Eyes of the Dragon

By Margaret Leaf

Adapted for reader’s theater from *Eyes of the Dragon*, Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1987

GENRE: Legend
CULTURE: China, ancient
THEME: Pride vs. humility
GRADE LEVEL: 3-7
ROLES: 7+
TIME: 6 min.

ROLES: Narrator 1, Narrator 2, Narrator 3, Narrator 4, Magistrate, Elder, Ch’en Jung, (Elders/Villagers)

NOTE: This is an original story based on Chinese legend and history.

NARRATOR 1: Long ago in China, there was a little village. The villagers there were afraid of wild beasts and wild men. So the head of the village, the magistrate, persuaded them to build a wall all around the village.

NARRATOR 4: The wall was strong and high, with a gate that could be locked. Now everyone felt safe, and they all slept soundly at night.

NARRATOR 2: The magistrate was especially proud of the wall. Every evening, he walked all around the village to admire it.

MAGISTRATE: How clever I was to think of the wall, and how beautiful it is.

NARRATOR 3: But one evening he noticed that the wall had no decoration.

MAGISTRATE: Perhaps it is a little plain.
NARRATOR 1: The next morning, he called a meeting of the village elders.

MAGISTRATE: Our wall is very strong and protects us well. However, I have decided we should have it decorated.

ELDER: We should have a portrait of the Dragon King painted on our wall. He controls the thunder and lightning, and could bring us rain for our fields if he were pleased.

MAGISTRATE: Exactly what I have been thinking.

ELDER: Ch’en Jung, the most famous dragon painter, lives in the city. I will gladly go and ask him to come.

NARRATOR 4: It was settled, and the elder set out that same day.

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NARRATOR 2: Three days later, two figures were spied approaching the village. The magistrate hurried to the gate.

NARRATOR 3: Ch’en Jung was riding a little horse with a big box tied on behind the saddle. The magistrate bowed to Ch’en Jung and then led him into the village.

CH’EN: Before I start, I want your promise that I may paint your dragon in my own manner and that you will accept it. You must also pay me forty silver coins.

MAGISTRATE: We agree to your conditions.

NARRATOR 1: Ch’en Jung then opened his box of paint and brushes, and started to work. He began on the left side of the gate, carefully drawing the dragon’s tail.
NARRATOR 4: He painted steadily, for days and days. Everyone in the village watched whenever they could. And the magistrate, of course, watched all day, looking very important.

NARRATOR 2: Little by little, the long body of the dragon appeared on the wall.

NARRATOR 3: Finally, the painter reached the right side of the gate, and the dragon’s head met his tail.

ELDER: The painting is magnificent!

CH’EN: Yes, the Heavenly King will be pleased. I have finished. I will now accept your payment.

MAGISTRATE: Forty silver coins is no small amount, Ch’en Jung. We must first look at your dragon, to make certain he is as he should be.

NARRATOR 1: Ch’en Jung consented. Starting at the tail, he led the magistrate around the wall, with the other villagers following.

NARRATOR 4: The dragon’s body was covered with fiery red scales like those of a fish. The magistrate counted carefully to be sure there were just eighty-one scales in each row, because eighty-one is nine times nine, and nine is a lucky number.

CH’EN: You will notice the feet on each of the four legs. They have the paws of a tiger and the claws of a hawk. Of course, your dragon has four claws on each foot. Only the Emperor’s dragon may have five.

NARRATOR 2: As they walked around the wall, the dragon’s body was bigger and bigger. The scales along his back looked like a row of mountains.

NARRATOR 3: Finally, they arrived at the great head shaped like a camel’s, with heavy, shaggy eyebrows, the horns of a deer, the ears of an ox, sharp tusks in the mouth, and a pointed beard with long streaming bristles. Under his chin, a large pearl glistened with all the colors of the rainbow.
NARRATOR 1: The dragon was so grand and beautiful that no one made a sound.

CH’EN: Now, the money, please.

MAGISTRATE: But, wait! You have not finished! The dragon has no eyes!

CH’EN: It would be dangerous to paint eyes on this dragon. And you promised to accept him as I painted him.

ELDER: (to the magistrate) I think we should listen to the painter. Surely he knows best.

MAGISTRATE: (to Ch’en Jung) Our dragon must have eyes! The silver coins shall not leave my hand until you have painted them!

CH’EN: Very well, if you insist—even though you are breaking your word. The consequences will be of your own making.

NARRATOR 4: The painter quickly filled in the empty spaces beneath the shaggy eyebrows. Then he took the bag of coins from the magistrate, packed his paints and brushes onto his horse, and left.

NARRATOR 2: As the villagers stood and admired the dragon,

ELDER: Look!

NARRATOR 2: the newly painted eyes began to glow more and more brightly, as though there were fire within. A wisp of smoke curled up from the wide-open nostrils, and the scales began to glisten.

NARRATOR 3: A great black cloud climbed the sky, and the wind began to howl.

NARRATOR 1: Suddenly,

ELDER: He moved!
NARRATOR 1: the dragon shook himself, and little cracks appeared in the wall.

NARRATOR 4: The black cloud moved overhead, lightning zigzagged across the sky, and there was a loud clap of thunder.

NARRATOR 2: The dragon shook himself again. Then, with a scream, it rose into the air and disappeared into the black cloud.

NARRATOR 3: The wall crumbled and fell in pieces.

CH’EN: (in the distance) Hurry, my horse, hurry! Those fools, those fools!