



The Greatest Archer

The greatest of all archers was Yi, for the targets of his deadly arrows were not made of straw, nor were they mere creatures of flesh and blood. The enemies Yi fought and conquered were powerful spirits who rebelled against the order of Nature, in the time of the saintly Emperor Yao. Under his rule men lived in peace, but these malevolent spirits took to themselves the forces of the elements and threatened to destroy all that lived.

It all began harmlessly enough, when ten children tired of playing each one by himself and decided that they would all go out to play together. For these were the children of the Supreme Ruler, born of his wife Hsi-ho. Each of these boys was a mighty star, a sun, and they lived all together above the Eastern Ocean. There a giant tree, the Fu-sang tree, rose thousands of feet from the surface of the water. A thousand men with arms outstretched could not span its trunk. It was in the branches of this tree that the ten suns took their rest. Each dawn it was from there that one of them would set out, as his turn came according to a fixed rota, on his journey across the heavens bringing light and warmth to earth. As

they kept so obediently to their rota, men had never seen more than one sun at a time, and indeed they did not know that more than one sun existed, for all ten of them looked exactly alike.

No one knows quite why these ten sun-children suddenly took it into their heads to set out one morning all together across the sky. But the Supreme Ruler learned of this happening with alarm. He knew that his children brought great blessings to the earth—one at a time; but with ten in the sky together, surely only catastrophe could follow? His fears were confirmed when the Emperor Yao, in place of his customary prayers of thanksgiving, began to speak of blinding light, unbearable heat, of parched cattle and burning crops. All-powerful though he was on earth, even the Emperor Yao himself was helpless in the face of this new peril in the heavens. Assistance must be sent to him, some hero must descend who would save the world from the fate which threatened. At once the Supreme Ruler thought of his noblest warrior, Yi, the Heavenly Archer, had the skill, the courage, and the goodness which the world would need. Yi it was, therefore, who on a night of full moon came down to earth and announced his presence at the gate of the simple dwelling from which Yao ruled his people.

Yao rose to welcome his visitor, and praised the great red bow he carried in his hand. He led him out into the street, where he pointed to the mountain peak which rose in the distance above the roofs of the capital. On its summit grew a solitary pine-tree. 'Let us see what use you make of this mighty bow you carry,' the Emperor commanded.

Slowly, deliberately, the great archer selected from the quiver at his side an arrow, long and straight and tipped

with purest, hardest bronze. This he fitted to the string, which he drew back with one smooth gliding of his right arm. Legs apart, body upright, he faced the distant peak. The pine gleamed in the moonlight, a thread of silver. Yi took his aim. There was a sound like the plucking of a giant zither as he released the string of his bow—and the pine on the hill-top clove in two before the impact of the speeding shaft.

The Emperor smiled. 'Take your rest now,' he ordered. 'Tomorrow there is much for you to do.'

Yi spent the night on a bed of fragrant grasses. When the Emperor himself came to wake him the sky was not yet light. Yi knew that Yao had not slept; he must have spent the night in prayer for his people's deliverance. Still there was no sign of weariness in the compassionate lines of his face. 'Come now,' said the Emperor calmly. 'I wish you to witness the dawn.'

Unattended by any suite the two walked out through the streets of the sleeping capital. The watchman at the gate, wary at first of strangers at such an hour, threw himself flat on the ground when he recognized his Emperor. Yao raised him to his feet, and bade him light their way with his torch to the top of the gate-tower. No sooner had they reached this vantage-point than the first washes of silver on the eastern horizon began to seep into the deep blue of the night sky. The dawn was breaking. For a few moments all was just as in any other dawn. But soon it became apparent that a greater light than the light of the morning was waiting below the horizon. The silver washes were now a flood, and the silver itself was of heightened brilliance. In a second, it seemed, the sky gleamed gold in the east. At the centre of the gold, the disc of the sun lifted itself clear of the land-line. Then, at

the precise moment when the sun stood clear in the sky, over the horizon flashed the rims of two suns, each of equal brilliance with the first. Now about this group of suns the sky flamed angrily for a while, until yet more suns rose, more than the watchers were able to make out in the liquid, boiling, white glare that filled the heavens.

And it was hot. Yi was astonished, when he put his hand on the stone rampart, to find that it burned and blistered, already in the early dawn. He opened his mouth to speak, but the parched air dried his mouth at once so that only a croaking sound came out. The Emperor Yao understood, and nodded and signed that they were to go down. But before they left the roof of the tower, he pointed to a field of millet below, close against the city wall. The ears had not yet formed on the stalks, and the stalks should have been green. But they were brown, withered. As they watched, from a corner of the field came wisps of smoke, and in a few moments the field was aflame. The flames themselves lasted only for a minute. Then all that was left was a layer of white ash, beneath which the ground was already beginning to crack.

Quickly the two men descended from the roof. As they left the tower they felt the soles of their feet burn against the ground. Yi turned back to the tower, where in the shade he found a pail which still contained some water. With this they soaked their sandals, and thus prepared they were able to make their way, though with pain, back to the Emperor's dwelling.

There Yao told his visitor of messengers who had come scores and hundreds of miles from all corners of the empire. They had brought stories of whole villages dying of thirst when the wells had dried; of men perishing in the fields from exhaustion in the heat; of forests ablaze, dense

clouds of steam over boiling lakes, and even, from the south, of valleys overwhelmed with lava from the melting mountain-sides.

News such as this was terrible to hear; but worse was to come. While the Emperor was still speaking there was a commotion outside the room and a man burst in. Another messenger—like the others, pale with fear beneath the stains of travel. His tale was the worst yet. Out of the unnatural happenings had come an unnatural creature, a monster with the giant body of a man and the head of an animal. It had one vicious weapon which none could resist: a great tooth, fully six feet in length, as sharp at the cutting edge as the edge of a chisel. This monster was creating havoc in the south, tearing down the people's flimsy huts before it tore at their bodies.

Hardly had the man finished his report when another came. 'Your Majesty, give ear to the sufferings of your people,' he cried. 'In the east a great bird flies, a peacock with mighty wings whose beating raises terrible raging winds. Trees are torn out by the roots, houses swept away like swirling autumn leaves, and the people cower, wretched and afraid, in caves and holes in the ground.'

And still a third, again exhausted by his journey through the fierce heat from the ten suns. 'The wide Tung-t'ing Lake,' reported this man, 'is terrorized by a monster, a sea-serpent whose passage through the water brings storm and flood. No one knows how many fishermen of the lake have disappeared down its cavernous throat nor how many whole villages have been swamped in its wake.'

Yi looked at the Emperor's expression and knew that he was suffering not for himself alone but for all his people. 'There is only one way,' the great archer said. 'First, the false suns must perish, or all life is at an end.'

Then Yi set to work. Carefully he chose ten arrows, which he placed in his quiver. He took up his bow and tested it, then strode out into the blinding light, into the choking heat. The Emperor followed him, and when they reached the market-place they found the people of the capital already assembled there, waiting patiently for the saviour of whom the watchman of the city gate had told them.

Yi closed his eyes for some seconds against the searing sunlight. Then he placed an arrow against the bowstring and drew to the full, his mighty shoulders forced back and the muscles leaping on his arms. Squinting upwards he loosed his shaft. There was a breathless pause; then, across the white pool of light of the sky leapt tongues of red. Now above the heads of the watchers floated tiny specks—the feathers of a bird; another instant, and something huge and black plummeted to the ground at the feet of the great archer. It was a monstrous crow, and it was transfixed by an arrow. This, then, was the spirit of the sun, a great crow just as the old magicians had always said. 'The golden crow'—that was what they had called the sun; but now the crow was dead, and black, pierced by the arrow of Yi.

Still the sky blazed and the earth burned. Nine suns remained, nine suns which at any moment might transform themselves into giant crows and take wing over the horizon, beyond the reach of his swiftest arrow. With unhurried movements, but losing not a second, he loaded, drew and released, loaded, drew and released. Two more explosions in the sky, soundless at that great distance; two more flurries of feathers, two more black bodies crashing to the ground. On and on laboured Yi, muscles bulging, shoulders aching from the prodigious strain of

his bow. The air was filled with the singing of his bow-string. Now four suns remained, and could be counted clearly against a sky less molten in its brilliance. The burning had almost ceased. The faces of the watchers were no longer seared blind with pain, but were lit with half-unbelieving hope.

The eyes of the Emperor Yao fell on Yi's quiver. Four arrows still remained—and Yi was conscious of nothing but the need to shoot the suns from the sky. But one sun must be spared, thought Yao, if the world were not to be plunged into eternal night and winter. Quietly he withdrew one arrow from the archer's quiver, and placed it in his sleeve. The seventh sun fell from the sky, the eighth, the ninth—and Yi's hand reached to his quiver and found it empty. Sweating, weary, he looked at the Emperor Yao, then up to the clear blue sky, to the one welcome sun which has given its blessings to the world through all the ages since that moment. Yi looked at the sun, and then his ears were filled with the shouts of the crowd of watchers, and he smiled and laid down his bow.

Already, at the edges of the sky, white clouds were forming, clouds of happy omen which would soon bring rain to the parching earth. Yi, after his heroic labours, would dearly have loved to rest. It was pleasant here, tempting, under the now kindly sky. All the world was his friend, for he had saved all the world from destruction, and the saintly Emperor Yao was even now giving orders for the preparation of a feast for the hero. But Yi well knew that his labours were not yet ended. In the south and in the east still roamed the monsters, Chiseltooth, the Windbird, the serpent of the Tung-t'ing Lake. Pausing only to replenish his quiver and gird on his sword, Yi

called for the messenger from the south and started in pursuit of Chiseltooth.

It was a long, hard journey. Across the plains strode the great archer and his companion, over the passes, through the swamps and forests. Boatmen ferried them across broad rivers, guides led them to the fords of a hundred streams, until at last they reached the mountains of the south where Chiseltooth had his home. Here they began to find the signs of the monster's presence. On the ground lay bodies from which the heads had been severed by that razor-sharp fang; huts near by had been ripped from their foundations. Even as he looked, Yi heard behind him an angry roar. He turned—and there stood his quarry, the one huge tooth gleaming yellow against its chest.

In a flash Yi had raised his bow, an arrow fitted to the string. But before he could draw back the string Chiseltooth had disappeared into a cave behind him. Warily Yi approached the cave. The monster re-emerged from its entrance, and this time little of him could be seen behind a massive shield. Yi stood his ground and waited, his bow still raised, arrow poised on the string. Chiseltooth lumbered nearer, very slowly, nearer, until it seemed the two must collide. Then, with a swift movement, he lowered his shield and the great fang reared up to strike. In that second Yi loosed the arrow he had held poised for so long. It flew straight to its mark at the root of the monster's tooth. At such a range the impact was like that of a thunderbolt. The tooth snapped off, and the monster, making not a sound, fell to the earth, dead.

The sun was sinking in the west, but Yi was not yet ready to take his rest. In the cool of evening he turned his back on the sunset and set out in search of the Windbird.

After much journeying he came to a wide river, and down this he sailed, ever eastward. At last he met with the signs he had been looking for, signs of destruction by raging winds, crops flattened, trees and huts and boats all tossed about like straws. And then he heard a far-distant rustling, and peering up made out, far off in the sky, a speck of black—the Windbird was coming. He paddled in to the bank, sprang ashore and hid himself in a thicket which still stood and would be in the path of the approaching bird. As he waited he reasoned with himself, 'One arrow may not kill a bird of such a size. And if it is merely wounded, and flies off to its nest to wait till the wound is healed—it may do great harm thereafter, before I find it again. The answer is to capture it now, and make an end of it now.'

To do this he used a method which hunters of birds have followed ever since. To his straightest arrow he attached a long, strong cord, the other end of which he tied to his bow. Then he fitted arrow to bow-string and waited in the shelter of the thicket. Very soon the rustling he had heard had grown into a roaring, and the roaring into a deafening thunder, and now the sky was darkened and the giant peacock was overhead. The great archer shot, the arrow struck home, and the bird leapt upward in its flight. Still it flew on, and Yi braced his legs against the earth to withstand the storm from its beating pinions, while all about him tall trees shook and toppled before the howling wind. The tug as the line tightened on the bow sent a searing pain across his shoulders, but still he held on, until at last the Windbird's effort failed and it dropped to earth, captive at the end of Yi's cord. Yi ran to it, and as it lay thrashing its wings against the ground he drew his sword and cut the peacock's head from its body.

The Windbird was dead, and Chiseltooth was dead. But on the Tung-ling Lake the sea-serpent still reigned in terror. Once more Yi took up his bow and set out on his way. After many days he reached the shore of the lake, which is less a lake than an inland sea. There he took a small fishing-boat, and launched out alone on the face of the waters. Out into the lake he sailed, and hard and long he searched until he saw across the water before him coil after coil of the scaly monster rising and falling in awful succession. Closer he sailed, while the waters of the lake grew ever more turbulent. He took up his red bow. His first arrow pierced the neck of the serpent, but the only effect was that the waves rose higher than before. Again and again he shot, until the serpent's body bristled with arrows and it writhed in anguish. Yi's little craft tossed and plunged on billows high as hills, and now it was impossible for him to shoot again. He drew his sword as his boat swept up a towering crest of water. Then, as it trembled on the brink of a sea-green precipice, he leapt, down, down, on to the broad and slippery back of the monster.

Then followed the most desperate contest Yi had known. Time and again his sword plunged to the hilt in the serpent's body; time and again he kicked his own body out of the way of the menacing fangs which reared above him. The bubbling, surging water of the lake was no longer green, but stained dark red with the sea-serpent's blood. The end, at last, came suddenly: one final lunge of the hero's sword struck deep into the monster's vitals. The wicked, scaly body went limp, then quivered, and sank at last beneath the crimson waves.

Wearily Yi allowed himself to float to the lake-shore. His task was ended. Nine false suns had perished. Three

monsters such as the world had never before seen had been destroyed. The saintly Emperor Yao could rule again a world of men at peace. Yi, the great archer, could take his rest.