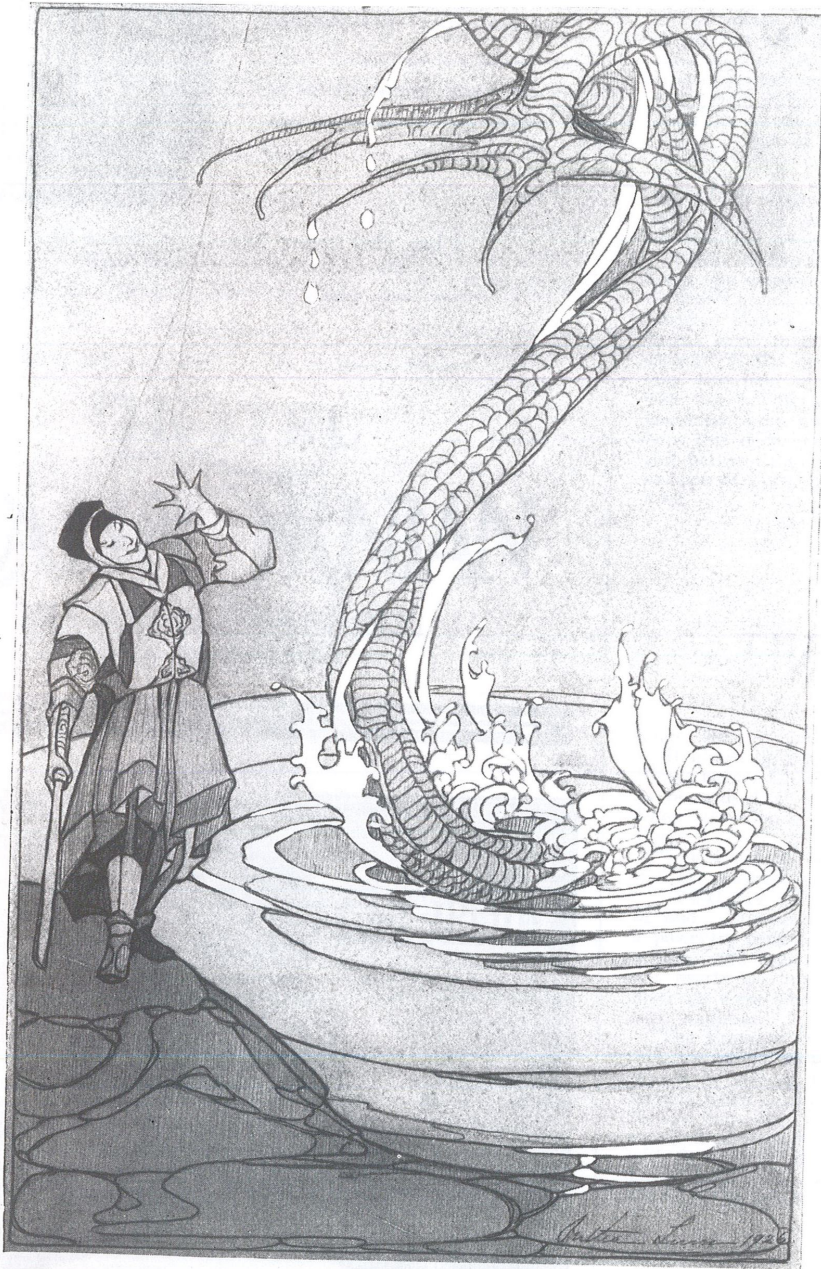
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THE DRAGON'S CLAW

By BALLIET LUM

Drawing by Bertha Lum



“GRANDFATHER, tonight it is cool without and the fire burns brightly within. I will bring your pipe and cushion and then, O my grandfather, please relate once more how you saw the meeting between Ch'ien Lung and the Dragon Hei Lung.”

Eagerly the small boy who has suggested this legend awaits the answer of the old man who sits by the fire. His hair is white and his skin is wrinkled and furrowed. Before many years, his soul will have entered on the Flight of the Dragon.

He smiles softly to himself and then bids the others of his family come. They all crowd closely beside him, the women and men, the boys and girls, his sons and daughters, his grandchildren. Sucking slowly on his pipe, he begins.

“Once, years ago, when I was a lad of perhaps eighteen, my father was gatekeeper at Hei Lung T'an, the Temple of the Black Dragon Pool. I helped him, living also in the temple.

“What a beautiful spot it was! The courtyards were glistening marble, the walls an old-rose colored tint, but that which was most lovely was the pool, the circular pool surrounded by a high balcony that had fascinating windows and tiny apertures looking out over the plains toward Peking and toward the mountains.

“The water is clear and cool, as cool as the spring breezes that play over the hills and as clear as crystal that is tinted with blue.

“By the side of the pool huge willows proudly stand, their long, graceful branches caressing the water with a reverent gesture. In the early months of the year, wisteria droops, purple-hued against the gray of the stones.

“In this pool dwells Hei Lung, the Black Dragon, who rules and who is sacred to the temple.

“One day as I was with my father at the temple, from afar came the sound of bugles and trumpets.

“Some person, a person of high birth, had been hunting and would pass my way. Again the trumpets sounded, nearer than before.

“Suddenly two couriers came dashing, running toward us on their tiny Mongolian ponies, shouting, ‘Ho! Make way for the highest of all. Bow before the mightiest of the mighties, Ch'ien Lung the Emperor, he who reigns supreme on earth.’

“They passed through the village and, pulling up quickly before my father, said, ‘Gatekeeper of the Temple of Hei Lung, prepare tea and food for the Emperor. He has desired to rest by the side of the far-famed pool.’

“My father hurried away, bidding me come, but the thought that I might glimpse the face of him who ruled the world kept me at the gate.

“The people had gathered, and as he passed, devout and worshipping, they knelt before him in the dust.

“He was robed in flowing skirts of blue and yellow, the blue of the heavens at night when the moon is shining and the yellow of the eyes of a tiger-cat.

“His coat was embroidered and he carried a fan.

“As he entered, I, too, knelt, but he paused and spoke to me. ‘Small One of Not So Many Years, follow me to the pool and while I rest you may have the honor, an honor never to be excelled. You may hold the fan that has cooled my face,’ he said.

“And so it happened that I, the gatekeeper's son, held the Emperor Ch'ien Lung's fan while he sat by the water.

“When he had refreshed himself and had eaten and drunk, he felt a desire to converse with the Black Dragon, and so he sent a messenger to the water's edge and the man knelt and humbly spoke.

“‘O gracious Hei Lung, my master and lord, the Emperor Ch'ien Lung, desires that you show yourself before him,’ he said.

“A voice answered from the depths, ‘Go. And tell Ch'ien Lung that I shall be pleased to receive him.’

“Bidding his courtiers remain behind, Ch'ien Lung walked to the side of the pool and looked into the crystal depths.

“As he watched, a small serpent appeared, a serpent no

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longer than a man's arm.

"It glided through the water until it was before Ch'ien Lung and then as he paused, it spoke, 'I am Hei Lung, the Black Dragon of this Pool.'

"The Emperor barely could control his surprise and annoyance.

"'YOU are the Black Dragon?' he said. 'I thought this Dragon was a powerful person and you are but a snake and a small one. You are not nearly so important as I and there are some who say that you are even mightier.'

"The Emperor laughed scornfully and was about to summon his followers to behold this insignificant serpent when a spray of water was thrown into the air from which emerged a dragon's claw, a claw with five points. It grew and grew, larger and larger, until it reached the top of the trees and still it grew,

more enormous and more fierce, until it was touching the sky and casting a shadow on the world, over the temple and over the hill.

"Ch'ien Lung, frightened and humbled, knelt in his gorgeous robes before the claw.

"'O mighty Hei Lung, I spoke wrongly and I ask your pardon,' he said. 'You are many, many times mightier than I, and I shall proclaim to the world your power and your strength. Black Dragon of this sacred spot, return once more to your own self.'

"And gradually the claw became smaller and smaller until it was only the tiny serpent and it glided beneath a rock and disappeared, while Ch'ien Lung continued on his way."

* * * * *

The old grandfather pauses. His story is finished, until another day.
