

The Tale of Three Dragons

Our story takes place in the distant mysterious realm of Mah Jong.

This concealed kingdom lies many miles to the East, set among towering icy mountains. To reach it an intrepid explorer would first need to find the steep stony track, known only to very few, and follow it upwards and upwards into the icy depths of the mountains where the air is thin and winds from East, North, South and West rage continuously, trying it seems to plunge the unwary traveller into the depths below.

If he is lucky and survives their onslaught, he will reach the Pass, an opening between the two towering peaks known as The Gates of Heaven. It is a narrow passage that the sun never reaches, and the icy walls crowd ever closer and closer as if to crush the traveller as he attempts to pass through. Even the bravest would hope and pray that somewhere an Angel was hovering to protect and see them to safety. Yet once through the traveller will emerge to find open skies and bright sun as the track starts its downward journey towards a lush green valley.

The traveller could not fail to notice set high up on the opposite side, with a commanding view of everything around a magnificent Palace. Its towers and pinnacles glittering in the razzle dazzle of sun and on the very tallest tower a Windvane in the shape of a Dragonfly spinning and dancing to the tune of the prevailing wind. This is the home of the ruler of Mah Jong His Imperial Majesty, The Great Kong.

Below the Imperial Palace lies a fertile valley divided by a gently flowing river with water of such purity that it is excellent for fishing. The fields on either side are well cared for, full of lush green grass and fruit laden trees. Slender Bamboo, swaying in the gentle breezes, lines the field edges, while everywhere chrysanthemums bloom profusely. The cows graze contentedly and the haystacks shimmer in the summer sun. The twittering of countless sparrows adds music to the scene as they fly to and fro seeking sanctuary beneath the thatched roofs of the homes of the village folk.

The village itself is not large, just twenty or so well kept stone cottages. The village leader is a tall, broad shouldered man, bronzed by his work in the fields, with an open honest face. He is called Robert and lives with his wife Greta and baby son, also known as Robert, in the first of the cottages. He is always known to the villagers as Big Robert, and his baby son, is Little Bobby. Greta is well loved by all. The villagers always recall how in the dreadful Autumn and Winter of 22 when the harvest failed and many fell on hard times she went about the village sharing with them the vegetables and fruit she had grown in her garden and stored away.

At the opposite end of the village and set a little apart from the rest is a small rather tumbledown cottage. It is here that you would see the small hunched figure of a very elderly lady just sitting in her doorway knitting, or at other times smoking her pipe, with an equally elderly cat curled up on her lap. This is Gertie who seemed to have lived in this same small cottage for longer than anyone could remember. No-one knew her real age or indeed where she had come from but the village elders remember they were told many tales about her by their grandparents. And no-one, NO-ONE had ever discovered the truth of the story passed down from family to family about the mystery of Gertie's Garter.

One day some time ago the twin brothers, Ping Ho and Ping Hong were dared by their friends to ask her. The brothers, although far from heavenly, were proud and fearless, so accepted the challenge and, watched from afar by their hidden friends, made their way up her garden path to where she was sitting. It was Ping Ho, the older by just 5 minutes, who posed the question. Gertie, after a long pause, pursed her lips, narrowed her eyes, fixed the boys with an icy stare and walked away muttering strange incantations. The brothers were certain she chanted “, Pung, pung, crazy chow” or some such, but since that made no sense to anyone they thought the boys had just made it all up.

So it is easy to imagine on this first sighting from above that the realm of Mah Jong with its fertile valley, and happy village of interesting characters was a land of four fold plenty, well governed by its ruler the Great Kong. However the first indication that all is not quite as it seems, is when the weary traveller reaches the end of the track from the high mountains and instead of immediately entering this idyllic place is met by a solid wall, some 15 feet high, that surrounds the whole valley. What is even stranger is that it seems impossible to pass through. To the casual glance there does seem to be any sort of gate or door that could be opened to admit the visitor. There seems not so much as a crack that even a mouse could squeeze through. But a few steps to the right the skilful observer would see a small doorway but so cunningly built as to be virtually invisible.

The story of this wall is terrifying. It was in the Spring of the year of the Snake, that everything changed. Mah Jong had indeed been an idyllic place to live until the arrival, like a bombshell, of three ferocious dragons. The Red Dragon, the White Dragon and, fiercest of all, the Green Dragon. They made their lair on the highest plateau from where their terrifying roars echoed around the mountains and down to the villagers below. Breathing fearsome tongues of fire, threatening to burn down the entire village, and raze the valley, they demanded offerings of food and wine. The villagers, quite terrified, immediately gathered all they had and Ping Ho and Ping Hung, brave fearless boy that they were, volunteered to carry the offerings up to the three dragons. Reaching the path just below the plateau the boys left the gifts on a high rock and backed away while the three dragons, roared and belched smoke and flames above them.

On their return Big Robert called a village meeting and it was agreed that the least they could do was to build a wall to protect the village as best they could. For it soon became plain that each dragon had a following of wriggling snakes, little devils and other evil creatures to do their bidding. Once the wall was complete the Great Kong ordered that no-one for their own safety should venture too near and certainly never to go out to the other side. Only the brothers would be allowed to pass beyond when they took the monthly gifts to their fearsome neighbours.

All this was bad enough but far worse was to come. The Great Kong had two lovely daughters, Their Royal Highnesses the Princess Plum Blossom and Princess Apple Blossom. It was their custom each day to enjoy walk by the river for a short while. They would gently greet the villagers they met and sometimes even play with the children. One day however they changed their walk and for some reason came much closer to the wall than usual. After a few steps they noticed that a small opening had appeared where the bricks had slipped out of position, breaking the wall. (They did not know that it had taken all night for one of the Green Dragon's little devils to undermine that section.)

Now the two princesses were only small so had never been able to see what lay on the other side so they could not resist peeping through. To their delight they saw countless beautiful orchids of every hue. Seeing no danger, and forgetting their father's strict orders the two girls skipped through the wall to gather some of the beautiful flowers. In an instant they were surrounded by hissing, wriggling snakes and seized by the dragons' evil helpers. Their screams stifled, they were carried, struggling, up to the rocky lair.

The first the Great Kong knew of his daughters' fate was when he received an ultimatum from the Red, the White and the Green Dragon. If the Great Kong wished to see his daughters again then he must gather together all the riches of his kingdom, all its buried treasure, every ruby, all the precious jade, and every one of the unique wonders held in his vaults. Even the villagers' small pieces of jewellery were to be included. He must gather together every bit of food, all the stored grain, the fruit the vegetables, the apples, and bring it all to the Dragons' lair. Failure to do this, would mean the Princess Plum Blossom and the Princess Apple Blossom would be cast into the fiery furnace of the Dragons' Lair.

The Great Kong was in despair. He must save his daughters but to meet the dragons' demands would ruin his village, drive his people to starvation and death. It would be the end of everything. He pleaded with the dragons for mercy. He offered himself in exchange for his daughters but the dragons were adamant. Their demands must be met, but in line with the ancient dragon tradition of their ancestral homeland of Middle Earth and in honour of their illustrious ancestor, The Great Smaug himself, they offered one small concession. If the Great Kong could solve three riddles set by the dragons then the Princesses would be released and the dragons would leave the mountains. So sure were the dragons of their own superiority in intelligence they were confident none of the puny villagers, not even the Great Kong himself, were clever enough to provide the answers to their devious puzzles. The Great Kong hastily agreed.

The Red Dragon roared

I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I have no body but come alive with wind. WHAT AM I?

The White Dragon roared

You measure my life in hours and I serve you by expiring. I'm thin and slow when I'm Fat. The wind is my enemy. WHAT AM I?

The Green Dragon roared

I have cities but no houses. I have mountains but no trees. I have water but no fish. WHAT AM I?

Then, in unison they roared together.

You have but three days. If you cannot answer then the reckoning will be taken.

With that they retired to their evil lair, smugly pleased with their plan to rob the Kong of all he valued most.

The Great Kong hurried back to his Palace. Although he thought hard about the riddles, with the words going round and round in his brain, he could not find the answers. He knew he must send for the cleverest men in the Valley. He summoned the Court Vizier.

“Go at once to the Academy and fetch The Professors,” he said. “They will surely know the answers.”

The Professors left the Academy and hurried to the Palace. The great Kong asked them to stand before him and after telling them all that had happened asked the Court Vizier to recount the three riddles.

I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I have no body but come alive with wind. What am I?

You measure my life in hours and I serve you by expiring. I'm thin and slow when I'm fat. The Wind is my enemy. What am I?

I have cities but no houses. I have mountains but no trees. I have water but no fish. What am I?

The professors frowned and sighed. “You have one day to find the answers,” the Great Kong said.

So the Professors returned to the Academy and they wrestled all that day and throughout the night with the puzzles. They argued and argued until they finally realised they were just going round in circles and could not find the answers.

So the next day they returned to the palace and admitted their failure to the Great Kong. The Great Kong clasped his hand to his head and replied,

“Then Send to me the Three Great Scholars from your academy. I have heard they are very clever indeed. We must see what they can do.”

So the Professors hurried back to the Academy and set the Three Great Scholars the task of solving the riddles. At first the Three Great Scholars were confident they would succeed where their professors had failed but the more they considered the riddles the more baffled they became. They batted ideas back and forth between the three of them in a never ending eternal triangle but answers came there none. There would be no honours for them.

In despair on the third and final day The Great Kong called on the Three Philosophers in their Ivory Tower and recounted the riddles. It was all in vain. After hours of poring over their books, consulting their charts, and studying the runes, until they were all at 1s and 9s with each other, the three philosophers had to admit they were baffled.

With little time left The Great Kong summoned the Court Vizier to let off one of the cannons that stood on the Palace ramparts. When the great boom of the cannon thundered around the valley, the villagers stopped all they were doing and with worried faces hurried to the palace. They entered the Great Hall and bowed before the Great Kong sitting on his throne of Imperial Jade. On either side sat the Great Kong’s favourite dogs, two golden haired Chows resting their silky heads on their paws. The Great Kong recounted once again the dreadful tale of the abduction of his daughters, the demands of the three dragons for the treasures of the realm and all its store of food. He explained how the wisest men in the Kingdom could not solve the three riddles and so the only way to save his daughters was to accede to the Dragons’ demands.

“But”, said the Great Kong, “You, the villagers, must agree for I fear acceding to the Dragons’ demands will have a devastating effect on your lives. The days ahead will be cold windy ones, and we will not know our heads from our tails. We will no longer be able live here. We will be would be forced to wander the world begging for our daily bread. There will no longer be blessings hovering over our doors. Our valley and the great mountains around us will just become the home of winds and dragons. It is a dirty business but I will not make such a decision without your agreement.”

Big Robert spoke for all when he expressed his sympathy for the Great Kong’s agony but he asked, “What are these riddles Your Imperial Majesty? Speak them to us for perhaps someone here may have the answers.”

So the Great Kong recited the three riddles once more.

I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I have no body but come alive with wind. What am I?

You measure my life in hours and I serve you by expiring. I’m thin and slow when I’m fat. The Wind is my enemy. What am I?

I have cities but no houses. I have mountains but no trees. I have water but no fish. What am I?

The villagers looked at each other with puzzled faces and for awhile no-one spoke. Then Ping Ho and Ping Hong pushed to the front and, bowing low to the Great Kong, Ping Hong said

“Send us to the Dragons Your Majesty. My brother and I are sure we know the answers. We will rescue your daughters and send those dragons packing. They are not really so fearsome you know. They are but a trio of Windy dragons”

In spite of the gravity of the occasion the Great Kong could not help but smile at the twins’ bravado. Yet it was surely worth a try.

“We must be quick for the time is almost up. The sun is setting fast and the shadows are lengthening and darkness will soon fall. Fetch my best red Lantern and give it to these brave boys to help light their way and let us all give them a special hand and cheer them on their way.”

So to the cheers and applause of the villagers Ping Hong and Ping Ho, taking the red lantern hurried out of the valley to begin the climb to the Dragons’ Lair. As they came near the three Dragons appeared and stared down at them. In spite of their courage the twins could not help but feel very exposed and drew closer together.

“So the Great Kong has sent you pair jokers,” sneered the White Dragon. “I very much doubt you can solve our puzzles. You realize the consequences if you make a false declaration. If you fail we may even double our demands”

The three dragons laughed their dragon laugh, which is quite awful to hear, and swished their dragons’ tails.

“Ask your riddles and you will find out.” replied Ping Ho stepping forward.

“Fetch the Princesses” The Red Dragon roared, “so they may see how we will humiliate these silly boys.”

From the back of the dark Lair the two Princesses were brought forward and made to stand close to the edge of the precipice. They smiled weakly at the twins who raised their clenched fists in a salute.

“I will begin,” snarled the Red Dragon. “*I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I have no body but come alive with wind. WHAT AM I?*”

Ping Ho stepped forward. Looking up into that huge snarling face he said,

“Oh! That is so easy. I knew the answer at once. It is an ECHO”

The Red Dragon started, and smoke and flames gushed from his mouth but he could not deny the truth of the answer. He slunk away to the back of the lair.

The White Dragon pushed past him and glared at the boys.

“That was just beginners’ luck,” he hissed. And to the indignation of his red companion continued, “We always start with an easy one. Mine is quite another matter. *You measure my life in hours and I serve you by expiring. I’m thin and slow when I’m fat. The wind is my enemy. WHAT AM I?*”

He glared down at the twins, daring them to answer.

“You flatter yourself,” responded Ping Hung, “I solved that in a trice. It is a Candle.”

The White Dragon snorted with rage and frustration. He scraped the ground with his great claws and lashed his great tail but he could not deny that the boy had given the right answer.

Then the Green Dragon stepped forward. He shook his great head and fixed the boys with his terrible stare.

“You must answer all three correctly to save the Princesses. So you think the last two riddles were easy do you, you arrogant puppies. Well now it is my turn. I am the most terrible of all the Dragons and my riddle was given to me by our great ancestor Smaug.

I have cities but no houses. I have mountains but no trees. I have water but no fish. WHAT AM I?”

The two boys looked at each other and were silent. The Dragons’ drew up to their full height sensing that victory would theirs. They took hold of the two Princesses and held them over the very edge of the abyss.

“Well, “ they roared, “What is your answer? Be quick or the Princesses are gone.”.

The two boys looked at each other again, nodded, smiled, and with one voice shouted

“ A MAP”.

There was the most dreadful roar from all three dragons as smoke and flames belched from their gaping jaws and they cursed,

“POW! POW! POW”

The impossible had happened. The answers were correct. All three answers were correct. Unbelievable. It had never happened before. But could they pretend at least one declaration was false. Could they declare that the deal was broken, and they had won the hand after all. But although they were cruel and evil without any compassion they were still bound by the ancient dragon code forged in the long lost past of their ancestral homeland. They had to admit they had been defeated.

Meanwhile down in the valley the Great Kong and all the villagers were waiting by the wall, staring anxiously up into the heart of the mountains. They heard the great roaring and saw the flames and smoke pouring down so feared the very worst. Time dragged by slowly but then they saw a small red light weaving its way down the mountain track. Slowly it advanced until rounding the last bend Ping Ho and Ping Hong came into view with the Princess Plum Blossom and Princess Apple Blossom in a wonderful grand sequence. Oh the joy! Oh the cheers that echoed around valley! The Great Kong’s favourite chows went quite crazy and raced about while he embraced his daughters with tears pouring down his face. He was shaking the hands of Ping Ho and Ping Hong when with a great roar and bursts of flame and smoke the three dragons appeared above their heads. They flew three times around the assembled crowd, (anti- clockwise of course.) and then with a last burst of flame flew up and away over the mountains into the darkness beyond.

Everyone made their way back to the Great Hall of the Palace where the Great Kong ordered a huge feast to be prepared, the traditional Goulash. All the tables were covered with soft green cloths and bowls of sweet smelling petals and herbs were placed in the middle. The Great Kong and the two Princesses sat at the head and all the villagers, led by Big Robert carrying little Bobby, took their places. Greta gave each Princess a beautiful bouquet of flowers picked from her own garden. The Great Kong ordered that after the feast Big Robert should organise all his special hands to demolish the wall brick by brick. However he decreed one part of it should be left to stand alone as a reminder of the amazing events that had just passed

When everyone had eaten and drunk their fill the Great Kong rose and declared that he recognised everyone had been tested to their limit. But each and everyone of them had proved their loyalty to him and their Kingdom. Proving they were all “One for Mah Jong”

“ But now,” he announced “ I must bestow all the honours of our kingdom on Ping Ho and Ping Hong. but,” and here he smiled at the twins, “ perhaps there is something else, something special you would like to have. Ask for anything. It shall be given you.”

“There is just one thing we would both like above all else,” Ping Hong said. “We want to know the story of Gertie’s Garter and the great mystery that surrounds it.”

The villagers gasped and all eyes looked about the throng for Gertie. The old lady shuffled forward, leaning on her stick, and for once she was not pursing her lips, or fixing everyone with a stony stare but she was smiling. Yes Smiling.

“Fetch me a chair, “ she croaked, “ and I will tell you. Gather close everyone I do not want to shout.”

The villagers hastened forward and formed a close circle about her chair. Even the Great Kong himself left his throne of Imperial jade and with his two chows came close to the old crone.

“Well you see.” she whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “It all started one day in spring when.....

A tale for another time.