

SI-LING AND THE DRAGON

by Joan Hiatt Harlow

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

ONCE, in the land where mornings begin, a good emperor ruled for many years. But like all things earthly, one day he died, and his subjects mourned. His young daughter, Si-Ling, grieved with her mother at their great loss.

The court officials gathered to discuss who would become the next ruler.

“Alas, the emperor has left us only a daughter,” said one official.

“We must search the land for a new leader, someone who will rule with the soul of wisdom,” an elder statesman said.

“First, he must be tested by the great dragon who dwells in the mountain,” the wise old mandarin reminded them. “It is the custom. Already smoke is rising, and the mountain shakes. The dragon is waiting.”

“Who will dare to face the dragon?” the counselors asked themselves. “The dragon speaks with fire and can devour anyone in the flash of a flame.”

Si-Ling, the young princess, who had been standing silently by the door, approached the group. “I shall face the dragon.”

The counselors shook their heads. “You are just a child—and a girl.”

Turning away from Si-Ling, the mandarin said, “We will search our country for a courageous leader who has the soul of wisdom.”

The next morning, a proclamation requesting fearless young men to appear before the court was sent throughout the land.

But no one came.

“There is no one who dares to face the dragon,” the wise mandarin said with a sigh.

Again Si-Ling approached the gathering. “I dare.”

The officials consulted with one another and finally decided that Si-Ling should go on her quest.

The following dawn, Si-Ling went to her mother, who sat by an open window in her quarters, as she had since the emperor's death.

"Mother, the kingdom will go to another dynasty unless I journey to the mountain and meet with the great dragon."

"If you fail, Si-Ling," her mother said tearfully, "you will never return."

"I will not fail," Si-Ling promised.

Her mother's face was as sad as a broken flower. "Be careful, my daughter, and come back safely," she murmured.

At the city wall, the old mandarin was waiting. He unlocked the gate that led to the Mountain of the Dragon. Si-Ling looked out at the smoking mountain.

"The cave of the dragon is there." The mandarin pointed to a jagged cliff. "Beware, my child."

Si-Ling waved good-bye and walked toward the overgrown, rocky path that lay before her. After a long climb up the mountainside, the trail became steep and less trodden. Down in the valley she could see one small village. Finally she came to the wall of a cliff and could go no farther. On the rocky face of the mountain was a gaping hole: the cave of the dragon!

A rattling roar shattered the silence as the dragon slithered out from the cavern, its green scales shimmering in the sunlight, its eyes like burning coals.

"Who dares to walk onto my mountain?" As the dragon spoke, flames erupted from its mouth, and the very ground beneath Si-Ling's feet quivered.

Si-Ling drew herself up. "It is Si-Ling, the future empress."

The dragon laughed, and black smoke billowed into the sky, darkening the sun. "So the emperor has left a girl to rule after them? What makes you think you have the courage and wisdom to rule your people?"

"I had the courage to come to your mountain," said Si-Ling with a deep bow. "Now I will show you that I am wise enough to rule."

The dragon slapped its tail on the rocks, and scales flew like sparks. "You have demonstrated your *courage*," it conceded. "To prove your *wisdom*, I shall give you three riddles to solve. If you do so, you will become the chosen ruler. If you fail . . ." The dragon howled, and the sound echoed over the mountains.

"Tell me what I must do," said Si-Ling bravely.

The dragon was silent for several moments. Then it spoke with a voice like echoing thunder. “First, you must come before me, walking a tiger in the clouds.” The dragon turned and disappeared into the darkness of the cavern.

Si-Ling left the mountain and wandered down into the valley. Where will I find a tiger? she wondered. And how can I walk it in the clouds? Surely this is an impossible quest.

She made her way to the nearby village, hoping someone would help her.

The villagers told her of a fearsome tiger that once stalked nearby. They said that the beast was as long as a sea serpent, with pointed claws and teeth as sharp as the dragon’s fangs. Surely Si-Ling could never tame that wild creature!

Later, Si-Ling walked in the countryside near her own home. She looked longingly at the distant palace. How could she face the dragon without an answer to the riddle? Worse yet, what would happen to her if she failed in her quest?

In a field, children gathered around a beggar who worked with paper and sticks. “Go,” he said, handing each child a colorful kite. “Go, soar with the wind. See how beggars’ children can fly above the royal palace itself!”

The children darted through the windy meadow, shrieking with delight as the kites flew high above them.

Si-Ling bowed courteously to the beggar. “Before the sun rises tomorrow, I would like you to make me a kite,” she said, “a magnificent kite that I will describe to you.”

The poor man’s eyes lit up. “It is done,” he agreed.

The next morning, Si-Ling spoke to the dragon, who peered out from the darkness of the cave. “Watch and see how I walk a tiger through the clouds.” Then she went to the path that wound around the open edge of the cliff. In her arms she held a bundle of colorful, striped paper with a long string. Si-Ling grasped the string and began to run. The paper crumpled behind her, then it filled with wind, expanded, and rose into the sky. Higher and higher it flew. The string tugged in her hands, but she held tight and raced along the path.

A majestic tiger soared above her, bobbling with the wind, dipping and rising into the low-hanging clouds.

“Look above you, Great Dragon,” Si-Ling called. “See how my obedient tiger walks through the clouds for me.”

“Yes, you have indeed solved the first riddle,” said the dragon. “But there is a second one for you to solve. Put out your hands.”

Si-Ling held out her small hands.

“How tiny they are! Can they guide an empire?”

“They are the hands of a woman. They will rule with gentle strength,” Si-Ling answered. “Now, please tell me the next riddle.”

The dragon spoke, and Si-Ling could hear the sound of storm winds in its voice. “You must bring me ten thousand trees—in the palms of your hands.”

“Honorable Dragon,” Si-Ling protested, “what you ask is impossible.”

“Wisdom makes all things possible,” answered the dragon. “If you are to rule, you must solve this second riddle.” The dragon hissed, and smoke billowed around it. Again the cliffs shivered, and the mountain quaked.

“I shall find the answer,” Si-Ling declared.

She took the path down the mountain and through a forest. Tall pine trees towered above her, blocking the sky. They whispered softly in the afternoon wind, and their tangy scent refreshed her. She placed her hand on the trunk of a tree. No one can carry even a single tree, yet the dragon demands ten thousand, she thought.

Beyond the forest was a field where she spied one small tree that was laden with golden red pomegranates. Si-Ling was hungry and tired from her journey, so she plucked one of the pomegranates and sat down on the grass. The sky above her was like blue silk, and the sun was beginning to set. Si-Ling pulled off the hard rind and bit into the sweet fruit. She ate eagerly, the juice dribbling down her chin as she sucked the hundreds of luscious seeds inside.

Night began to fall, and the moon rose like a lantern. Si-Ling lay down on the grass, gathered her robe around her, and closed her eyes while the stars glistened above.

When dawn came, she awoke with joy. “The answer has come in my dreams!” She plucked a pomegranate from the nearby tree and returned to the dragon’s cave.

The sun was high in the morning sky when she reached its lair. “Dragon!” she called.

The dragon pushed its huge head out from the cave. “Where are the ten thousand trees?” it demanded. “Have you come with empty hands?”

She pulled the pomegranate from her robe. “I have brought you ten thousand trees,” she replied. “Here in the palms of my hands is a fruit with hundreds of seeds. They will become hundreds of trees with hundreds of fruits with hundreds of seeds. Ten thousand trees and more will grow from this one small fruit. Si-Ling smiled and said, “I have solved your second riddle, Great Dragon.”

“True, but a more difficult task is ahead,” the dragon warned. “You must bring me the most precious of all jewels.”

“I have many jewels,” said Si-Ling.

“You may choose from all the gems on the earth. But I will accept only the most precious.”

“I shall return to my home,” Si-Ling told the dragon. “That is where I will begin my search.”

The mandarin opened the gate as Si-Ling approached. “Have you completed the quests of the dragon?” he asked.

“I have yet one more. The dragon demands that I bring it the most precious of all jewels.”

Si-Ling returned to her room and opened her own jewel box. Rubies, emeralds, and diamonds caught the light and sparkled inside. A white jade, carved with flowers, glistened like the moon. They were all lovely, but which was the most precious?

“Here is a diamond, the oldest and most durable of stones,” she said to herself. The diamond glittered, scattering rainbows around the room.

She held a gem to her eye. “This emerald is as green as the dragon itself.”

She fumbled through the pearls and rubies, then closed the box.

While these are priceless, she thought, they are not the *most* precious. Maybe my mother can help me.

Her mother, still mourning over her husband’s death, opened her arms when Si-Ling entered the room. Embracing her daughter, she said joyfully, “Si-Ling, you have come back safely.”

“I have one more riddle to solve before I can become empress,” Si-Ling told her.

“Oh, my daughter, I cannot part with you. You are as precious to me as my own life. If you fail in your quest, my heart will break.” A tear spilled from her mother’s eye and slipped down her cheek.

Gently, Si-Ling wiped the tear with her own silk handkerchief, then folded it into her robe.

“Just one more meeting with the dragon,” she promised, “and I shall come home to stay—and rule our empire.”

The next day, Si-Ling appeared before the cave of the dragon. The creature was waiting for her, flames darting from its mouth.

“What priceless gem have you brought me?” the dragon roared.

Si-Ling bowed graciously. Then she opened her silk handkerchief.

“It is empty!” exclaimed the dragon.

“The most precious things are often visible only to the heart,” Si-Ling answered. “My handkerchief holds the most precious jewel of all—a tear from my mother’s eye.”

For a moment, the dragon was silent, and smoke rose from its ears and nostrils. Then it spoke. “Ah yes, this is indeed the most precious of all gems. You have shown courage and wisdom, but most importantly, you have shown a heart of love. Go and rule in peace, Si-Ling.”

Then the dragon, who was an honorable dragon, slithered back into its cave, and the trembling mountain was still once more.

When Si-Ling returned to the palace, her mother and the court officials welcomed her.

“Si-Ling has proved that the soul of wisdom is found in the heart of a child,” said the wise mandarin.

And this is how Si-Ling became an empress who ruled her people well—with courage, wisdom and love—in the land where mornings begin.