



# The Jade Dragon

A short story by Graham Price

**T**he Australian summer heat of 1919 curled itself around her tiny feet, making them perspire. She took the peony and chrysanthemum embroidered slippers off and placed them beside the tall cabinet. A long time ago one of her ancestors had brought the cabinet out from old China, the fine glazed artwork on its doors was of several centuries ago, but she had never asked her father the full history of it, though now she wondered where and how it came from within China. After all, China was a big country. Then there was the Jade Dragon that her mama had given to her on her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, which stood on her bedroom chest of drawers and was cool to the touch on a warm day. Her mama had said it was very special, having come from the imperial court in Peking during the latter part of the Qing dynasty, where one of her male ancestors was dismissed from his duty. Strangely, he was given a going away surety of several gold coins and the green Jade Dragon. It almost fitted into the palm of her hand now, being somewhat larger, and was said to bring great luck during times of distress or illness. Its tail curved outward and was so sharp it could cut your hand. The courtier had done well, moving to Shanghai where he set up a business selling imitation Chinese antiques and water colour paintings to foreigners. He considered that his good fortune had come from the Jade Dragon with its mystical powers. Anyhow, that was the story. She didn't know if it was true, but she did feel some comfort whenever she handled it. She felt as if all the gods of heaven and earth were present within that green figurine. During times of stress she would take it and place it on the small ancestral altar in the living room, feeling a certain regeneration of her mind and body after prayers and the burning of several joss sticks. Beside the red candles, the Jade Dragon glowed like celestial fire.



*The year of the Goat*

February in Melbourne was an uncomfortable time. It was better to go barefoot, though one had to be careful as some of the old floorboards on the upper second storey had raised splinters. The three-storey building and its neighbours had been built after the gold rush — just prior to the property crash in the 1890s and she knew that it was overdue for some renovations. She shook her loose sam-fu cotton top and padded into the bathroom to splash her face and arms. The tepid water lying in the enamel bowl helped somewhat. She would have preferred it colder, but that would mean going out into the backyard in the heat to use the old pump, which also was in need of some repair. Her long black hair swung down almost to her waist and she wondered if she should have it cut shorter. She stared at her image in the mirror and saw a smooth unblemished face, with small soft ears and dark brown eyes. Not bad, she thought, not bad at all. Outside, in Little Bourke Street, the wind raised blooms of dust in the sultry evening air. Above, a first quarter moon was rising, a promise of new things, she thought. But there had been three days of this unwelcome heat and she was sick of it — surely, with March approaching that would be the end of it? But March in Melbourne, as she knew so very well, could also be an unsettling hot and humid time.

It was getting late and Ho had not come back from the market garden in Footscray — she always worried about her younger brother; he was not the brightest, always dreaming of being an artist and seemed to lose track of time quite easily. She heard her name being called from the shop below. It was her father, probably wanting his supper. She often berated him for refusing to come up to the accommodation level, he preferring to stay downstairs while eating his food. It's not good, she had told him, to be seen eating in front of the customers. What would mama have thought of that? But he simply shook his head, patted her on the shoulder, took the steaming fried rice bowl from her and went back to his pills and potions. Mama had been gone now these past two years, so young at thirty-nine, and she Hong Sung, just seventeen this past year. At fifteen Ho came next and then there was her sister Mei who had just turned twelve.



The sign outside the three-storey building read HONG MEDICINAL EMPORIUM. Sung stepped out the front and looked at the red and gold lettering above the door. It was weathered and needed replacing. Perhaps Ho could do that over the week-end, not that they were closed much. A ladder outside would certainly disturb the customers and her father Hong Chung would not allow that. The market garden was not going all that well, even though he spent his mornings there and Ho as well all day with Mei helping out as best she could. Sung looked after the shop mornings and carried out the housework during the afternoons. The arrangement suited her, though the work was much heavier now that her mama was gone — buried in the Chinese section of the Melbourne Cemetery.

“How are you, Sung?” She turned. Li Wu from the Gilded Turtle restaurant was standing there with his hands on his hips. She thought he was handsome enough, but didn’t like his attitude.

“Fine, thank you, Wu.” They were well into the Chinese New Year of the earth sheep or goat and she thought Wu was a bit more like a ram with some of his bombastic ways. But who was she to be choosy? Most of her friends had been married off at fifteen and sixteen and here she was seventeen going on for eighteen and really no one in sight as a potential husband. Of course, there was the rich Lu Cheung from the wholesale warehouse next door, who had met with her father several times now, expressing his wish to marry Sung. She couldn’t see any future in that, for he was old — a widower with six children, some of them much older than Sung. Apart from that, he dribbled when he spoke and he didn’t smell all that wonderful. Besides, by the look of him these days Sung was sure he was an opium addict, as were many in Chinatown. His body seemed wasted away, with his cheeks so hollow and eyes protruding with dark bags underneath them. I will remain an old maid, she considered, looking after bapa until I am myself too old to marry. Ho could do that and produce many children, of which they would be her nieces and nephews, so that the family lineage would carry on. No need for her to bind herself into an unwelcome marriage simply to add more children to the planet. Though at times she thought it could be pleasant and warm with someone like Li Wu by her side, but father would not approve of such, for he had considered the Li family to be below his standard. The Li’s had come from Guang Dong, China, in recent times and she knew that her father disapproved. “We are Han,” he had said one day when the wine had taken over, “We are Han. We are from the higher position. We are not from Canton as the lower classes are. You cannot mix the two and make a fine rice pudding. It will be soggy and sink to the bottom of the pile.” She thought of that and simply waved at Wu, then went inside. He hesitated a while, then walked back to his father’s restaurant.

March and the suffering heat moved on, and autumn with its falling gold and brown leaves, came upon them. Somehow, the market garden at Footscray had vastly improved in quality, possibly due to better weather with rain at the appropriate times, and Hong Chung considered that it was bringing in more finance than his apothecary. Perhaps it was time to extend his allotments and increase his plantings? Then there were his tenancies in Collingwood and Fitzroy, all doing reasonably well. He had chosen rightly in his investments as his father had before him. Things had been somewhat scary during that war of 1914-1918, but he had managed his property portfolio well and considered that his children would eventually benefit. He’d even volunteered for the military during that war, but they had turned him down – flat feet, they reckoned.

**S**ung had now turned eighteen and Chung worried that she would never take a partner. He was also conflicted in his mind as to who would cook and clean for him if she did marry. There was, of course, Mei, who was now thirteen and blooming so graciously. A thin wisp of a girl with budding breasts and a comely figure, who had already taken the eye of certain males within the Chinese community. She will be married before she is sixteen, thought Chung. I will be powerless to prevent it. The young boys already have their sights upon her, buzzing like bush flies in search of a mate. And, he noted, Mei sometimes flirted with the more handsome boys. I will have to watch her carefully, he thought, to make sure there are no unwanted pregnancies. If her mama was here. . . but he drifted off into remembrances of his own marriage at nineteen, and Lily at sixteen. How they had celebrated! The local community had even organized a dragon line spectacle outside the old temple in Little Bourke Street, and the fireworks that night were splendid. It was a wonderful sign of prosperity. They had gone on a honeymoon to St. Kilda where they stayed at the George hotel and luxuriated in the St. Kilda Sea Baths, with long moonlight walks along the promenade, but only for the week-end because they had to be back in Chinatown for Monday’s business. Those were giddy days, he thought, if somewhat cramped in accommodation with three families above the apothecary; his parents, Lily’s parents and himself and Lily, who



was then pregnant with Sung. But when the elders passed on, the freedom of space soon became apparent. It meant that Sung and Mei each had a room of their own, and also Ho who slept on the ground level at the rear of the shop in a small, but comfortable, outhouse.

Yes, they were good days, thought Chung, sad that his parents and Lily's parents were gone, which then brought him to his own destiny. He was still reasonably young and could marry again if he wished, but he had reached a decision that it would be unfair to his memory of Lily, and he was also of the mind that his children did not need a step-mama these days. Besides, any bride coming into the house would most likely be the same age or thereabouts of Sung. No, he had his wonderful memories and was satisfied with that. As for sex, well, he'd long lost interest in that. He'd never really found it satisfactory, even with Lily. But it was his duty and he had carried it out with as much tenderness as he could manage. She had always appeared well satisfied after sex; she had this curious half smile upon her lips, which simply would not go away until at last they had fallen asleep. He had tried his best, and he knew that she never suspected he was simply doing his duty as a husband and that there was no great satisfaction in it for him. Best to be gentle and accommodate her wishes when necessary. All in all, it had been a good marriage. They had never argued. Sometimes there was a silence from either one or the other when things went wrong, but by the next day everything was back to normal. Lily had a way of smoothing over rough edges.

What he didn't know was that she had placed the Jade Dragon under his pillow at nights when the silence came between them. In the morning the silence was somehow magically broken and they cheerfully went about their business. When Sung had turned twelve, Lily noticed that the child was having trouble at school and also seemed to be distant while at home. The Jade Dragon would fix that, thought Lily. It's time. We elders don't need its powerful spirit any more – it has long smoothed our paths. I'll give it to Sung even though I feel my own life is running out of time. And that was the year in which Sung began to blossom and help out more around the house and the apothecary. Lily nodded to herself, knowing that all would be well with the child. The Jade Dragon was in good hands, and when it became necessary, she knew that Sung would pass it on to another who needed the spirits of old to illuminate their destiny.

The winds of late March swept into the Chinese community, helping little boys to fly their colourful kites and quickly drying the numerous laundry washings hanging on clothes lines at the rear of Little Bourke Street. Chinese New Year had come and gone. Among the troops who were late returning from the war in Europe and in the Middle East, was Chung's younger brother, Kang. Now a corporal, he had been wounded in Palestine during 1916 but returned to duty six weeks later. His regiment was one of Victoria's finest, the 4<sup>th</sup>, which had taken part in that famous Light Horse charge of Beersheba in October 1917. Kang had recounted it several times in letters sent home. Chung had shown the letters to Sung, who was amazed at what she read. Her uncle surely was a hero and she could hardly wait to see him again — of course it had been nearly four years since he went away. She was then just fourteen.

He came shortly after eleven o'clock at night, when the apothecary had closed. Chung was fast asleep upstairs and had not heard the knocking on the door. Sung arose, and with great anticipation in her heart, ran down the stairs toward the shadowy figure on the footpath. From the silhouette in front of the glass door it could only be her uncle Kang. Excitedly, she opened the door and looked into the eyes of the soldier who was still in uniform and with a large kit bag slung over his right shoulder.

He stared at her, standing there in her flimsy nightgown – bare feet poking out below. He looked down and laughed. "Why, it has to be Sung, my lovely Sung. My, how you have grown!" And she felt his eyes sweeping over her. She blushed, but opened the door wider and indicated for him to enter. He threw the kit bag to the floor and lifted her up by her armpits, squeezing her body to his, feeling the pressure of her breasts through his tunic.

"Oh. . . oh. . . you are so strong, uncle Kang!"

"We soldiers are always strong, my sweet little Camellia."

He put her down and stepped back. "Let me look at you. You have become a woman, and who is the lucky boy-friend that will take you away from us?"

She blushed again and gave a tiny giggle. "Oh, no one, uncle, no one. Someone has to look after bapa now that mama has gone." His face lost some of its excitement and he bit his bottom lip. "Yes, that is so sad. I never expected that. The desert warfare was horrible enough, without having received that bad news. How was she at the end?"



Sung felt tears welling up. “She was quiet. It was very peaceful. Doctor Quin gave her opium to ease the pain, and she smiled at me a minute or two before the big sleep. If you want to visit, I have the grave number and position to give to you.”

“Yes, I’d like that, Sung. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Where do I sleep?”

“Oh, you can share with Ho out the back. There are two beds there. He is not here tonight, has been staying with cousins for some birthday celebrations. I think his bed is the one on the left as you enter the door. You can take the right hand one, which also has a small set of drawers beside it. There is a paraffin lamp which you may light if you wish. Are you hungry? I have some rice, veggies, and noodles left over.”

“No, dear one. I ate supper on the ship before it docked. I’m rather tired, so if you would show me the way.”

The next day Li Wu had called upon Hong Chung at the apothecary, asking for Sung’s hand in marriage. Chung greeted him cordially, but with reservation. “So,” said Chung, “All you have to offer is perhaps your father’s restaurant when he has departed this earth, eh? What good is that? I hear it is full of rats and cockroaches.”

Li Wu protested: “That’s not true, simply put about by my father’s enemies at the Lucky Rabbit restaurant, who are Tong people.”

Chung’s eyebrows raised sharply. “Tong! The triad gangs from old China! What are you saying, boy? I thought they died out long ago. It’s not possible.”

“It is true, honourable Hong Chung. If you would come with me to meet my bapa, Li Chen, he will have proof for you. We were fire-bombed last year and several chefs have left us recently under threat from the Tong because my bapa would not pay up for protection. It is the Tong who are doing this. Your apothecary could be next.”

Chung narrowed his eyes. “My brother has just returned from the war. He will know of many others who fought with him, and who would be willing to drive the Tong out of this area. Tell your bapa to see me here tomorrow at ten, when I will have arranged a meeting with some of the returned soldiers of Chinese extraction and many other Australians.”

Sung, who had been listening to all of this, departed for the ancestral shrine in the living room, where she again placed the Jade Dragon in a small alcove. She prayed for peace and the defeating of the Tong, lighting several red candles and joss sticks in expectation. As she was leaving her kneeling position she felt a movement behind her. It was her uncle Kang.

“You are so dedicated, Sung, to the gods and spirits of heaven. But it is far better to be much closer to your friends and relatives. After all, who sees the gods and the spirits these days? No one. Comfort is to be found within your own circle.”

She bowed slightly. “Of course, dear uncle, but I must attend to my bapa now. Thank you for your warm interest. I must go.” She reached for her Jade Dragon, when Kang grasped her arm. “What is this? Where did you get it from?”

“It was given to me by my mama on my 12th birthday. It has powerful energies and because it is in my keeping it is my choosing how it is to be used. You may not touch it.”

“No, but I’m sure I can touch you.” He reached out and tore her sam-fu from her, revealing her naked breasts.

“You’ve become such a beauty, my little one. It’s time we got to know each other. I’ve waited a long time for this.”

She backed away from him, but he came closer, reaching for her pants. His eyes were wild, and the lust that she saw on his face was not that of the uncle she knew of old. He was like a mad man, grasping and pulling at her. She stumbled back onto the shrine, still holding the the Jade Dragon in her left hand. With one powerful movement she swung the figurine’s sharp tail into his neck. The wound was not deep but blood spurted out over her breasts. Kang staggered back, the look of lust on his face disappearing fast. He backed into a chair and fell to the floor, holding his neck. Sung raced out of the room and up the stairs to her room, where she wiped the blood off her breasts. It was as if her body had suddenly gone icy cold. She was shivering like she had never known before. There were specks of blood on the figurine and she dipped it into a bowl of water, hurriedly washing it clean. From below



she heard nothing. All was silent, and she wondered it perhaps she had killed her uncle. She stayed in her room for over half an hour, still not hearing anything from below. Eventually, she crept down the stairs and went into the apothecary. Should she tell her father? Would he believe her? As she entered she heard the voices of bapa and her uncle Kang.

“What have you done to yourself, Kang? Why the dressing on your neck?”

“Oh, I was testing out a new razor and cut myself. It is very sharp.”

“You should be more careful, I suppose you were not using a mirror?”

“What? Ah, no. . . no, I was not.”

In the afternoon, forty-three returned soldiers appeared at the doors of the Lucky Rabbit restaurant. Most were still in uniform, and everyone was carrying some kind of weapon: a spade, a club, a pitch fork, an iron rod, a hatchet, a shovel. At the front of this array of men stood the corporal Hong Kang, who was addressing the gathering. Sung’s brother, Ho, with Li Wu and several of their friends, were standing in the background listening intently. Each was holding a wooden club. It was hot and humid and many in the crowd were perspiring and eager to get on with their business. More soldiers came from side alleys to join in and several of them had rifles.

“You all know what these pigs have done,” said Kang, “taking money for protection and beating up or setting fire to those who would not pay up. You know what we are here for. We are here for freedom, which is what we fought for in the war. This building is the headquarters of the Tong, the secret triad society criminals of old China, who are attempting to corrupt and destroy the freedom that we fought for. You all know what you have to do, so let’s get on with it.”

By sunset, the Lucky Rabbit restaurant and its several outhouses had ceased to exist. The mob had simply ransacked the buildings, smashing anything they could see in front of them, until eventually all the buildings were set on fire. Six persons of Chinese extraction who were in the rear of the restaurant were attacked and killed. Three others were badly wounded, but that, said Hong Chung to Sung the next day, was the beginning of the end for the Tong triad in Melbourne.

Sung smiled to herself and cradled the Jade Dragon to her chest. Little did they know where their power had come from. Now the Gilded Turtle restaurant and many others were free from further extortion and she thought she would marry Li Wu, after all. As for her uncle Kang, he was never seen again. The civil authorities could only surmise that he was one of the seven bodies found in the burnt-out wreckage of the Lucky Rabbit restaurant. •

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