

Yeh Shen

The Chinese Cinderella

During the time of the Ch'in and Han dynasties, a cave chief named Wu married two wives and each gave birth to baby girls. Before long, Chief Wu and one wife died leaving one baby, Yeh-Shen, to be reared by her stepmother. The stepmother didn't like Yeh-Shen for she was more beautiful and kinder than her own daughter, so she treated her poorly. Yeh-Shen was given the worst jobs and the only friend she had was a beautiful fish with big golden eyes.

Each day the fish came out of the water onto the bank to be fed by Yeh-Shen. Now Yen-Shen had little food for herself, but she was willing to share with the fish. Her stepmother, hearing about the fish, disguised herself as Yen-Shen and enticed the fish from the water. She stabbed it with a dagger, and cooked the fish for dinner. Yeh-Shen was distraught when she learned of the fish's death. As she sat crying she heard a voice and looked up to see a wise old man wearing the coarsest of clothes and with hair hanging down over his shoulders. He told her that the bones of the fish were filled with a powerful spirit, and that when she was in serious need she was to kneel before the bones and tell them of her heart's desires. She was warned not to waste their gifts.

Yeh-Shen retrieved the bones from the trash heap and hid them in a safe place.

Time passed and the spring festival was nearing. This was a time when the young people gathered in the village to meet one another and to find husbands and wives. Yen-Shen longed to go to the festival, but her stepmother wouldn't allow it because she feared that someone would pick Yeh-Shen rather than her own daughter. The stepmother and the daughter left for the festival leaving Yeh-Shen behind. Yeh-Shen, wanting desperately to go, asked the bones for clothes to wear to the festival. Suddenly she was wearing a beautiful gown of azure blue with a cloak of kingfisher feathers draped around her shoulders. On her feet were beautiful slippers. They were woven of golden threads in a pattern of a scaled fish and the soles were made of solid gold. When she walked she felt lighter than air. She was warned not to lose the

slippers.

Yeh-Shen arrived at the festival and soon all were looking her way. The daughter and step-mother moved closer to her for they seemed to recognize this beautiful person. Seeing that she would be found out, Yeh-Shen dashed out of the village leaving behind one of the golden slippers. When she arrived home she was dressed again in her rags. She spoke again to the bones, but they were now silent. Saddened she put the one golden slipper in her bedstraw.

After a time a merchant found the lost slipper, and seeing the value in the golden slipper sold it to a merchant who gave it to the king of the island kingdom of T'o Han. Now the king wanted to find the owner of this tiny beautiful slipper. He sent his people to search the kingdom, but no ones foot would fit in the tiny golden slipper. He had the slipper placed on display in a pavilion on the side of the road where the slipper had been found with an announcement that the shoe was to be returned to the owner. The king's men waited out of site. All the women came to try on the shoe.

One dark night Yeh-Shen slipped quietly across the pavilion, took the tiny golden slipper and turned to leave, but the king's men rushed out and arrested her. She was taken to the king who was furious for he couldn't believe that any one in rags could possibly own a golden slipper. As he looked closer at her face, he was struck by her beauty, and he noticed she had the tiniest feet. The king and his men returned home with her where she produced the other slipper. As she slipped on the two slippers her rags turned into the beautiful gown and cloak she had worn to the festival. The king realized that she was the one for him. They married and lived happily ever after. However, the stepmother and daughter were never allowed to visit Yeh-Shen and were forced to continue to live in their cave until the day they were crushed to death in a shower of flying tones.