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THE DEER AND THE CAULDRON —the adventures of a Chinese trickster

史 *Two chapters from a novel by Louis Cha**
translated by John Minford

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the Song dynasty there lived a poet called Liu Yong 柳永; and in his time there was a popular saying—'Wherever there is a well of water, you will always find people who can chant the poems of Liu Yong.' Today we can say likewise: wherever there are Chinese people, wherever there is a Chinatown, you will always find the novels of Louis Cha.¹

Walk into a bookshop in Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore or stop at a bookstall in Peking, Shanghai, Canton or any Chinese city and make a note of what the really engrossed browsers are reading—the chances are it will be one of Louis Cha's novels. Stroll through the stacks of a Chinese studies library in a Western university and see which shelves show most signs of being used, which books are most higgledy-piggledy, thumb-marked, missing, in a word, read: it will be the Martial Arts fiction² section, and within that section the shelves devoted to Louis Cha's work. It is not just the young and the middle-brow readers who are addicted. I have encountered over the years the most amazing variety of Cha-aficionados: elderly professors of Chinese archaeology and linguistics, the leading critic and collector of contemporary Chinese art, Johnson Chang 張頌仁 ("I graduated from the university of Louis Cha's novels"), modernist poets writing in Chinese, who for the most part do not deign to read plain old-fashioned Chinese prose, but find Cha's work addictive.³

How can this phenomenon be explained? Stephen Soong offers three possible reasons for Cha's popularity. The first is the way his novels recreate

* I use this name throughout for the writer Zha Liangyong 查良鏞, whose most widely-known Chinese pen-name, Jin Yong 金庸, is formed by splitting the last character in his name into its component parts. Louis Cha has always been his name for use in a non-Chinese context, and it therefore seems appropriate to use it when introducing his work to a Western reader.

¹ These are the words with which the Hong Kong critic Lin Yiliang 林以亮 (better known as Song Qi 宋淇, or Stephen C. Soong) begins an interview with Louis Cha conducted on 22 August 1969. See *Zhuzi baijia kan Jin Yong: 3 諸子百家看 金庸*: 三 (Taipei, 1987), pp.33–54. Stephen Soong's various articles on Cha are among the best-written pieces to be found in the many books produced by the prolific 'jinxue' 金學 industry. Soong is from a prominent Wuxing (Zhejiang) family (his grandfather was a prosperous silk merchant, and his father, T. F. Soong, or Song Chunfang 宋春舫, having passed the last *xiucai* examination when he was thirteen, was educated at St John's and in Geneva and Paris, and became professor of drama at Peking University; he was somewhat unkindly immortalised in /OVER

/Somerset Maugham's sketch "A student of the drama"). Soong, who is perhaps best known as a scholar of *The story of the stone*, brings to his critiques of Cha's work not only a trained critical eye and a wide reading of literature, Chinese and Western, but also an extensive experience of the Hong Kong film industry and literary scene.

² This is an woefully inadequate English term, but to date I have been unable to find anything better as an equivalent for *wuxia xiaoshuo* 武俠小說. I can't say I prefer the alternatives offered: Stories about Swordsmen (C. T. Hsia), Chivalric Fiction (James Liu), Stories of Chivalry (Liu Ts'un-yan), Novels of Martial Chivalry, or Novels of Fantasy and Martial Arts Adventure (Chard). The problem with 'Martial Arts' is that it leaves untranslated the *xia*, and instead substitutes *shu* 術. In certain important senses (especially for *Deer*) 'picaresque romance' is close, but for the majority of novels produced within the genre it is misleading.

³ I will not attempt to deal here with the countless adaptations of Cha's works as plays, films and TV series. This merits a study of its own.

⁴ Soong, Interview, p.48. Nor, one might add, has Cha's prose been corrupted by the barbarism of so much post-1949 Mainland prose. I can think of no finer example of modern Chinese prose than the short postscript to *Liancheng jue*, dated March 1977, in which Cha tells the story of his old family servant's life, which inspired the writing of the novel. It is simple, unaffectedly elegant, understated and moving.

⁵ Liu Ts'un-yan, ed., *Chinese middlebrow fiction* (Hong Kong, 1984), Introduction, p.32.

⁶ C. T. Hsia, *The classic Chinese novel* (New York, 1968), p.30. Hsia refers to Cha as the "reigning practitioner of the genre," and comments (n.49): "Many readers of cultivated taste compare him seriously to Alexandre Dumas, *père*."

⁷ "Louis Cha has created a mythological world for modern man, developed from the escapist fantasies of the Martial Arts fiction of the '30s and '40s; in his novels he has constructed a finely crafted literary pagoda on the foundations of the popular novel." Zhang Weimin 張未民, "Xia yu Zhongguo wenhuade minjian jingshen" 俠與中國文化的民間精神, *Wenyi zhengming*, 1988.4, pp.48-55. Wang Zheng 王政, in *People's*

the quintessential Chinese spirit or "world," a mixture of elements taken from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The second is his recurring concern for traditional Chinese ethical values—loyalty, piety, humanity, honour. The third is his fluent prose style. This, says Soong, preserves the essential beauty of Chinese prose, it is timelessly Chinese, it has not been corroded by the un-Chinese Western sentence structures that have so overwhelmed many Chinese writers of this century.⁴

The popularity of the Martial Arts genre earlier in this century has been explained by Liu Ts'un-yan 柳存仁 in the following terms: "Such stories aroused an extraordinary enthusiasm among readers at this time, when the poor and down-trodden all over China were struggling for survival amidst the debris of civil war."⁵ C. T. Hsia 夏志清 has his own explanation, referring this time to the period after the Second World War: "Probably, in their impotence to relieve the suffering of their compatriots under Communist rule, these readers have turned to a simpler world of fantasy where the champions of justice have never failed to punish the oppressors."⁶

But this more recent popularity has not been restricted to the Chinese diaspora. During the past decade, since Cha's books have become available in Mainland China, they have been enormously popular there as well. While some critics welcome the arrival of a new genre, others bemoan it as "escapist."⁷ There is here some of the old Chinese attitude that the reading of novels of any kind is something to be mildly ashamed of, and the taking of pleasure in it a symptom of some individual or social malaise. Do we in fact need any of these sociological explanations? Is not the pleasure the novels give itself a sufficient *raison d'être*? The West is scarcely any better off. "Is it fear of fictional artificiality or a puritanical distrust of pure pleasure which has led to an increasing relegation to the status of 'popular' and, by implication, 'inferior' literature of a genre which has myth and legend as its ancestors?"⁸ "The modern world's dismissal of adventure as an entertaining but minor experience is unprecedented. Few cultures have been so willing to tempt the gods. That we should do so says a great deal about the arrogance of our cultural values."⁹

There has been, it is true, throughout the centuries an abiding Chinese fascination with the figure of the *xia*, which was so well described by James Liu 劉若愚 in his classic work *The Chinese Knight-Errant*: "Historically, knight-errantry is a manifestation of the spirit of revolt and nonconformity in traditional Chinese society, sometimes lying underground and sometimes erupting to the surface. Its ideals are admirable, though these have not always been realized in practice, and may have even provided excuses for mere lawlessness."¹⁰ Or, in the rather more succinct words of Li Bo 李白:

It is better to be a knight-errant than a scholar;
What is the good of teaching the Classics till your hair grows white?¹¹

This general fascination with the genre of Martial Arts fiction is not hard to understand. Try to imagine the fascination that *might* be exercised among English readers by a (hitherto non-existent) genre combining the content of

good old-fashioned cloak-and-dagger historical romance (well told—a rattling good yarn, preferably set in seventeenth-century France, or during the Jacobite uprising, or in the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, or the late British Empire), with a certain amount of material from the Occult (the Knights Templar, the Cathar Treasure, Nostradamus, etc.), and a lot of detailed (indeed fanciful) description of some national sport that combined the excitement of duelling and boxing with the underlying ‘national philosophy’ of cricket.

In the case of Louis Cha’s novels, quite apart from the nature of the genre itself, their popularity has, I believe, a lot to do with the author’s personality and his own perception of himself, not as a pretentious writer of serious literature, but as a storyteller in the Chinese tradition, whose aim is simply to please, to entertain, by creating first-rate stories and vividly imagined characters and situations. “Since childhood I have enjoyed reading Martial Arts fiction. I write such fiction first and foremost for my own pleasure, and then for the pleasure of my readers (there is also, of course, the financial reward ...).”¹² In a century when Chinese writers and critics have been subjected to the demands of nation-building, political propaganda, self-conscious Westernisation and modernisation/modernism, obsessed with ‘China’s Destiny’ in the modern world, Cha has remained true to an older craft that imposes its own very demanding discipline—because the listener or reader quickly loses interest in a badly told story. To this task as a popular entertainer Cha brings an intensely lively imagination, the ability to create complex and intriguing plots, and formidable skills as a prose stylist. And all of this is informed by an enduring and serious interest in Chinese history and philosophy.¹³

/Daily, 1989.3.4, p.5, argues that this literature “offers the over-burdened and under-rewarded intelligentsia a form of escape and consolation, which will no longer be necessary when they have genuinely fulfilling lives ...”. Since the late ‘80s, some Mainland intellectuals have also begun to treat Cha’s work and the whole Martial Arts genre seriously. See, for example, Chen Pingyuan’s 陳平原 *Qianggu wenrenxiake meng* 千古文人俠客夢 (Peking, 1992), and the articles in *Dushu* by He Ping 何平. There is now even an academic association in Mainland China devoted to the study of “Martial Arts Literature,” funded from Louis Cha’s royalties. It is headed by the well-known scholar of *The story of the stone*, Feng Qiyong 馮其庸. In Hong Kong and Taiwan Martial Arts fiction has been treated as “literature worthy of serious consideration” for at least two decades. In December 1987 an International Symposium was held on the subject at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (see the brief report in *Ming Pao*

Monthly, 1988.2, pp.60–4). For the baptism of *wuxiaxiaoshuo* into the realm of post-modern discourse, see the interesting exchange between William Tay (Zheng Shusen 鄭樹森) and Chen Pingyuan 陳平原 in *Ersbiyi shiji*, 1991.4 & 5.

⁸ Margery Fisher, *The bright face of danger* (London, 1986), p.15. Fisher is writing of the Western novel of adventure. The chapter is significantly entitled “Escape or Enlargement.”

⁹ Paul Zweig, *The adventurer* (London, 1974), Preface, p.vii.

¹⁰ James Liu, *The Chinese knight-errant* (London, 1967), p.193. In his book Liu traces the historical pedigree of the knight-errant figure in Chinese culture, as well as the literary pedigree of Martial Arts fiction. C. T. Hsia prefers to avoid the word knight-errant: “In its broadest sense, the term *bsia* applies to all men and women of a chivalrous temper, but in fiction it additionally denotes a person of

/considerable prowess, usually a swordsman with or without magical skill. He could be a boss of the underworld, a good outlaw of the Robin Hood type, a bodyguard or officer in the service of a conscientious prefect, or a lone wanderer roaming over the country to rescue the innocent from oppression.” *Classic Chinese Novel*, p.30. John Lust, in *Popular movements and secret societies in China, 1840–1950*, ed. Jean Chesneaux (Stanford, 1972), p.170, adds that it is “a gentry affair implying not only impulsive chivalry and a spirit of self-sacrifice, but also an outdoor atmosphere of military sports.” Over a hundred years earlier, the Marquis D’Hervey-Saint-Denys translated Li Bo’s *xiake* 俠客 as “Le Brave,” adding that he combined something of the “bravo,” the “condottiere,” the “chevalier errant” and the “chef des bandits.” It is, he concludes, “un des types curieux de la Chine ancienne.” *Poésies de l’époque des Tang* (Paris, 1862), p.5.

¹¹ Liu, *Chinese knight-errant*, p.65. Cf Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, pt. I, ch.2: “De la caballeria andante se puede decir lo mesmo que del amor se dice: que todas las cosas iguala.” It may be said of knight-errantry what is said of love: that it makes all things equal.]

¹² Lin Yiliang, in his article “The Martial Arts world of Louis Cha,” quotes at some length from Cha’s own “Apologia of a storyteller.” See *Zhubi baijia kan Jin Yong*: 3, pp.14–15.

¹³ Cha has written a study of “The life and times of Genghis Khan,” and a critical biography of the late-Ming general Yuan Chonghuan 袁崇煥 (“Yuan Chonghuan pingzhuan” 袁崇煥評傳, published as an appendix to *The sword stained by royal blood*). In an interesting article in *Dushu* 91.4, pp.46–55, He Ping traces the development of Cha’s thought from the creation of heroic personalities in the earlier novels to a more Buddhist, transcendental world of enlightenment in the later work. Cha has indeed had a long interest in Buddhism, and has for many years been a practising Buddhist. Among his non-fiction works in Chinese he includes an essay “On the concept of materiality in Buddhist thinking,” and a version of the *Dharmapāda*. See also his brief comments on D. C. Lau’s modern version of the *Heart Sūtra*, in *Ming Pao Monthly*, 1980.3, p.25. Cha has also written a study of the Quanzhen Sect of Taoism. /OVER

/Occasionally he spells out the underlying seriousness of his concerns, whether philosophical, political or literary, without ever flaunting them. See for example his note towards the end of the first chapter of *Deer*: “*Deer* was written between October 1969 and September 1972. Although when I began writing the high tide of the literary purges of the Cultural Revolution was over, a sense of desolation lingered on in my mind, so that when I came to create the outline of my new work, I turned quite naturally to the theme of a literary inquisition.”

* This is based in part on information provided by Louis Cha, in part on Weng Lingwen’s 翁靈文 “Louis Cha’s life and works,” in *Zhuji baijia kan jin Yong* : 3, pp.1–10.

¹⁴ These two both feature in *Deer*: the first appears in chapter 1, in the section entitled “The Beggar in the Snow”; Louis Cha used lines from the poetry of Zha Shenxing as chapter headings for the novel.

¹⁵ Put to death by the Yongzheng Emperor. See Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing period* (Washington, D.C., 1943–44), p.22.

¹⁶ When the University of Hong Kong awarded him the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences, *honoris causa*, in 1986, the university orator, in his citation, quoted the famous lines of Horace (Odes, III, iii):

Iustum et tenacem propositi virum
Non civium ardor prava iubentium,
Non vultus instantis tyranni
Mente quatit solida.

[The man of justice, firm of purpose,
Is not shaken in his rocklike soul
By the misguided enthusiasm of fellow-
citizens
Or the visage of an impending tyrant.]

¹⁷ Cha, “Apologia of a storyteller.” See n.12.

*Louis Cha : a Brief Biography**

Louis Cha (Zha Liangyong) was born on 6 February 1924 in Haining, into a family that had achieved distinction in the Qing dynasty. His grandfather was a local magistrate, and his forbears included the scholar Zha Jizuo 查繼佐 (Yihuang 伊璜, 1601-1677), the poet Zha Shenxing 查慎行 (1650-1727),¹⁴ and the official Zha Siting 查嗣庭 (1664-1727).¹⁵ He was educated at Hangzhou High School, Zhengzhi University (where he studied foreign languages) and Soochow University Graduate School of Law (where he studied international law in preparation for a career as a diplomat). In 1948 he was recruited in Shanghai by the *Ta Kung Pao* and shortly thereafter sent to Hong Kong, where his work for the newspaper mostly involved translating foreign despatches. In the 1950s he began writing film reviews under the pen-name Lin Huan 林歡, and in 1955 started writing his first Martial Arts novel, *Book and Sword, Gratitude and Revenge*, for serialisation in the *Xinwanbao* 新晚報 (New Evening News—the evening newspaper linked to the *Ta Kung Pao*). He embarked on a career in the Hong Kong film industry, writing scripts and directing, and founded his own newspaper, the now widely read *Ming Pao* 明報 (1959), for which he has continued to write editorials over many years. Between 1955 and 1972 he wrote fourteen novels, some short, some of enormous length, and during the following decade (1970–1980) he revised the original serialised versions extensively, and republished them in thirty-six uniform volumes. In the meantime he had launched the *Ming Pao Monthly* (1966), *Ming Pao Weekly* (1968) and other newspapers in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. He came to play an important role in Hong Kong public life, and in 1985 accepted a position on the Drafting Committee of the Basic Law—a position which he resigned in protest at the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 4 June, 1989.¹⁶

Martial Arts Fiction, Romance and Picaresque

I am just a story-teller, like the professional story-tellers of the Song dynasty or of more recent times. I just want to bring my stories to life, I want them to be gripping, exciting . . .

I think the most important thing in fiction is the creation of character, the telling of a story, the description of a setting, an atmosphere. Of course a novel inevitably embodies certain of the author’s ideas: but an author should not allow his characters, his story, his setting to take second place to his ideas or to some preconceived programme.

I believe Martial Arts fiction is like Peking Opera, or ballad-singing, or dancing or music: its main function is to give pleasure; it does not necessarily have a great deal of ‘artistic value’. If we want to make a more high-flown claim for it, then its aim is to express feeling, to create character, to describe life and the lives of individuals. There is no need to drag in politics, ideology, religion, science, ethics. Beauty is the goal of art, to move the emotions, not to propagate some truth, or to argue some cause.¹⁷

Louis Cha began reading Martial Arts fiction when he was eight or nine years old, beginning with the works of Xiang Kairan 向愷然 (1890-1957),¹⁸ then Bai Yu 白羽 (1899-1966),¹⁹ and Li Shanji 李善基 (1902-1961).²⁰ He also read widely in traditional Chinese fiction, and influences from the major novels, especially *Water Margin*, *The Journey to the West* and *The Story of the Stone*, can be seen in much of his work.

¹⁸ Pen-name: Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, 平江不肖生—"The Worthless Scholar from Pingjiang." See James Liu, *Chinese knight-errant*, pp.135-6, for an introduction to Xiang's *Xiayi yingxiong zhuàn 俠義英雄傳*. See also Liu Ts'un-yan, *Chinese middlebrow fiction*, Introduction, p.32: "Hsiang ... was able to blend indigenous mystery, long-revered Taoist traditions and improbable happenings from real life into a homogeneous whole ..." Liang Shouzhong 梁守中 has an interesting chapter on Xiang in his *Wuxia xiaoshuo huagujin 武俠小說話古今* (Taipei, 1990), pp.175-8, as does Zhang Gansheng 張麟生 in his highly informative *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao 民國通俗小說論稿* (Chongqing, 1991), pp.111-24. Other general works on *wuxia xiaoshuo* include Wang Hailin 王海林, *Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shilue 中國武俠小說史略* (Taiyuan, 1987), and Luo Liqun 羅立群, *Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi 中國武俠小說史* (Liaoning, 1990).

¹⁹ See Zhang Gansheng, *Minguo tongsu xiaoshuo lungao*, pp.259-73.

²⁰ Pen-name: Huanzhulou Zhu 還珠樓主—"Master of the Pavilion of the Returned Pearl." See *ibid.*, pp.244-58. Zhang points out that both Xiang Kairan and Li Shanji died as the result of the pressures brought to bear on them during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late '50s. See also Liu, *Chinese knight-errant*, pp.130-4, for an extract from Li's *Shushan jianxia 蜀山劍俠* [Chivalrous Swordsmen of the Szechwan Mountains]. There is a good English version now available of his shorter novel *Liubu xiayin 柳湖俠隱*, translated by Robert Chard as *Blades from the willows* (London, 1991).

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Figure 1

Contents page of the first issue of Ming Pao Monthly, January 1966

²¹ Among the authors that he has translated into Chinese are Damon Runyon, André Maurois and Bertrand Russell.

But also from an early age he read Western fiction, notably Walter Scott (he first read *Ivanhoe* as a young student in Chongqing, where he was working in the Central Library), Robert Louis Stevenson, and above all Alexandre Dumas, *père* (*The Three Musketeers* has always been a favourite). Later he became an avid reader of Agatha Christie.²¹

But these influences did not operate in a calculatedly literary manner. The workshop in which his novels were created was very much that of the practising journalist, constantly having to meet deadlines for the next day's copy. Under these circumstances he produced his series of novels, beginning with *Book and Sword* and ending with *The Deer and the Cauldron*.

Louis Cha's Major Novels : a Tentative Chronology

1. *Shujian enchou lu* 書劍恩仇錄 [Book and sword, gratitude and revenge]. 2 vols, 1955, rev. eds 1976, 1977.
Based on the legend that the Qianlong Emperor was Chinese, descended from the Chens of Haining.
2. *Bixue jian* 碧血劍 [The sword stained with royal blood]. 2 vols, 1956, rev. ed. 1975.
Set in the late Ming—deals with the life of Yuan Chonghuan. The revised edition contains (as an appendix) a lengthy biography of Yuan.
3. *Xueshan feihu* 雪山飛狐 [Flying fox on snowy mountain]. 1 vol., 1959, rev. eds 1974, 1977.
Set in Manchuria, in the late-eighteenth century. Story told from multiple viewpoint.
4. *Shediao yingxiong zhuan* 射雕英雄傳 [The eagle-shooting heroes]. 4 vols, 1957–9, rev. ed. 1976.
Set against the background of the struggles of late Southern Song/Jurchid/Mongol times. Deals with the Quanzhen 全真 Taoist Sect.
5. *Shendiao xialü* 神雕俠侶 [The giant eagle and its companion]. 4 vols, 1959, rev. ed. 1967.
A sequel to No. 4, dealing with the cripple Yang Guo and the clever Xiao Lungnü.
6. *Feihu waizhuan* 飛狐外傳 [The young flying fox]. 2 vols, 1960, rev. ed. 1975.
A 'prequel' to No. 3.
7. *Liancheng jue* 連城訣 [A deadly secret]. 1 vol, 1963, rev. ed. 1977.
Based on the true life story of one of Cha's family servants, who was taken in by the local magistrate, Cha's grandfather Zha Wenqing 查文清, during the aftermath of the missionary troubles in Jiangsu (1891).
8. *Yitian tulong ji* 倚天屠龍記 [The heaven sword and the dragon sabre]. 4 vols, 1963, rev. ed. 1977.
Set against the background of late Mongol times, tells the story of Zhang Wuji and the Ming Founder Zhu Yuanzhang. Deals with the Manichean sect.

Figure 2

Lines by Liu Ts'un-yan, written for this introduction. Liu refers to the ingenuity with which Cha contrived the chapter headings for Tianlong babu; if the headings for each of the five volumes are put together they form a poem in one of the traditional lyric metres. This, says Liu, deserves mention in a critique of the contemporary lyric (cihua).

李倩先生之小說馳名數十年久已膾炙人口夫即以其章回體之四
 目言之碧血劍為五言書劍恩仇錄為七言皆對仗甚工無論其其
 天龍八部每十回一集別分以少年遊蕩蘇幕遮桃牌子洞仙歌水龍吟
 五詞逐句名篇此真能以詩寫禱龍蛇者夫人不惟傾賞其新文學
 亦常舉其有可承傳與創斯也其在幕遮云向年嶺從山醉水樹聽音
 指點羣秦戲劍飲千杯男兒事喜于林中商果平生義昔時個今日
 意胡漢恩仇須傾英雄誌譜萬千人去住去情正廟門絕壁無餘字
 盡可入个詞譜也

癸卯春十月南海柳存仁



9. *Tianlong babu* 天龍八部 [The demi-gods and the semi-devils]. 5 vols, 1963–7, rev. ed. 1978.
Set in the Dali Kingdom in south-west China in the Northern Song dynasty, and involving the Shaolin Temple. Two letters from Chen Shixiang included as appendix.
10. *Xiake xing* 俠客行 [Ode to gallantry]. 2 vols, 1966, rev. ed. 1977.
Includes the story “Yuenü jian,” and Cha’s retelling of the stories to accompany Ren Xiong’s *Sasan jianke tu*.
11. *Xiao’ao jianghu* 笑傲江湖 [The smiling, proud wanderer] 4 vols, 1963, rev. ed. 1980.
No historical background.
12. *Luding ji* 鹿鼎記 [The deer and the cauldron]. 5 vols, 1969–72, rev. ed. 1981.
Set in early Qing times, during the first decades of the reign of Kangxi.

The Deer and the Cauldron

²² “Afterword” to the revised edition of *The deer and the cauldron* (June 1981).

²³ For an English treatment of this old story, see Reginald Johnston’s article, “The romance of an emperor,” in the *New China Review*, vol.2 (1920), pp.1–24 and 180–94. See also Meng Sen 孟森, “Shizu chujia shi kaoshi” 世祖出家事考實, originally included in *Qingchu san da yi’an kaosbi* 清初三大家疑案考實 (1934), reprinted in *Xinshi congkan (wai yizhong)* 心史叢刊(外一種) (Changsha, 1986), pp.247–78.

The Deer and the Cauldron was serialized in *Ming Pao* from 24 October 1969, the last instalment appearing on 23 September 1972. My habit when writing for serialisation has always been to write a section each day for publication the following day: so this novel actually took me two years and eleven months to write. Unforeseen eventualities aside (and life always contains such eventualities), this will be my last Martial Arts novel.

But *Deer* is not really a Martial Arts novel at all. It would be better to call it a historical romance. While it was being serialised I was always receiving letters from readers asking if it had been written by someone else. They found it to be so different from my previous novels. In fact, I wrote every word of it. I am touched that my readers should wish to ascribe to someone else a novel of mine that they have found in some way disappointing ...

Deer is totally unlike my previous Martial Arts novels. It was supposed to be. An author cannot go on for ever repeating his style and form. He should experiment wherever possible with new creative methods.

Readers object to the fact that Trinket (Wei Xiaobao 韋小寶), the protagonist of *Deer*, transgresses all systems of values. Readers of Martial Arts fiction are accustomed to identifying with the hero, but they cannot do this with Trinket. For this, for having robbed my readers of this pleasure, I must tender my sincerest apologies.

But the protagonist of a novel does not need to be ‘good’ or ‘admirable’ ...²²

By general consensus, *Deer*, Louis Cha’s last novel, is also his best. It is a great sprawling work that meanders along for five thick volumes, covering in its scope twenty or so years of the early part of the reign of the Emperor Kangxi. In strictly ‘historical’ terms, the novel begins some time after the death of Koxinga in 1662 and the *Ming History* purge (1662–63), and before the death of Oboi 鰲拜 in 1669, covers the period of the rebellion of the ‘Three Feudatories’ (1673–80), and the surrender of Formosa to the Manchus (1683),

and ends shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689). It moves from the pleasure-houses of Yangzhou to Peking and the Imperial Court, from the sacred mountain of Wutaishan to a desolate island off the north-east coast of China, base for the fanatical drug-taking Sect of the Mystic Dragon, and then to the legendary Shaolin Temple; thence to Yunnan and Guizhou, through the frozen north-east to Fort Albazin, Moscow and the boudoir of Princess Sophia; back to Peking, Yangzhou, Peking again, Formosa, Nerchinsk for the signing of the Treaty, and finally back to the birthplace of the protagonist, Yangzhou.

The complicated plot involves:

- ❖ the *Ming History* purge and its aftermath;
- ❖ the killing of Oboi, Manchu Regent during the early years of the Kangxi Reign;
- ❖ the recovery of eight copies of a Sūtra, containing, when pieced together, a map showing the whereabouts of secret treasure;
- ❖ the discovery of the supposedly dead Shunzhi emperor, living in secret retirement in a monastery;²³
- ❖ the formation of the Triad Society and its unsuccessful struggle to organise the Resistance and defeat the Tartar conquerors;
- ❖ the unmasking of a “fake” Dowager Empress and the uncovering of a plot to seize power at court;
- ❖ the defeat of the rebellious Satrap Wu Sangui 吳三桂 and his various allies in the south-west of China;
- ❖ the conflict with Czarist Russia over Fort Albazin, and the signing of the Treaty of Nerchinsk;
- ❖ the final defeat of the Ming loyalist forces holding the island of Formosa.

During this long picaresque saga we are introduced to a vast array of underworld characters, all of them members of the so-called Brotherhood of River and Lake²⁴—“Brave Men and True,”²⁵ martial arts practitioners of every school (Huashan 華山, Kongtong 崆峒, Kunlun 崑崙, Shaolin 少林, Wudang 武當, Wuyi 武夷), and of every shape and size (one of them

Figure 3

A page from the cartoon version of *The Deer and the Cauldron*, Ming Pao



²⁴ *jianghu* 江湖, like *xia*, is a keyword in Martial Arts fiction. It signifies a whole Chinese “world”, with its own way of life, its own argot. To a certain extent where the Chinese say “on the water” we would say “on the road.” It is the world of the /OVER

/travellers, street performers (our circus folk), people who have to live by their wits, outsiders, sometimes hermits, nearly always elements considered disreputable by society. As Liu Jingsheng 劉靜生 observes in the second chapter of his *Dangdai jianghu milu* 當代江湖秘錄 (Peking, 1993), no two sources will give the same definition. Above all this 'brotherhood' exists in defiance of the stifling conventions and hypocrisy of Confucian society, it brings together men and women whose quest for freedom has driven them outside society. In this sense the truck-drivers I met in a roadside café in north-east China, for whom being on the road was freedom, inherit the age-old values of the *jianghu* world. And Bai Hua 白華, the caring ruffian in Zhao Zhenkai's novel *Bodong* 波動, translated by Bonnie McDougall as *Waves* (Hong Kong, 1985), is a present-day 'knight of the road': he comes from the *jianghu* world, he is at once a *xia* and a *liumang* 流氓 and a *yingxiong* 英雄好漢.

²⁵ *Yingxiong baohan*.

²⁶ "A book in which all the usual conventions are consumed and yet no ruin or catastrophe comes to pass We live in the humours, contortions and oddities of the spirit, not in the slow unrolling of life." Virginia Woolf, "Phases of fiction," *Granite and rainbow* (London, 1958), p.135.

²⁷ Louis Cha, "Wei Xiaobao, zhe xiao jiahuo!" 韋小寶這小傢伙, originally published in *Ming Pao Monthly*, 1981.10, pp.20–6, reprinted several times, e.g. *San kan Jin Yong xiaoshuo* 三看金庸小說 (Taipei, 1987), pp.177–99.

²⁸ For the contemporary elevation of the *liumang* to the status of existential hero, see Geremie Barné's "Wang Shuo and *liumang* ('hooligan') culture," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 28 (July 1992), pp.23–66. As the ever-stimulating He Xin 何新 comments, in part 1 of his "Xia yu wuxia wenxue yuanliu yanjiu" 俠與武俠文學源流研究, *Wenyi zhengming*, 1988.1 & 2, the *xia-liumang* relationship is a recurring and fascinating phenomenon in Chinese history. For a recent book-length treatment of the *liumang* in Chinese culture, from the pre-Qin period until the Qing, see Chen Baoliang 陳寶良, *Zhongguo liumang shi* 中國流氓史 (Peking, 1993). It is interesting to note that

rejoices in the name Lump-o'-Flesh 肉球; another is a transvestite), outlaws, secret society members (especially the Triads, its leader "Helmsman" Chen Jinnan 陳近南, and its various Lodges), singsong-girls, innkeepers, gamblers, beggars, salt-smugglers, itinerant (and often fighting) monks and Taoists, herbalists, butchers, boatmen. We also encounter dissident literati (Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, Lü Liuliang 呂留良), corrupt magistrates, ruthless petty Yamen officers, members of the fallen Imperial family of the Ming dynasty (including the one-armed Princess with the deadly "flicking" kungfu, who features in Cha's earlier novel *The Sword Stained by Royal Blood*), the Paladins of Prince Mu 沐王府 (loyal defenders of the Ming cause in the south-west), the descendants of Koxinga, eunuchs (including one aged and wheezing eunuch who practises a particularly lethal form of kungfu), Manchu princes and regents, Jesuit Fathers (Schall and Verbiest), Tibetans (including Sangge 桑結, or sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho), Mongols (including Galdan 葛爾丹), Cossacks, the great Satrap Wu Sangui, Li Zicheng 李自成 the Dashing General, Chen Yuanyuan 陳圓圓, once the Peerless Consort of the last Ming emperor, the Emperor Kangxi himself, the Dowager Empress, and a host of pretty girls of various origins.

Most importantly, we meet, and become *very* familiar with, the novel's protagonist, a young rogue by the name of Trinket: born in a Yangzhou whorehouse, *nom de guerre* Little White Dragon, also known as Grand Master of the Green Tree Lodge of the Triad Society, as the eunuch Brightie, the Bannerman Captain Huachahuacha, the Zen Brother Claritas, Duke of Albazin, Grand Patriarch of the Sect of the Mystic Dragon, etc. etc. The character of Trinket is the inspiration of the novel. It is the many facets of Trinket that bind the book together, somewhat in the way Tristram Shandy binds Sterne's great novel together.²⁶ And yet Cha himself writes that the character stole up on him almost unawares:

Frankly, when I started writing *Deer*, during the first few months I had no clear notion of what sort of character Trinket was going to be: he just grew on me slowly, bit by bit He has many of the common Chinese qualities and failings, but he is certainly not meant to be a 'type' of the Chinese people.²⁷

Whatever the process of his creation, Trinket is one of the truly unforgettable characters in Chinese fiction. He belongs with Monkey, Jia Baoyu, Ah Q and a handful of others. He is the prankster, the larrikin, the trickster who breaks every known convention (of both the worlds he inhabits, the high and low), the singsong-girl's son whose ultimate dream is to run his own bordello, the perfect anti-hero, the subversive antithesis of the true *xia*, the apotheosis of the *liumang*.²⁸ And yet (or should one say and so?) he has a highly developed sense of friendship, loyalty and honour. His ambivalent and touching relationship with the emperor Kangxi is one of the recurring themes of the book:

Trinket is not a person of very intense emotions. *Deer* is not a book that places much emphasis on emotion. Perhaps the most unusual emotion in it is the

friendship between Trinket and Kangxi, subject and lord; a complex emotion, full of contradiction, and at the same time full of affection.²⁹

Deer and the character of Trinket took many of Cha's regular readers by surprise, including Stephen Soong:

I remember some years back, when *The Deer and the Cauldron* was running in *Ming Pao*, I encountered Louis Cha and inevitably our conversation came round to his new work. I expressed my great admiration for it, and said I thought it was the most wonderfully radical new departure—in a strange way reminiscent of the New Novel in the West. Trinket is an 'anti-hero' and the novel itself is an anti-'traditional Martial Arts' novel. On the surface there is a great deal of genuine historical content, but beneath it all lies a subtle humour and satire, somewhat like Alexander Pope's mock-heroic ...

As the serialisation of the novel progressed, I saw how far its richness and originality, its subtlety and brilliance exceeded all my earlier expectations. Not

/the punk rock singer He Yong 何勇 regards Trinket as his role model ...

²⁹ "Wei Xiaobao, zhe xiao jiahuo!", p.198.

Figure 4

Cover and title-page of *The Deer and the Cauldron* (1981 edition).
The painting "Pine and Deer" (left) is by Zhu Da (Bada shanren, ?1626–?1705),
and the seal (right) is by Zhou Lianggong (1613–1672).

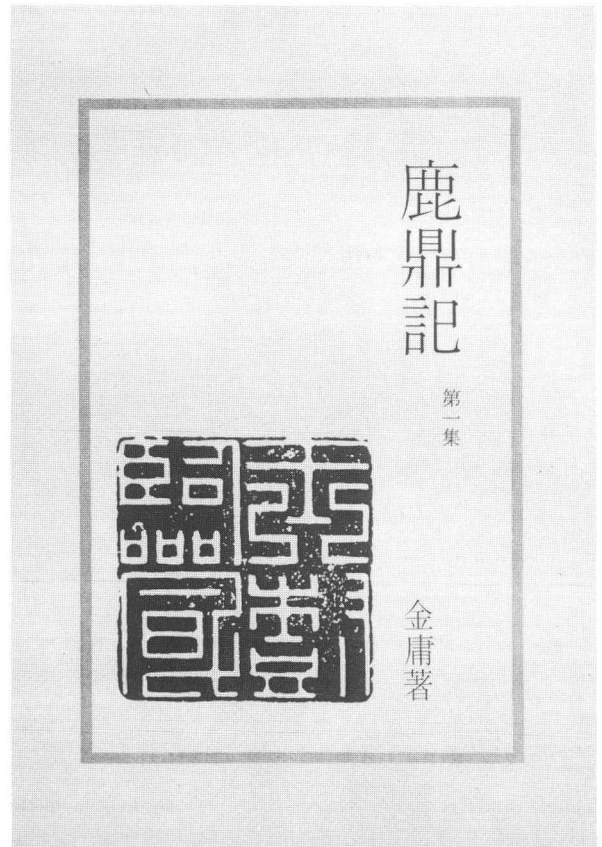
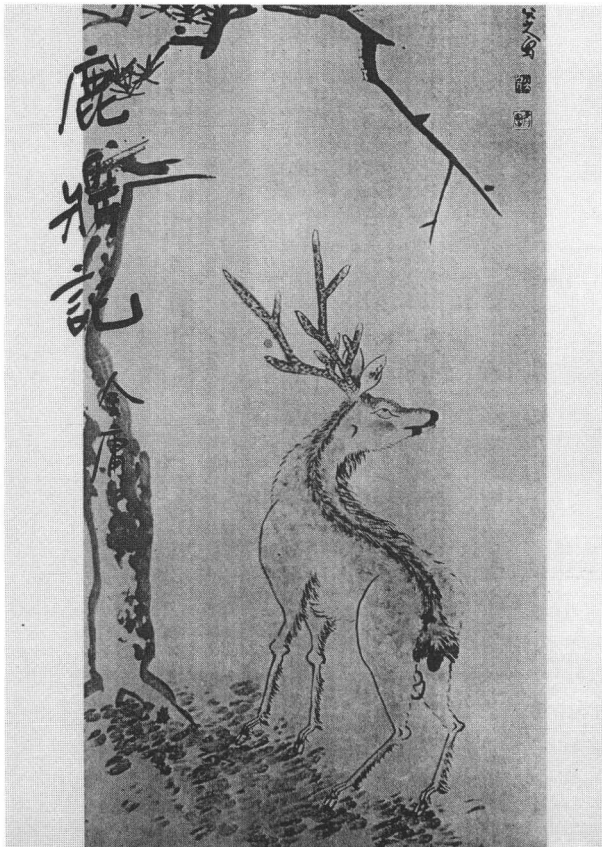


Figure 5

Cover of Vietnamese translation of *Bixue jian*



³⁰ Lin Yiliang (Stephen Soong), “Xidu Jin Yong wuxia xiaoshuo shuhou” 細讀金庸武俠小說書後, in *Ming Pao Monthly*, 1984.9, p.33. See also Lu Dunji 盧(盧)敦基, “Jin Yong xin wuxia xiaoshuode wenhua yu fanwenhua” 金庸新武俠小說的文化與反文化, in *Zhejiang xuekan*, 1989.1, pp.90–6. “Louis Cha’s counter-cultural thinking becomes evident in *Deer*. This is his finest work; it is also a reaction against everything he had written before. Like *Don Quixote*, which was written in reaction to previous picaresque fiction, it became itself immortal . . .” And Zhou San 周三, “Yu youren hua Jin Yong shu” 與友人話金庸書, in *Dongfang jishi* 東方紀事, 1989.3, p.128: “This novel, with its ironic, anti-heroic historical stance, reflects certain transcendental tendencies in Louis Cha’s thinking . . . No wonder so many of his regular readers found it hard to accept when it first appeared.”

only was this vast work anti-Martial Arts, anti-Chivalry, it was also anti-Louis Cha (as seen in his previous work). It was a roller-coaster packed with thrills, with fun, rage, humour and abuse, written in a style that flowed and flashed like quicksilver. And then there was the character of Trinket—that embodiment of laziness, that inexplicably charismatic, rivetting rascal . . .³⁰

It is the character of Trinket that places the novel in a category of its own—more than anything it belongs to what we might call *huaji wenxue* 滑稽文學—the literature of fun, of the fool, written (as was *The Story of the Stone*) for the entertainment of like-minded souls: “An antidote to boredom and melancholy . . .”,³¹ “so much ink splashed for fun, a game, a diversion.”³² As one recent Mainland critic put it: “Louis Cha’s wit and humour are based on an inner realm of Buddhism and Taoism. Behind the clownish, fool-like exterior lies a great subtlety and refinement.”³³

Deer in English guise

One of the reasons for the popularity of my novels is their Chineseness. They describe Chinese society and Chinese people . . . They have for this reason been well received in South-east Asia where the Chinese influence is so strong.³⁴ But I wonder if they will ever be much enjoyed by Western readers? There are no English translations as yet, but whenever I have retold the stories to Western friends, they don’t seem particularly interested.³⁵

In a very real sense this is true. Trinket is as quintessentially Chinese as Tintin is Belgian, or Asterix a Gaul, D’Artaganan a Gascon, Don Quixote Spanish. The Martial Arts genre (even such a subversive variant of it as *Deer*) is as Chinese as the Western is American. But after all, didn’t the Chinese a century ago successfully make Haggard and Conan Doyle their own? Isn’t that what translation is for?

This translation of the first two chapters of Louis Cha’s novel is very much work-in-progress. It shows Cha at his most serious (in chapter 1, the Prologue, where he is dealing with the *Ming History* purge), and at his most entertaining (in chapter 2, where Trinket first leaves Yangzhou for his adventures in the big wide world).³⁶ It represents less than one-twentieth of the whole novel, but most of the translator’s problems are already present—above all the problem of style.

I must thank Louis Cha himself for his enthusiastic and generous support in this project. David Hawkes, dear friend and long-time collaborator, provided crucially-timed encouragement, and much more than I can adequately acknowledge here. From Joseph Lau, over the years, I have learned much about both the mischief of the *liumang* and the loyalty of the *xia*. I also wish to thank Liu Ts’un-yan and Geremie Barme³⁷ for their ever-

attentive ear and critical scrutiny, and Rachel May for her gentle insistence on “hearing voices.” It is my personal belief that Cha can be proved wrong, and that his novels can one day be a source of great enjoyment to Western readers. I see them as belonging firmly in the world tradition of the well-written tale, side by side with Scott, Dumas, Stevenson and their later followers.³⁸ Many of the recurring elements of the Western ‘novel of adventure’ are present in Cha’s work: fast horses, flashing swords, the “desperate anxieties of pursuit and siege,” chase, escape and ambush, duel and intrigue, the force and tension of action, honour and friendship tested in action, confrontation and conflict of personalities, opposing loyalties, clan rivalries, colouring of landscape, costume and physiognomy And linking it all together the road, the journey, at once the most important theme of the adventure story (and the picaresque novel), and the classical scheme of lateral storytelling, where the main plot can be stretched out over chapter after chapter.³⁹ Trinket’s adventures seem to me to answer rather well to T. H. White’s prescription:

My next novel must be picaresque. A pursuit perhaps, with Russian spies, a great-great-grandson of William Wordsworth, aeroplanes, and a drunk wildfowler lying in a puddle with two bottles of whisky. Also a Harem out for a walk, in a crocodile; and the suggestion of a local anaesthetic for boys who have got to be beaten at school.⁴⁰

³¹ *The story of the stone*, trans. David Hawkes (Penguin Classics, 1973), vol.1, p.50. Cao Xueqin continues, in a vein reminiscent of Cha: “My only wish is that men in the world below may sometimes pick up this tale when they are recovering from sleep or drunkenness, or when they wish to escape from business worries or a fit of the dumps, and in doing so find not only mental refreshment but even perhaps . . . some small arrest in the deterioration of their vital forces.”

³² *The story of the stone*, trans. John Minford (Penguin Classics, 1986), vol.5, p.375.

³³ Zhou San: “There is a certain type of humour that comes from spiritual wisdom, and expresses a deep human strength. Unlike the humour of the small-minded, this humour grows out of a psychological and literary wholeness, and has the power to propel readers into a new and more rarefied realm When I read Louis Cha I perceive this realm, a realm that transcends the clamour of the external world, and enables the spirit to enter into a purer and clearer dimension. Perhaps Louis Cha’s greatest significance lies in the fact that he offers modern man a means to liberate himself from the tangled net of

/society, a means to release his alienated spirit and send it back to its source, a means to refresh and enrich the parched imagination; his work enables his readers to find in this imaginary world a sense of human worth and of the beauty of human nature that are impossible to find in the real world. Louis Cha’s world is an arsenal of modern myth, and its only limit is the limit of the human imagination itself”

³⁴ Most of Cha’s novels (but not *Deer*) have been translated into Indonesian. See Leo Suryadinata, “Chinese literature in Indonesian and Malay translation: a preliminary study,” in *Chinese literature in South East Asia*, Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Commonwealth of Chinese Literature (Singapore, 1988), pp.247–62. *Deer*, on the other hand, is among the novels that have been translated into Vietnamese.

³⁵ Lu Yuying 盧玉瑩, “Interview with Louis Cha,” in *Zhubi baijia kan jin Yong*: 3, p.24.

³⁶ There are surely echoes in the story of the *Ming History* case in chapter 1 (the cashiered, corrupt official Wu Zhirong, and his dealings with the wealthy Zhuang family) of the extended introductory story of the “Bottle-

Figure 6

Cover of Vietnamese translation of *Shujian enchou lu*



/gourd Case” in the first few chapters of *The story of the stone* (the cashiered, corrupt official Jia Yucun, and his dealings with the even wealthier Xue family). Equally there are (for me) strong echoes of *The three musketeers* in chapter 2: Trinket’s departure from Yangzhou for the Capital reminds me of D’Artagnan’s journey from deepest Gascony to find M. de Tréville in Paris, while the much feared and hated Manchu éminence grise, Oboi, inevitably makes me think of Cardinal Richelieu.

³⁷ Geremie Barmé generously shared with me the fruits of his own long-standing interest in this subject.

³⁸ Such as Stanley Weyman and Jeffrey Famol. For a fine study of the ‘adventure story’, from Marryat to John Le Carré, see Fisher, *Bright face of danger*.

³⁹ These themes are well discussed in Fisher’s book, *passim*.

⁴⁰ T. H. White, *England have my bones* (London, 1936), p.208. Quoted by Fisher, *Bright face of danger*, p.406.

Note on Illustrations

It has been Louis Cha's custom to add a generous number of illustrations to his novels—just as one of the hallmarks of *Ming Pao Monthly* has always been its wealth of pictures. We have tried to follow that example here. Needless to say, very few of the pictures actually represent the characters or scenes of the novel. Some of them do, however, convey the flavour of the Ming/Qing period, while others represent images of the *xia* through the centuries.

The watercolour "A Pipe-bearer Attendant on the Mandarin of Tourane" by William Alexander (1767–1816), the painter who accompanied Lord Macartney to China, was painted in June 1793 during the expedition's two-week stay at Tourane Bay (modern Da Nang) in Indo-China. It is reproduced by kind permission of the Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery. The painting of "Two Deer" is by the late eighteenth-century artist Tong Heng 童衡, reproduced by kind permission of the Guangzhou Art Gallery. It was exhibited in Hong Kong in late 1986, and the curator of the Chinese University Art Gallery, Mayching Kao, was most helpful in telephoning the Guangzhou Art Gallery on our behalf. The cauldron is from C. A. S. Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives* (Shanghai, 1932). The Triad figures are taken from Xiao Yishan's 蕭一山 *Jindai mimi shehui shiliao* 近代秘密社會史料 (Peking, 1936); the weapons, fire-belcher etc are from E. T. C. Werner's *Chinese Weapons*, originally published by the Royal Asiatic Society, North China Branch, in 1932; several drawings of characters from the "Brotherhood" are taken from the *Sasan jianke tu* 卅三劍客圖 of Ren Xiong 任熊 (1820–1857), reproduced in volume 2 of Cha's *Xiake xing* 俠客行; the portraits of Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi are from Ye Gongzhuo's 葉恭綽 *Qingdai xuezhe xiangzhuan* 清代學者像傳 (1928). The Nanking singsong-girl is reproduced from the first volume of the Chinese edition of *Ludingji*. Calligraphy by Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong) and Prince Ningjing 寧靖王 is from *L'Encre des Lettrés de Taiwan* (Paris, 1985). The picture of two gentlemen examining a painting is from the *Wu Youru huabao* 吳友如畫寶 (1908). The picture "The Beggar and the Bell" illustrates the version of this story in the *Xiangzhu Liaozhai zhiyi tuyong* 詳注聊齋志異圖詠 (edition of 1886). The various illustrations showing Nurhaci, the Ming Princes, Wu Sangui etc are from Cai Dongfan's 蔡東藩 *Qingshi yanyi* 清史演義 (1916).

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史 CHAPTER ONE : PROLOGUE

In which three Ming Loyalists discuss the Manchu Persecution, the Ming History, the Beggars' Guild, and the Triad Secret Society

1. *The Deer and the Cauldron*

Along a coastal road somewhere south of the Yangtze river, a detachment of soldiers, each of them armed with a halberd, was escorting a line of seven prison carts, trudging northwards in the teeth of a bitter wind. In each of the first three carts a single male prisoner was caged, identifiable by his dress as a member of the scholar class. One was a white-haired old man. The other two were men of middle years. The four rear carts were occupied by women, the last of them by a young mother holding a baby girl at her breast. The little girl was crying in a continuous wail which her mother's gentle words of comfort were powerless to console. One of the soldiers marching alongside, irritated by the baby's crying, aimed a mighty kick at the cart.

"Stop it! Shut up! Or I'll really give you something to cry about!"

The baby, startled by this sudden violence, cried even louder.

Under the eaves of a large house, some hundred yards from the road, a middle-aged scholar was standing with a ten- or eleven-year-old boy at his side. He was evidently affected by this little scene, for a groan escaped his lips and he appeared to be very close to tears.

"Poor creatures!" he murmured to himself.

"Papa," said the little boy, "what have they done wrong?"

"What indeed!" said the man, bitterly. "During these last two days they must have made more than thirty arrests. All our best Zhejiang scholars. And all of them innocents, caught up in the net," he added in an undertone, for fear that the soldiers might hear him.

"That little girl is just a baby," said the boy. "What crime can she possibly be guilty of? It's very wrong."

"So you understand that what the Government soldiers do is wrong," said the man. "Good for you, mu som!" He sighed. "They are the cleaver and we are the meat. They are the cauldron and we are the deer.."

"You explained 'they are the cleaver and we are the meat' the other day,

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*"Two Deer"**Tong Heng, late eighteenth century*

papa,” said the boy. “It’s what they say when people are massacred or beheaded. Like meat or fish being sliced up on the chopping-board. Does ‘they are the cauldron and we are the deer’ mean the same thing?”

“Yes, more or less,” said the man; and since the train of soldiers and prison carts was now fast receding, he took the boy by the hand.

“Let’s go indoors now,” he said. “It’s too windy for standing outside.”

Indoors the two of them went, and into his study.

The man picked up a writing-brush and moistened it on the ink-slab; then, on a sheet of paper, he wrote the character for a deer.

“The deer is a wild animal, but although it is comparatively large, it has a very peaceable nature. It eats only grass and leaves and never harms other animals. So when other animals want to hurt it or to eat it, all it can do is run away. If it can’t escape by running away, it gets eaten.”

He wrote the characters for ‘chasing the deer’ on the sheet of paper.

“That’s why in ancient times they often used the deer as a symbol of empire. The common people, who are the subjects of empire, are gentle and obedient. Like the deer’s, it is their lot to be cruelly treated and oppressed. In the *History of the Han Dynasty* it says ‘Qin lost the deer and the world went chasing after it’. That means that when the Qin emperor lost control of the empire, ambitious men rose up everywhere and fought each other to possess it. In the end it was the first Han emperor, who got this big, fat deer by defeating the Tyrant King of Chu.”

“I know,” said the boy. “In my story-books it says ‘they chased the deer on the Central Plain’. That means they were all fighting each other to become emperor.”

The scholar nodded, pleased with his little son’s astuteness. He drew a picture of a cauldron on the sheet of paper.

“In olden times they didn’t use a cooking-pot on the stove to cook their food; they used a three-legged cauldron like this and lit a fire underneath it. When they caught a deer they put it in a cauldron to seethe it. Those ancient rulers and great ministers were very cruel. If they didn’t like somebody, they would pretend that they had committed some crime or other, and then they would put them in a cauldron and boil them. In the *Records of an Historian* Lin Xiangru says to the king of Qin, ‘Deceiving Your Majesty was a capital offence. I beg to approach the cauldron.’ What he meant was, ‘I deserve to die. Put me in the cauldron and boil me.’”

“Often in my story-books I’ve read the words ‘asking about the cauldrons in the Central Plain’,” said the boy. “It *seems* to mean the same thing as ‘chasing the deer in the Central Plain’.”

“It does,” said the man. “King Yu of the Xia Dynasty, the first Dynasty that ever was, collected metal from all the nine provinces of the empire and used it to cast nine great cauldrons with. ‘Metal’ in those days meant bronze. Each of these bronze cauldrons had the name of one of the nine provinces on it and a map showing the mountains and rivers of that province. In later times whoever became master of the empire automatically became the guardian

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of these cauldrons. In *The Chronicle of Zuo* it says that when the Viscount of Chu was reviewing his troops on Zhou territory and the Zhou king sent Prince Man to him with his royal compliments, the Viscount questioned Prince Man about the size and weight of the cauldrons. Of course, as ruler of the whole empire, only the Zhou king had the right to be guardian of the cauldrons. For a mere Viscount like the ruler of Chu to ask questions about them showed that he was harbouring thoughts of rebellion and planning to depose the Zhou king and seize the empire for himself.”

“So ‘asking about the cauldrons’ and ‘chasing the deer’ both mean wanting to be emperor,” said the boy. “And ‘not knowing who will kill the deer’ means not knowing who is going to be emperor.”

“That’s right,” said the man. “As time went by these expressions came to be applied to other situations as well, but originally they were only used in the sense of wanting to be emperor.” He sighed. “For the common people, though, the subjects of empire, *our* role is to be the deer. It may be uncertain who will kill the deer, but the deer gets killed all right. There’s no uncertainty about that.”

He walked over to the window and gazed outside. The sky had now turned a leaden hue showing that snow was on its way. He sighed again.

“He must be a cruel God up there. Those hundreds of poor, innocent souls on the roads in this freezing weather. The snow will add to their sufferings.”

Two figures caught his eye, moving along the highway from the south. They walked close together, side by side, each of them wearing a coolie hat and a rain-cape. As they drew nearer, he recognised them with a cry of pleasure.

“It’s Uncle Huang and Uncle Gu,” he said to the boy as he hurried out to greet them.

“Zongxi, Yanwu, what good wind blows you hither?” he called out to them.

The one he addressed as “Zongxi” was a somewhat portly man with a plentiful beard covering the lower half of his face. His full name was Huang Zongxi and he was a Zhejiang man, like his host. The other one, a tall, thin man with a swarthy complexion, was Gu Yanwu, a native of Kunshan in Jiangsu. Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu were two of the foremost scholars of their day. Both of them, from patriotic motives, had gone into retirement when the Ming empire collapsed, being unwilling to take office under a foreign power.

Gu Yanwu drew a little closer before replying.

“Liuliang, we have something serious to discuss with you. That’s what brings us here today.”

Liuliang was the man’s name, then—Lü Liuliang. His family had lived for generations in Chongde, a prefecture in the Hangzhou district of Zhejiang. Like Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu, to whom you have just been introduced, he is an historical personage, famous among those Southern gentlemen who,

Gu Yanwu (1613–1682)



during the last days of the Ming Dynasty and the early days of the Manchu conquest, buried themselves away on their estates and refused to take part in public life.

Lü Liuliang observed the grave expression on his visitors' faces. Knowing of old how unfailingly Gu Yanwu's political judgement was to be trusted, he realised that what the latter had referred to as "something serious" must be very serious indeed. He clasped his hands and bowed to his guest politely.

"Come inside," he said. "Drink a few cups of wine first, to warm yourselves up a bit."

As he ushered them into the study, he gave an order to the boy.

"Baozhong, tell your mother that Uncle Huang and Uncle Gu are here. Ask her to slice a couple of platefuls of that goat's meat paté to go with our wine."

In a minute or two the boy came in again, accompanied by his younger brother. They were carrying three sets of chopsticks and wine-cups which they laid on the study table. An old servant followed them carrying a wine-kettle and some plates of cold meat. Lü Liuliang waited until the two boys and the servant were outside the room and closed the study door.

"Come, my friends," he said. "Wine first."

Huang Zongxi declined gloomily with a brief shake of the head; but Gu Yanwu, helping himself unceremoniously from the wine-kettle, downed half a dozen of the tiny cupfuls in quick succession.

"I suppose your visit has something to do with this *Ming History* business," said Lü Liuliang.

"Precisely," said Huang Zongxi.

Gu Yanwu raised his winecup and, in ringing tones, recited the following couplet:

The cool wind sways not me, howe'er it blow;
For me the bright moon still shines everywhere.

"That's a splendid couplet of yours, Liuliang," he said. "Whenever I drink wine now, I have to recite it. —And do it justice, too," he added, with a ceremonious flourish of his wine-cup.

In spite of Lü Liuliang's patriotic unwillingness to serve, a local official, impressed by what he had heard of Lü's reputation, had once sought to recommend him as a "hidden talent" meriting a summons to the Court for suitable employment; but Lü had made it clear that he would die rather than accept such a summons, and the matter had been dropped. Some time later, however, when another high-ranking official sent forward his name as a "distinguished scholar of exceptional merit," Lü realised that his continued refusal would be construed by the Court as an open slight, with fatal consequences for himself and perhaps his family. Accordingly he had had himself tonsured (though not in fact with any intention of becoming a real monk), whereupon the government officials were finally convinced of his determination and ceased urging him to come out of his retirement.

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Huang Zongxi (1610-1695)



Gu Yanwu's enthusiasm for Lü's somewhat pedestrian couplet sprang from the fact that it contained a hidden message. In Chinese the word for 'cool' is *qing* (the word chosen by the Manchus for their new 'Chinese' Dynasty) and the word for 'bright' is *ming* (the name of the old Chinese Dynasty they had supplanted). So the couplet Gu had recited could be understood to mean:

The Qing wind sways not me, howe'er it blow;
For me the Ming moon still shines everywhere.

In other words, "I will never bow to the Manchus, however they may threaten and cajole. For me the empire is still the Ming empire, whose loyal subject I remain." Although the poem in which these lines occurred could not be published, they were familiar to all the like-minded scholars of Lü's wide acquaintance, and Huang, hearing them recited now by Gu, responded to the challenge by raising his own wine-cup in homage.

"Yes, it is a very good poem," he said, and drained it off at a gulp.

"Thank you both, but it doesn't deserve your praise," said Lü Liuliang.

Chancing to glance upwards at that moment, Gu Yanwu found his attention caught by a large painting which was hanging on one of the walls. It must have measured near enough four feet from top to bottom and well over three yards horizontally. It was a landscape, so magnificently conceived and boldly executed that he could not forbear a cry of admiration. The sole inscription on this enormous painting was the phrase "This Lovely Land" written in very large characters at the top.

"From the brushwork I should say this must be Erzhan's work," he said.

"You are absolutely right," said Lü.

This Erzhan's real name was Zha Shibiao. He was a well-known painter in the late Ming, early Manchu period and a good friend of the three men present.


"How is it that so fine a painting lacks a signature?" said Huang.

Lü sighed. "The painting had a message," he said. "But you know what a stolid, careful person Erzhan is. He wouldn't sign it and he wouldn't write any inscription. He painted it for me on a sudden impulse when he was staying with me a month or so ago. Why don't you two write a few lines on it?"

Gu and Huang got up and went over to examine the painting more closely. It was a picture of the Yangtze, the Great River, rolling majestically eastwards between innumerable peaks, with a suitable garnishing of gnarled pines and strange misshapen rocks: a very

Calligraphy of Zha Shibiao (1615–1698)

此在館木偶成文何如河陽石
是吾溪道畫家多換繪古今
能事控隸君
從來壯事正相資家學師
承分承新華巨傳祚宗派
千秋齊譽映同時
嶺石谷子畫
烟翁先生正 查士標



beautiful landscape were it not for the all-pervading mist and cloud which seemed calculated to create an oppressive feeling of gloom in anyone looking at it.

“This lovely land under the heel of the barbarian!” said Gu Yanwu. “And we have to swallow our humiliation and go on living in it. It makes one’s blood boil. Why don’t *you* do an inscription, Liuliang—a poem that will give voice to what Erzhan had in mind to say?”

“Very well,” said Lü Liuliang, and he took the picture down from the wall and spread it out on the desk, while Huang Zongxi set about grinding him some ink. He picked up a writing-brush and for some minutes could be observed muttering to himself in the throes of composition, then, writing straight or to the painting and with pauses only for moistening the brush, he quickly completed the following poem:

Is this the scene of Great Song’s south retreat,
This lovely land that hides its face in shame?
Or is it after Yai-shan’s fateful leap?
This lovely land then scarce dared breathe its name.
Now that I seem to read the painter’s mind,
My bitter teardrops match his drizzling rain.
Past woes I see reborn in present time:
This draws the groans that no gag can restrain.
Methinks the painter used poor Gaoyu’s tears
To mix his colours and his brush to wet.
“This Lovely Land” was commentary enough;
No need was there for other words to fret.
The blind would see, the lame would walk again,
Could we but bring back Hongwu’s glorious days.
With what wild joy we’d look down from each height
And see the landscape free of mist and haze!

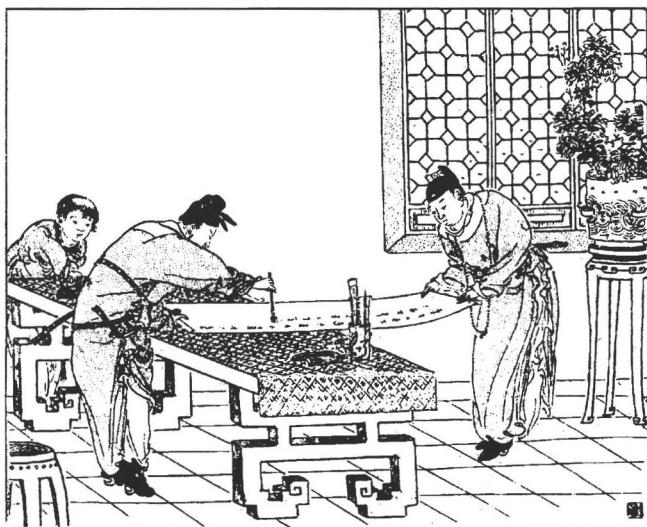
He threw the brush on the floor as he finished and burst into tears.

“It says all there is to say,” said Gu Yanwu. “Masterly!”

“It lacks subtlety,” said Lü. “In no way could you call it a *good* poem. I merely wanted to put Erzhan’s original idea into writing so that anyone looking at the picture in days to come will know what it is about.”

“When China does eventually emerge from this time of darkness,” said Huang, “we shall indeed ‘see the landscape free from mist and haze’. When that time comes, we shall gaze at even the poorest, meanest, most barren landscape with a feeling of joyful liberation. As your poem says, ‘with what wild joy we’ll look down from *each* height’ then!”

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“Your conclusion is excellent,” said Gu. “When we do eventually rid our country of this foreign scum, the feeling of relief will be infinitely greater than the somewhat arid satisfaction we get from occasionally uncorking our feelings as we do now.”

Huang carefully rolled up the painting.

“You won’t be able to hang this up any more now, Liuliang,” he said. “You’d better put it away somewhere safe. If some evil-intentioned person like Wu Zhirong were to set eyes on it, you’d soon have the authorities round asking questions and the consequences could be serious not only for you but probably for Erzhan as well.”

“That vermin Wu Zhirong!” said Gu Yanwu, smiting the desk with his hand. “I could willingly tear his flesh with my teeth!”

“You said when you came that you had something serious to discuss with me,” said Lü, “yet here we are, like typical scholars, frittering our time away on poetry and painting instead of attending to business. What was it, exactly, that you came about?”

“It has to do with Erzhan’s kinsman Yihuang,” said Huang. “The day before yesterday Gu and I learned that *he* has now been named in connection with the *Ming History* affair.”

“Yihuang?” said Lü. “You mean *he*’s been dragged into it too?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Huang. “As soon as we heard, the two of us hurried as quickly as we could to his home in Yuanhua Town, but he wasn’t there. They said he’d gone off to visit a friend. In view of the urgency, Yanwu advised the family to make their getaway as soon as it was dark. Then, remembering that Yihuang was a good friend of yours, we thought we’d come and look for him here.”

“No,” said Lü, “no, he’s not here. I don’t know where he can have gone.”

“If he were here, he would have shown himself by now,” said Gu. “I left a poem for him on his study wall. If he goes back home, he will understand when he reads the poem that he is to go and hide. What I’m afraid of, though, is that he may not have heard the news yet and may expose himself unnecessarily outside and get himself arrested. That would be terrible.”

“Practically every scholar in West Zhejiang has fallen victim to this wretched *Ming History* business,” said Huang. “The Manchu court has obviously got it in for us. You are too well known. Gu and I both think that you ought to leave here—for the time being, at any rate. Find somewhere away from here where you can shelter from the storm.”

Lü Liuliang looked angry.

“Let the Tartar emperor have me arrested and carried off to Peking,” he said. “If I could curse him to his face and get rid of some of the anger that is pent up inside me, I think I should die happy, even though it meant having the flesh cut slice by slice from my bones.”

“I admire your heroic spirit,” said Gu, “but I don’t think there would be much likelihood of your meeting the Tartar emperor face to face. You would die at the hands of miserable slaves. Besides the Tartar emperor is still a child

who knows nothing about anything. The government is in the hands of the all-powerful minister Oboi. Huang and I are both of the opinion that Oboi is at the back of this *Ming History* affair. The reason they are making such a song and dance about it and pursuing it with such ferocity is that he sees in it a means of breaking the spirit of the Southern gentry.”

“I’m sure you are right,” said Lü. “When the Manchu troops first came inside the Wall, they had pretty much of a free run in the whole of Northern China. It wasn’t till they came south that they found themselves running into resistance everywhere. The scholars in particular, as guardians of Chinese culture, have given them endless trouble. So Oboi is using this business to crush the Southern gentry, is he? Humph! What does the poet say?”

The bush fire cannot burn them out
For next year’s spring will see them sprout.

—Unless, that is, he plans to wipe out the lot of us!”

“Quite,” said Huang. “If we are to carry on the struggle against the Tartars, we need anyone who can be of use in it to stay alive. Indulging in heroics at this juncture might be satisfying, but would be merely falling into their trap.”

Lü suddenly understood. It was not only to look for Zha Yihuang that his friends had made their journey to him in the bitter cold. They had come because they wanted to persuade him to escape. They knew how impetuous he was and were afraid that he might throw his life away to no purpose. This was true friendship and he felt grateful for it.

“You give me such good advice,” he said, “I can hardly refuse to follow it. All right, then. I’ll leave with the family first thing tomorrow.”

Huang and Gu were visibly delighted and chorussed their approval of his decision, but Lü looked uncertain.

“But where can we go?”

The whole world belonged to the Tartars now, it seemed. Not a single patch of land was free of their hated presence. He thought of Tao Yuanming’s story about the fisherman who, by following a stream that flowed between flowering peach-trees, had stumbled on an earthly paradise—a place where refugees from ancient tyranny had found a haven.

“Ah, Peachtree Stream,” he murmured, “if I could but find you!”

“Come,” said Gu, “even if there *were* such a place, we cannot, as individuals, opt out altogether. In times like these ...”

Before he could finish, Lü struck the desk with his hand and jumped to his feet, loudly disclaiming his own weakness.

“You do right to rebuke me, Yanwu. The citizen of a conquered country still has his duty. It’s all very well to take temporary refuge, but to live a life of ease in some peach-tree haven while millions are suffering under the iron heel of the Tartars would be less than human. I spoke without thinking.”

Gu Yanwu smiled.

“I’ve knocked about a great deal during these last few years,” he said, “and

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made friends with an extraordinary variety of people. And wherever I've been, north or south of the River, I've discovered that it isn't only among educated people like ourselves that resistance to the Tartars is to be found. Many of our most ardent patriots are small tradesmen, Yamen runners or market folk—people belonging to the very lowest ranks of society. If you'd care to join us, the three of us could travel to Yangzhou together. I have a number of contacts there I could introduce you to. What do you think?"

"But that would be wonderful," said Lü Liuliang delightedly. "We leave for Yangzhou tomorrow, then. If the two of you will just sit here for a moment, I'll go and tell my wife to start getting things ready."

He hurried off to the inner quarters, but was back in the study again after only a few minutes.

"About this *Ming History* business," he said. "I've heard a good deal of talk about it outside, but you can't believe everything people say; and in any case they conceal a lot of what they *do* know out of fear. I'm so isolated here, I have no means of finding out the truth. Tell me, how *did* it all begin?"

Gu Yanwu sighed.

"We've all seen this *Ming History*. There are, inevitably, passages in it which are not very complimentary to the Tartars. It was written by Zhu Guozhen, who, as you know, was a former Chancellor at the Ming court. When he came to write about the 'antics of the Paramount Chief of the Jianzhou tribe', which is how the Ming court used to refer to the Tartars, it's a bit hard to see how he *could* have been polite."

Lü nodded:

"I heard somewhere that a member of the Zhuang family of Huzhou paid one of Chancellor Zhu's heirs a thousand taels of silver for the manuscript and published it under his own name—never dreaming, of course, that it would lead to such terrible consequences."

Gu went on to tell him the whole story.

2. *The Ming History*

Hangzhou, Jiaxing and Huzhou, the three prefectures of Zhejiang around the southern shores of Lake Taihu, are situated on flat, low-lying and extremely fertile soil. It is an area which produces rice and silk in abundance. Huzhou has always been a great cultural centre, the home of many artists and men of letters. Shen Yue in the sixth century, who first gave names to the four tones of the Chinese language, and Zhao Mengfu in the thirteenth, equally famous for painting and for calligraphy, were both Huzhou men. Huzhou is also famous for its writing-brushes. The brushes of Huzhou, the ink-sticks of Huizhou, Xuancheng paper, and the ink-stones of Zhaoqing and Duan are celebrated the world over as the writer's Four Most Precious Things.

Nanxun in the prefecture of Huzhou, though it has only the status of a market town, is actually larger than the average county town or district

capital. Among the richest and most distinguished of its many wealthy families was the Zhuang family, whose most opulent representative at the time we are writing of was one Zhuang Yuncheng. Zhuang Yuncheng had several sons. The eldest of them, Zhuang Tinglong, was devoted to literature from his early youth and had many friends and acquaintances among the Southern intelligentsia. Some time during the Shunzhi period, in the forties of the seventeenth century, probably because of excessive reading, he lost his sight. The best doctors to be had were called in to treat him, but their efforts proved unavailing, leaving him not only permanently blind but in a chronic state of depression.

Then one day a young man called Zhu suddenly turned up in the Zhuangs' neighbourhood with a manuscript, written, he said, by his grandfather the Chancellor, which he offered as security for a loan of several hundred taels. Zhuang Yuncheng was a generous man and in any case well-disposed towards anyone claiming relationship with the famous Chancellor. He agreed at once to the loan but waived the need for a security. However, the young man insisted on depositing the manuscript. He said he was going on his travels as soon as he had the money and feared it might get lost if he took it with him. On the other hand he was nervous about leaving it at home. So Zhuang *père* took the manuscript and, after young Zhu had gone, gave it to his retainers—to read from it by way of a diversion to his blind son.

The greater part of Zhu's *Ming History* had by this time found its way into print and was already in circulation. This manuscript that his grandson had given the Zhuangs as security was the final, still unpublished, part consisting of individual biographies. After listening for some days to the retainers' readings from it with growing interest, Zhuang Tinglong suddenly had an idea.

"Among the ancients Zuo Qiuming was blind like me, yet a book of history, *The Chronicles of Zuo*, has made him famous for all time. Because of my blindness I've got nothing to do and I'm bored. Why don't I too write a history that will live on after I have gone?"

The very rich have few problems about getting things done. No sooner was the wish expressed than amanuenses were engaged to read through the manuscript, paragraph by paragraph, to the blind man, deleting or correcting whatever he thought should be suppressed and taking down at his dictation whatever he wanted to add.

But because of his blindness he had no means of checking references or conducting wide-ranging research. He reflected, with dismay, that if the work he had just completed should prove full of errors, he would not only fail to win the fame he coveted, but would become an object of derision. And so, in order that the book might be as perfect as possible, more large sums of money were spent on engaging the services of distinguished specialists to revise and edit it. In the case of those very learned scholars whose services were not to be had for money, Zhuang Tinglong used whatever connections he had to woo them with humbly-worded invitations.

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The area round Lake Taihu has always been a great place for scholars. Partly because they pitied Tinglong for his blindness and admired his singleness of purpose, and partly because they felt the editing of a Ming history to be an intrinsically worthwhile thing to do, nearly all of those who received invitations made their way to the Zhuang residence and spent a week or two as guests of the family, correcting mistakes, making improvements or even adding a chapter or two to the text. The new *Ming History* in its completed form was now a collective work by a number of very distinguished hands. Then shortly after its completion Zhuang Tinglong died.

Grief for the death of his beloved son prompted Zhuang Yuncheng to undertake the printing of the book without delay. In the Manchu period getting a book printed was no simple matter. Before the actual printing could begin, engravers had to be found to cut the many, many wooden blocks each representing a double page of the text. And since this *Ming History* was a large work in many chapters, the cost of engraving and printing it would be vast. Fortunately the Zhuangs had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of money. They set aside several spacious rooms to serve as workshops, engaged large numbers of printers and engravers, and in the course of several years succeeded in getting the whole work into print. It was entitled *An Epitome of Ming History*. The author's name was given as Zhuang Tinglong and a distinguished scholar, Li Lingxi, was invited to write a preface. In it the names of the scholars who had helped in the production of the book were listed, eighteen of them in all. There was also a statement to the effect that the book had been based on an original manuscript by a Mr Zhu. As a former Chancellor at the Ming court, Zhu Guozhen's name was too well-known to be mentioned in full. 'Mr Zhu's manuscript' was deemed the least dangerous way in which the book's origin could be referred to.

After undergoing the improvements of so many gifted scholars, this *Epitome of Ming History* was, needless to say, immaculate in the organisation and presentation of its material; its historical narratives, though rich in detail, were of commendable clarity; and the whole of it was written in the most elegantly beautiful prose. Its publication was greeted with acclaim by the learned world. It should be added that the Zhuangs, being more interested in fame than in profit, had, to encourage circulation, released the book for sale at a very reasonable price.

In its treatment of the period when the Manchus play a part in the story the original manuscript had frequently had occasion to make critical or damaging allegations. These had all been carefully removed by the scholarly editors. Inevitably, though, some passages in which the Ming court was presented in a favourable light remained untouched. This was not long after the fall of the Ming, and educated readers still felt a patriotic nostalgia for the old régime. The book therefore had an enormous circulation as soon as it was published and Zhuang Tinglong's name was on everyone's lips, both north and south of the River. Grieved though he was for the loss of his eldest

son, Zhuang *père* could take some comfort from the fact that the young man had become famous after his death.

But these were bad times when bad men came into their own and the good were often persecuted.

In the Gui'an district of Huzhou prefecture the District Magistrate, one Wu Zhirong by name, had earned the fierce hatred of all the local people by his corrupt and oppressive practices. In the end someone denounced him to the higher authorities and an order arrived from the Court commanding his instant dismissal.

During his tenure of the Gui'an magistracy this Wu Zhirong had, by his nefarious extortions, accumulated a sum of more than ten thousand taels; but in order to avert the dreaded Search and Confiscation Order which might otherwise have followed his dismissal, he found it necessary to spend a great deal of money on bribes—so much, indeed, that by the time he had finished, not a tael of the ill-gotten ten thousand remained. The circle of dependants who had accompanied him on his tour of duty had by this time melted away. Alone, jobless and penniless, he was reduced to knocking on rich men's doors and soliciting 'subscriptions' to pay his way back home. He presented himself as a poor but honest official who had lost his job through misfortune and lacked even the money to return. At some of the houses he visited they fobbed him off with small sums of eight or ten taels to save themselves further trouble, but when he came to the residence of the Zhu family, the master of the house, Mr Zhu Youming, a very rich but extremely upright gentleman and a great stickler for morality, not only refused to make any contribution but gave him a dressing-down into the bargain.

"During your period of office you did a great deal of harm to the people in this area," he said. "If I had any money to give away, I would sooner give it to the poor people you despoiled."

Wu was furious, but there was nothing he could do about it. Now that he had been cashiered, he no longer had the power or authority to try consequences with wealthy local magnates. He decided to go and visit Zhuang Yuncheng.

As an assiduous patron and cultivator of impoverished men of learning, Zhuang had the profoundest contempt for venal officials like Wu. When the latter arrived with his request, he laughed disdainfully and handed him a packet containing a single tael of silver.

"When I consider the sort of person you are," he said, "I'm not sure I ought to be giving you this. However, the people of Huzhou are longing to see the back of you, so, insofar as this single tael may slightly hasten your departure, I suppose it will do some good."

While he struggled to conceal his fury, Wu's eye chanced to light on a copy of the *Epitome of Ming History* lying on the sitting-room table.

"This Zhuang fellow likes to be flattered," he thought. "You've only got to say what a wonderful job they've made of this *Ming History*, and he'll be handing out the white and shiny without so much as batting an eyelid."

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He smiled ingratiatingly.

"It would be discourteous of me to refuse your contribution, Mr Zhuang," he said, "but actually my big regret in leaving Huzhou now is that I can't take a copy of the Treasure of Huzhou with me. It would have been an eye-opener to the provincial folk back home."

"What do you mean by the 'Treasure of Huzhou?'" asked Zhuang.

Wu smiled.

"You are being modest, Mr Zhuang. In educated company one is constantly hearing that the *Epitome of Ming History* from the brush of your late son, whether from the point of view of historical genius, command of material or style, is an achievement rarely paralleled in any age. Already they speak of the Four Great Historians, Zuo, Ma, Ban and Zhuang. The 'Treasure of Huzhou' is, of course, the *Ming History* from the brush of your late son."

These repeated references to "the brush of your late son" brought a glow of pleasure to the parental bosom of Zhuang Yuncheng. He knew that his son had not literally written the whole *History* himself and the knowledge was a source of some regret. The words used by Wu had therefore struck a responsive chord, prompting the following favourable reflection:

"This man is certainly corrupt, and, as they all say, a sordid money-grubber; but he is, after all, educated and can be credited with some discernment. So they are calling Longie's book the 'Treasure of Huzhou' now, are they? I must admit, it's the first I've heard of it."

In spite of his wish to be severe, a broad smile suffused his face.

"This expression you just referred to, the 'Four Great Historians, Zuo, Ma, Ban and Zhuang'," he said: "I don't quite understand it, Mr Wu. You will have to elucidate."

The sudden change of expression on the old man's face from sternness to one of affability showed that his vanity had been tickled. Wu observed it and rejoiced.

"You really are too modest, Mr Zhuang," he said. "The *Chronicle of Zuo* by Zuo Qiuming, the *Annals of an Historian* by Sima Qian, and Ban Gu's *History of the Han Dynasty* are universally recognised to be the greatest histories ever written. From Ban Gu's time until recently there hasn't been any really great historian. Ouyang Xiu's *History of the Five Dynasties* and Sima Guang's *Mirror of History*, though stylistically very fine, lack the touch of genius. Not until our great Qing era, with the appearance of this magnificent *Epitome of Ming History* from the brush of your late son, has there been anything to bear comparison with those great works of the past. Hence the coining of this new expression, 'the Four Great Historians, Zuo, Ma, Ban and Zhuang'."

By now Zhuang was beaming.

"Too kind, too kind," he said, pumping his clasped hands in courteous deprecation. "But 'the Treasure of Huzhou', you know- that I cannot allow."

"Why ever not?" Wu replied with a perfectly straight face. "There's even a rhyme going the rounds now which says so:

Brushes, silk and a book
 Are Huzhou's treasures three.
 And the greatest one among them
 Is Zhuang's *History*."

Silk and writing-brushes were in fact the two products for which Huzhou was famous. For all that he was a vulgar philistine, Wu was gifted with a certain verbal dexterity and his neat coupling of 'Zhuang's *History*' with 'Hu brushes' and 'Hu silk', as they were called, had the desired effect of making Zhuang even more delighted.

Wu pressed on.

"I arrived here to take up the magistracy in this area with a clean slate, Mr Zhuang, and I am leaving it no richer than I came. Let me be bold. My real reason for visiting you today was to beg a copy of the *Ming History*. It would become an heirloom in our family. My sons and grandsons would read and study it day and night. It would improve their minds. It would enable them to get the sort of jobs that would make them a credit to their ancestors. And all that would be thanks to your generous gift."

"You shall have a copy, of course," said Zhuang graciously.

Wu added a few politenesses, but his host showed no sign of moving. He was obliged to fall back on further eulogies of the *Ming History*. In point of fact he hadn't read a single page of it and his eloquent comments on the book's amazing historical genius, superb command of material, etc., etc. were a farrago of wholly irrelevant babble.

Zhuang at last got up.

"Make yourself comfortable, will you, Mr Wu, while I leave you for a moment," he said, and retreated to an inner room.

After a long wait, a servant came in with a large cloth-wrapped bundle, set it down on the table and went out again. Since there was no sign of Zhuang returning, Wu quickly lifted the bundle from the table and tested it for weight. In spite of its bulk, it was light as a feather and could not, he concluded with dismay, contain any silver. After he had waited a little longer, Zhuang came in again, ceremoniously picked up the bundle from the table with both hands and smilingly presented it to his guest.

"Since you have shown your appreciation of our Huzhou products, Mr Wu, allow me to present you with this sample."

Wu thanked him and took his leave. On his way back to the inn where he was staying he slipped his hand inside the bundle and felt around. The contents turned out to be a book, a hank of raw silk and a few dozen writing-brushes. So all that ingenious talk which he had hoped would bring him not only the book but several hundred taels to go with it had been wasted! That brilliant bit about the 'three treasures of Huzhou' which he had invented on the spur of the moment had been taken literally and Zhuang had, though not in the sense he intended, given him what he asked for.

"Damnation!" he thought. "They're all so mean, these Nanxun millionaires. —But whatever possessed me to say that? If I'd told him that the three

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treasures of Huzhou were gold, silver and the *Ming History*, I might have made quite a haul.”

He reached the inn in a thoroughly bad temper, dumped the bundle on the table, threw himself down on the bed and was soon asleep. When he woke up it was already dark. The inn had long since ceased serving supper, but he didn't feel he could afford to order a separate meal. What with the pangs of hunger and anxiety about his predicament, there seemed little prospect of his getting to sleep again. To pass the time he took the *Epitome* from the bundle, opened it up and began to read.

After he had read a few pages, he thought he could see the glint of gold. He turned over the page and there, shining before him, was a whole sheet of gold leaf. His heart pounded with excitement. Could it be? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Yes, it was gold all right. He picked up each volume in turn and shook it wildly. From each of them sheets of gold leaf dropped out, ten in all. Each sheet, he calculated, must weigh at least five pennyweights. That meant a total of five taels of gold. The relative value of gold to silver at that time was eighty to one, so five taels of gold represented four hundred taels of silver.

Wu's joy knew no bounds.

“That Zhuang's a crafty old devil,” he thought. “He was afraid that once I'd got him to give me a copy of the book, I might throw it aside and forget it without even looking at the contents. He put these sheets of gold leaf inside this copy of his son's book to make sure that only the first person who actually *read* it should have them. —All right, then. I'll read two or three more chapters, and when I call round tomorrow to thank him for the gold, I'll recite a few passages from memory and tell him how wonderful they are. Then—who knows?—he might cough up a whole lot more.”

At once he trimmed up the lamp, opened the book again and began reading aloud to himself from the text. On and on he droned until suddenly—he had just reached the year 1616—his heart missed a beat. It was the year in which the Manchu Nurhaci proclaimed himself First Emperor of the Later Jin Dynasty, but here in the book it was referred to as “the forty-fourth year of the Ming Emperor Wanli”. He read swiftly on. Here it was again: the year 1627 when Abahai succeeded Nurhaci as emperor of Later Jin was referred to as “the seventh year of the Ming Emperor Tianqi”; 1636, when Abahai changed the name of the Manchu Dynasty from ‘Later Jin’ to ‘Qing’, was given as ‘the ninth year of the Ming Emperor Chongzhen’; 1645 was called ‘the first year of Longwu’ and 1647 ‘the first year of Yongli’. (‘Longwu’ and ‘Yongli’ were the reign-titles of Prince Tang and Prince Gui, Ming princes who set up short-lived régimes in the South after the Manchus had established themselves in Peking.) It was patently obvious that the author of the book had followed Ming court practice throughout for his dates, totally disregarding the existence of the Manchus.

Wu hit the table with a mighty thump and involuntarily let out a shout. “But this is treason! This is outrageous!”

Nurhaci (1559–1626)

偷庫佛士天



The table was shaken so much by his blow that the lamp fell over, splashing his hands and the front of his gown with oil. As he sat there in the dark he had a sudden inspiration that made him fairly crow with delight.

"Dear God," he thought, "I thank you for this windfall! This could make me rich. I could be promoted."

His heart so warmed at the prospect that he let out a great whoop of joy. It was shortly followed by an urgent knocking at the door.

"Hello, sir. Hello. Are you all right?"

"It's nothing," he said, laughing. "I'm all right."

He re-lit the lamp and went back to his reading. The neighbourhood cocks were crowing when he finally broke off and threw himself, fully clothed, on to his bed. From time to time he chuckled in his sleep. He had discovered between seventy and eighty violations of taboo.

Whenever there is a change of Dynasty, the incoming régime is always extremely sensitive about dates. There is insistence that the new forms should be used correctly. Lapses, whether in speech or writing, of a kind likely to awaken nostalgic memories of the previous Dynasty are regarded as particularly heinous. As a narrative of Ming events, the *Epitome of Ming History* had throughout followed the Ming system of dating; but though this had seemed perfectly natural to the original author, it was likely to have disastrous consequences at a time when new regulations about these matters were being applied with ever-increasing stringency. Most of the scholarly specialists who had taken part in the editing had worked on only one or two sections of the book and never read it through, whilst those who worked on the last few sections were precisely the ones with the most inveterate hatred of the new court, men for whom the use of the 'Great Qing' formula in a book like this would have been unthinkable. As for Zhuang Tinglong himself: it was hardly surprising that a wealthy young amateur who was moreover blind should have overlooked loopholes that a mean-spirited reader might exploit.

At noon next day Wu took an east-going boat to Hangzhou. There, as soon as he had found lodgings, he wrote out a letter of denunciation and delivered it, together with his copy of the *History*, to the headquarters of General Songkui, the Military Governor, confident that as soon as the General saw it, he would be summoned for an interview.

This was a period in which anyone who gave the Manchu authorities information leading to the apprehension of a rebel could expect a very generous reward. In return for so important a service Wu could be sure at the very least of getting back his old post and perhaps of being promoted two or three grades as well. Yet though he waited and waited in his lodgings until he had been staying in the same inn for more than half a year, and though he went every single day to the General's headquarters to make inquiries, there was no response. It was as if he had dropped a pebble into the sea. Eventually the people on the reception desk lost patience with him and forbade him, with much angry shouting, to come troubling them any more.

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The Four Ming Princes



Wu was by now extremely worried. The money he had got from selling the gold leaf given him by Zhuang Yuncheng had now all been spent, yet the project on which he had invested it all had come to nothing. Not only was he vexed and worried; he was also puzzled.

Then one day while he was out strolling in the city he chanced to find himself outside the Wen Tong Tang bookshop. He had no intention of buying anything, but he thought he would step inside and browse for a bit to help while away the long day. As he did so he noticed, among the other books on the shelves, three copies of the *Epitome of Ming History*.

"Surely," he thought, "those things I found wrong with the book ought to have been enough to get Zhuang Yuncheng arrested? I'll just have another look and see if I can find some really seditious bits. Then tomorrow I'll write another letter and take it to the General's headquarters."

The Provincial Governor of Zhejiang at this time was a Chinese civilian; the Military Governor was a Manchu. Wu was afraid that, as a Chinese, the Provincial Governor might be unwilling to start a literary witch-hunt in his area. That is why he was determined that the Military Governor should be the one to receive his denunciation.

He took a copy down from the shelf, opened it up and began to read. He hadn't read more than a few pages when he experienced the sort of shock you might get from accidentally stepping into an ice-pit. All those bits he had listed as likely to give offence to the new régime had disappeared without trace. From 1615 onwards, the year in which Nurhaci proclaimed himself emperor, every single date was expressed in terms of Jin or Qing reign-titles. The disparaging references to the "antics of the paramount chief of the Jianzhou tribe" had vanished. So had all references to the Southern courts of the Ming princes as those of legitimate rulers. And yet there were no breaks in the text, no signs of erasure or alteration. Every page was as immaculate as if it had never been other than it was now. What conjurer's magic could have produced so extraordinary a transformation? For some time he stood there in the bookshop, holding the book in both his hands and gawping foolishly. Then the solution he was puzzling for came to him.

"Of course!" he said to himself out loud.

The cover of the book was brand-new, the pages were dazzling white, and when he made a few inquiries of the bookseller's assistant, the latter confirmed that the Huzhou agent had only recently delivered it. The copies had in fact only been in stock for seven or eight days.

"That Zhuang's a cunning devil," he thought. "No wonder they say money can work miracles. He's withdrawn the book, had new blocks cut and brought out a new edition in which all the offensive bits have been removed. Humph, you won't get away with it that easily, my friend!"

Wu's surmise was correct. General Songkui, the Military Governor in Hangzhou, was unable to read Chinese. Wu's letter had gone straight to his Chinese secretary, who had broken out in a cold sweat when he saw its contents. He knew what serious repercussions a letter like this would have and his hands, as they held it, shook uncontrollably.

*Dorgon (1612–1650),
Ababai (1592–1643), the
Empress Xiaozhuang (1613–1688),
and the Shunzhi Emperor
(1638–1661)*



The name of this secretary was Cheng Weifan, a Shaoxing man, like a great many other Yamen secretaries of the Ming and Qing periods—so many, indeed, that ‘Shaoxing secretary’ and ‘Yamen secretary’ had become almost synonyms. These Shaoxing secretaries were trained by their older countrymen in the mysteries of their profession before they entered employment, so that when they did so they were able to discharge their duties, whether legal or financial, with complete assurance. All official correspondence passed through their hands; and since they were all fellow-countrymen, it was very unusual for documents sent for approval from a lower to a higher Yamen to meet with criticism or refusal. For this reason the first thing any candidate for office would do on receiving his posting would be to acquire, at whatever cost, the services of a Shaoxing secretary. During the Ming and Qing dynasties very few Shaoxing men reached positions of authority, yet for several centuries they virtually controlled the administration. This is one of the great paradoxes of Chinese history.

This Cheng Weifan was a good-hearted man. He subscribed to the precept that ‘good works may be done in a Yamen’, by which it is meant that, since a government official has powers of life and death over the people under his jurisdiction, and since, as a consequence, the secretary who takes down his commands can, by a mere shift of emphasis, either utterly ruin a man or save him from certain death, it follows that merit may more effectively be acquired in a Yamen, by saving lives, than by prayer and fasting in a monastery. Aware as he was that if this *Ming History* business was allowed to get out of hand it could threaten the lives and fortunes of countless people in the whole of West Zhejiang, he knew he must act swiftly. He asked the General for a few days’ leave, hired a boat to take him to Nanxun in Huzhou prefecture, travelling through the night for greater speed, and went straight to see Zhuang Yuncheng on his arrival.

The effect of suddenly being made aware of the calamity that hung over him was to deprive Zhuang Yuncheng temporarily of his faculties. His whole body became paralysed, a dribble of saliva ran from his mouth, and for some time he was incapable of making any response. Eventually he rose from his chair, plumped down on both his knees and, knocking his head several times on the floor, thanked Cheng Weifan for his kindness. Then he asked him what he should do.

Cheng Weifan had had plenty of time to think things over on the long boat journey from Hangzhou to Nanxun and had come up with what seemed like a good plan. The *Epitome of Ming History* had already been in circulation for some time. It was therefore too late for concealment. The only expedient left was to reduce the damage already done—by pulling the burning brands from under the pot, as it were, in order to reduce the heat. Let Zhuang send people to the bookshops to buy back all copies of the book they could lay their hands on and destroy them; and meanwhile let him set the engravers to work day and night on a new edition from which all the offensive bits had been removed. Then let him release this new edition. When the authorities started investigating, they would submit the new

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edition for their inspection. Wu's charges would be dismissed as groundless and a hideous disaster would have been averted.

Zhuang Yuncheng listened with a mixture of surprise and delight as Cheng Weifan unfolded his plan and kowtowed many times in gratitude when he had finished. The latter added a number of tips on handling the authorities—which officials to bribe and how much, which secretaries in which Yamens to contact, and so on—all of which were gratefully received.

After his return to Hangzhou, Cheng Weifan allowed more than two weeks to go by before forwarding Wu's letter and copy of the book to the civilian Governor of Zhejiang, a certain Zhu Changzuo. He added a brief covering note in which he played the affair down as much as possible, pointing out that the writer of the letter was an ex-magistrate who had been cashiered for dishonesty and who appeared to be motivated by some grudge. He ended by praying His Excellency to kindly look into the matter and deal with it as he thought fit.

While Wu sat in his Hangzhou lodgings anxiously waiting for news, a regular flood of silver from Zhuang Yuncheng was busy doing its work. By the time the file reached Zhu Changzuo, the Military Governor's Yamen, the Provincial Governor's Yamen and the Literary Chancellor's Yamen were already in receipt of very substantial bribes. Matters of publication fell within the domain of the Literary Chancellor, the Governor decided, so after holding on to the file for a fortnight or so, he passed it on with another covering note to the Literary Chancellor, Hu Shangheng. Following its arrival in the Literary Chancellor's office, the secretary managed to put off opening it for about three weeks. He then took a month's sick leave, and only after his return set about, albeit very slowly, drawing up a directive to be sent in due course, along with the book and the rest of the file, to the Chief Education Officer in Huzhou prefecture. This individual managed a delay of some three weeks or more before issuing directives to the Education Officers of Gui'an District and Wucheng District requiring them to furnish him with a report. Long in advance of this, both Education Officers had received hefty bribes from Zhuang Yuncheng; and by this time the printing of the revised *Epitome of Ming History* had been completed, so they were able to send in copies of the new edition along with their reports. In these they stated—the words of one more or less echoing the words of the other—that they had read the whole book carefully, that they had found it indifferently and somewhat carelessly written, with little in its contents conducive to moral uplift, but that they had failed to find any instances in which taboos, regulations concerning the correct wording of dates, etc., had been infringed. And so, in huggemugger fashion, the affair was laid to rest.

Wu had realised what he was up against ever since he had come across the new edition of the *Epitome* in the Hangzhou bookshop. He now saw that he would only get the case reopened if he could find another copy of the original edition. In all the Hangzhou bookshops every copy of it appeared to have been bought up by the Zhuangs. He therefore set about hunting for one in the remoter towns and cities of East Zhejiang; but there, too, not a

single copy was to be had. In the end, disconsolate and now nearly penniless, he was forced to acknowledge himself beaten and to make his way back home.

It was at this low point in his fortunes that he had a sudden stroke of luck. Putting up one night on his homeward journey at an inn, he chanced to observe the landlord nodding his head and rocking himself to and fro as he read from some book. The book turned out on inspection to be the *Epitome of Ming History*, and when he asked to borrow it for a few moments to have a look at it, it proved, to his boundless delight, to be the original edition. He calculated that if he asked to buy it the innkeeper would probably refuse; and in any case he wouldn't be *able* to buy it because he hadn't got the money. The only thing was to steal it. So he tiptoed from his bed at dead of night, stole the book and slipped from the inn without being observed.

Wu was pretty sure that all the relevant officials in Zhejiang province had received Zhuang's bribes.

"Very well," he thought to himself: "in for a penny, in for a pound!" and resolved to take the case all the way to Peking.

When he got to Peking, Wu wrote out three more copies of his denunciation, one addressed to the Board of Rites, one to the Court of Censors, and one to the Chancellery, this time adding an account of how the Zhuang family had evaded justice by bribing government officials and by printing a new, innocent edition of the seditious book.

To his astonishment, this denunciation, too, was rejected. After waiting in Peking for a whole month, he received the same dismissive reply from all three departments. They had carefully examined the *Epitome of Ming History* by Zhuang Tinglong and found no infringements. The allegations made by the cashiered District Officer Wu Zhirong were without foundation and maliciously inspired. As for his allegations about the bribery of officials, these appeared to be totally groundless. The Chancellery's finding was even more severe, stating that "the said Wu Zhirong, having himself been dismissed from office for corrupt practices, was evidently seeking to tar the honest majority of officials with the same brush."

Acting on Cheng Weifan's advice, Zhuang Yuncheng had long before this sent copies of the new edition to the Board of Rites, the Court of Censors and the Chancellery, and suitable *douceurs* to the relevant officials and secretaries.

Once more Wu had got a nose full of soot for his pains; and as he now had no money left for his journey back home, he was faced with the prospect of becoming a down-and-out in a city in which he was still a stranger.

The Manchu court was at this period extremely severe in its treatment of Chinese intellectuals. Normally the punishment for the slightest infringement of a taboo found in their writings would be summary execution by beheading. If the charges made by Wu had been laid against an ordinary writer, they would long since have been acted on. It was only because their

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target was the member of a very wealthy family that he had encountered so many obstacles.

Since he had no other course to fall back on, he resolved, even at the risk of imprisonment, to follow this case through to the bitter end. He wrote out four more copies of his denunciation which he addressed to four great Counsellors of State. At the same time, sitting in his Peking lodgings, he wrote out several hundred copies of a hand-bill outlining his main charges which he pasted up everywhere in the city. This was a very dangerous thing to do, for if the authorities decided to investigate the source of the hand-bills, he might well face a charge of spreading alarmist reports or inciting public disquiet, for which the mandatory penalty was execution.

Soni, Suksaha, Ebilun and Oboi were the names of the Counsellors of State whom Wu chose to be the recipients of his letter. These four Manchu statesmen, each of them distinguished for the part he had played in the foundation of the new state, had been nominated by the dying emperor Shunzhi to act as regents during the minority of his heir. Oboi was by far the most formidable of the four. His was the most numerous following at court and at this time virtually all the powers of government were concentrated in his hands. In spite of this he remained excessively fearful of his political rivals and employed a regular army of informers, both at the capital and in the provinces, to keep an eye on their activities. It was from a secret report sent in by one of these spies that he learned of the handbills which had been appearing all over Peking denouncing as guilty of treason a Zhejiang commoner called Zhuang who had written a seditious book, and claiming that the Zhejiang authorities had taken bribes to hush the matter up.

On receipt of this information Oboi at once ordered an investigation. Now at last things began to move, this time with lightning speed. And just at this moment Wu's letter was delivered to Oboi's residence. Oboi summoned him for an interview without delay and closely questioned him. He ordered his Chinese secretaries to take the copy of the *Epitome* in its original edition which Wu had brought with him and look through it carefully. Wu's allegations were now all substantiated.

Oboi, who had won his dukedom and high office by virtue of his military exploits, had an inveterate contempt for civilians, especially Chinese officials and men of letters. In order to consolidate his monopoly of power in the state he needed one or two big show-trials which would cow men's minds into submission, not only to extinguish Chinese hopes of a rebellion, but also as a means of deterring the rival factions at court from acting against him. A Special Commissioner was accordingly despatched to Zhejiang to pursue the investigation. His first act was to arrest all members of the Zhuang family and send them off to Peking. General Songkui and the Civil Governor of Zhejiang, Zhu Changzuo, all members of their staffs and all subordinate officials of whatever rank were immediately suspended and placed under investigation; and all those scholars whose names were inscribed in the preface of the *Epitome* were clapped in irons and imprisoned.

3. *By the Slow Process*

This was the story that Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi related in all its details to Lü Liuliang and to which Lü listened attentively, with many a sigh and groan. When it was time to retire, the three of them shared the same bedroom and lay awake far into the night discussing the world's affairs: how, in the penultimate reign of the Ming Dynasty, the evil eunuch Wei Zhongxian had gained control of the government by encompassing the deaths of good, loyal ministers; how the weakening of the state by his disastrous policies had hastened the fall of the Dynasty; and how, since the arrival of the Manchus, the Chinese people had been cruelly massacred and subjected to every conceivable suffering, to which they now responded with a deep and bitter hatred of their oppressors.

First thing next morning Lü Liuliang with his wife and sons and his two friends Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi embarked on their journey to Yangzhou. South of the River even households of quite moderate means had their own boat. This was a land of lakes and rivers, criss-crossed in all directions by canals and waterways, where journeys were normally made not by land but by water, so that it was often said, "the Northerner goes a-horseback, the Southerner by boat."

Their plan, when they reached Hangzhou, was to turn into the Grand Canal and travel northwards. While they were moored for the night outside the city, they heard some news. The Manchu court had already sentenced a large number of those involved in the *Ming History* case, both officials and commoners. Zhuang Tinglong could not be executed because he was already dead, so they had broken open his coffin and gibbeted his corpse. Zhuang Yuncheng had died in prison of maltreatment. Of the rest of the Zhuang family, which numbered some forty or fifty members, all the males over the age of fifteen had been beheaded; the females were being transported to Mukden to be the slaves of Manchu Bannermen. The former Vice-President of the Board of Rites Li Lingxi who had written the preface to the *Epitome* had been sentenced to execution 'by the slow process' and his four sons had been beheaded. The youngest of them, a lad of barely sixteen, had been ordered by the law officers, who felt some compunction about the numbers being executed, to give his age as fifteen in his deposition, since under Qing law those of fifteen and under could not be executed, being sentenced to transportation instead; but the boy said that if his father and brothers were to die, he didn't want to go on living. He refused to give a lower age in his deposition and was executed along with the rest. Songkui and Zhu Changzuo were in prison awaiting sentence. The secretary Cheng Weifan had been sentenced to execution 'by the slow process'. The Education Officers of Gui'an and Wucheng had been beheaded. Countless people had been charged and sentenced on the flimsiest of evidence. The Prefect of Huzhou, who had only held office for a fortnight, was accused by the court of failing to report the facts and



receiving bribes. Along with his Justiciar, and his Sub-Director of Studies, he was sentenced to be garotted.

Wu Zhirong nourished a deep-seated hatred for the wealthy Nanxun householder Zhu Youming who had given him a piece of his mind and sent him packing when he came to his door begging for 'subscriptions'. The preface to the *Epitome* had described the book as "a revised and improved edition of an original manuscript by Mr Zhu." Wu Zhirong gave the law officers in charge of the case to understand that the 'Mr Zhu' referred to was Zhu Youming. Moreover he pointed out that the name *Youming*, which means 'Guiding Light', could be construed to mean 'Supporting the Ming' and had obviously been assumed by Zhu in defiance of the Manchu court. As a consequence Zhu Youming and all five of his sons were beheaded and the Zhu family fortune, amounting to more than a hundred thousand taels, was awarded by the Manchu court to Wu Zhirong.

What perhaps was cruellest of all was that the engravers, printers and binders who produced the book, the book-traders, booksellers and book-sellers' assistants who sold it and even—whenever they could be traced—the readers who bought it were also summarily executed. It is reliably reported that one Li Shangbai, an excise officer working in the Suzhou Customs at Xushuguan who had a great fondness for reading books of history, chancing to hear that the Chang Men Bookshop in Suzhou was selling copies of a newly-published *Ming History* the contents of which had been very highly praised, sent one of his workmen to buy a copy for him. When the man got to the shop the bookseller was out, so he sat and waited for him to return in the house next door belonging to an old gentleman called Zhu. In due course the bookseller got back, the man bought a copy of the book and delivered it to Li Shangbai, and Li read a few chapters and thought no more about it. A few months later, however, the *Ming History* affair blew up and a hunt began for all those who had either sold or bought copies of the book. By this time Li Shangbai was working in Peking. There he was charged with purchasing a seditious book and summarily executed. The Suzhou bookseller who sold him the book was also executed, and so was the workman who had been sent to buy it. Even old Mr Zhu who lived next door to the bookshop was arrested. He knew the man was buying a seditious book, he was told. Why hadn't he reported it? They would have sentenced him, too, to be executed, but as he was over seventy they sentenced him and his wife to hard labour on a distant frontier instead.

As for the Southern scholars whose collaboration Zhuang Tinglong had sought in order to lend lustre to his book and whose names were inscribed in it as co-editors, fourteen of them were executed on the same day 'by the slow process'. 'By the slow process' meant that the condemned person's body was slowly cut away, slice by slice, and only when he had endured every conceivable suffering did they finally cut off his head.

Just how many whole families were wiped out because of this one book it would be impossible to say.

The feelings of Lü Liuliang and his friends when they heard this news, their cries of anger and horror, can be imagined.

“Yihuang’s name was in the list of co-editors,” said Huang. “He’s hardly likely to escape now.”

Zha Yihuang was an old friend of all three of them. The other two shared his anxiety.

When the boat reached Jiaying, Gu Yanwu went ashore and bought a copy of the *Peking Gazette* which listed the names of all those who had been sentenced. Somewhere in the *Gazette’s* transcript of the Imperial Edict he noticed the following words:

“Zha Yihuang, Fan Xiang and Lu Qi, although listed as co-editors, had never seen the book. They are to be exempted from punishment and released from further questioning.”

Gu Yanwu took the copy of the *Gazette* back to the boat with him and went over it with the others. All three expressed their surprise at Zha Yihuang’s release.

“This must be General Wu’s doing,” said Huang Zongxi.

“General Wu?” said Lü Liuliang. “Who on earth is he?”

“When I went to visit Yihuang a couple of years ago,” said Huang Zongxi, “I found his place completely and utterly transformed. There was an enormous garden. The fittings and furnishings of his house, in total contrast to what they were like before, were positively sumptuous. There was even a troupe of Kunqu players—players, moreover, of a standard it would be hard to match anywhere South of the River. Well, Yihuang and I have known each other for a very long time and have no secrets from each other, so I asked him point-blank the meaning of this transformation. The story he told me by way of explanation was one of the most extraordinary I’ve ever heard.”

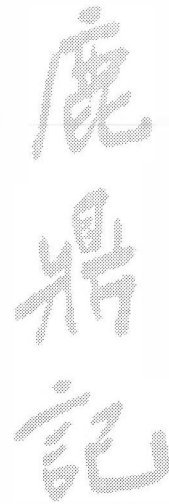
He proceeded to tell them the story as he had heard it from Zha Yihuang.

4. *The Beggar in the Snow*

Some years back Zha Yihuang had been sitting at home one day towards the end of the year, drinking on his own, when it began to snow. After a while it was snowing hard, and, as he was growing bored with his own company, he went to see what it was looking like outside. As he did so, he saw a beggar sheltering under the eaves. He was a tall, powerfully-built man, evidently not someone to be trifled with. Although dressed only in a ragged, unlined gown, he showed not the slightest sign of being affected by the cold, but his face had an aggrieved, angry expression on it. Zha Yihuang was conscious of something about him very much out of the ordinary.

“This snow is not going to stop for quite a while yet,” said Zha Yihuang to the man. “How about coming inside for a drink?”

“Good idea,” said the beggar.



Zha Yihuang showed him into the house, ordered the servant to bring another winecup and a pair of chopsticks and poured out a drink for them both.

“Your health,” he said.

The beggar raised his winecup and drained it at a gulp.

“Good wine,” he said appreciatively.

Zha Yihuang poured him three more cupfuls in succession and the beggar drank them down with evident gusto. Zha Yihuang was pleased. He liked to see someone enjoying himself uninhibitedly.

“You have a good capacity, my friend!” he said. “How many cups can you drink?”

“In the right company a thousand cups is too few; in the wrong company a single word is too many.”

The well-known saying, though unremarkable in itself, struck Zha Yihuang as somewhat odd coming from the mouth of a beggar. He gave instructions to his servant to get out a large jar of Shaoxing Rosy Girl.

“My own capacity is pretty limited,” he said to the beggar, “and in any case, I have already been drinking, so I can’t keep up with you cup for cup. How would it be if you drank from a bowl while I drink from a smaller cup?”

The beggar replied that he had no objection.

Zha Yihuang’s pageboy first heated up the wine and then poured it out for them, a big winebowlful for the beggar, a tiny winecupful for Zha. After twenty or more rounds Zha passed out; the beggar, though, apart from being very slightly flushed, showed no other sign of being the least bit tipsy.

It should be explained that Shaoxing Rosy Girl seems harmless enough while you are drinking it but is actually extremely potent. In Shaoxing families it is the custom when a baby is born to make anything from a few jars to several dozen jars of the wine and bury them in the ground. If the child is a girl, they wait till she has grown up and use the wine for her wedding-feast. By the time it is dug up, it will have gone a deep amber colour: hence the name ‘Rosy Girl’. The wine will have been in the ground by then for anything from sixteen to twenty-odd years, so you can imagine how strong it is. If the baby is a boy, they call the wine ‘Rosy Top Boy’, the idea being that it can be used at the celebration-party when the son comes out top in the Civil Service examination. Of course, very few do, so in the majority of cases it is used for the son’s marriage-feast. The names ‘Rosy Girl’ and ‘Rosy Top Boy’ are also given to wines made commercially and sold in the wine-shops.

While the page-boy helped Zha into the rear part of the house and put him to bed, the beggar went outside of his own accord and took up his original place beneath the eaves.

Early next morning, having by now sobered up again, Zha hurried outside to see what had become of the beggar. He found him standing, hands behind his back, apparently enjoying the view. Just then a sudden gust of north wind caught him, chilling him to the marrow of his bones. The beggar

appeared to be completely unaffected by it; nevertheless Zha took off his sheepskin-lined gown and put it round the man's shoulders.

"Here," he said. "Your clothes are a bit too thin for this freezing weather."

He got out ten taels of silver and offered them to him politely, with both his hands.

"This is a little something to buy wine with. Please don't refuse. And whenever you feel like it, drop in again for a drink. I'm afraid I was so drunk last night, I wasn't able to offer you a bed. It was no way to treat a guest. I do apologise."

The beggar took the money.

"That's all right," he said.

And without a word of thanks, he left, swaggering slightly as he went.

Sometime in the spring of the next year Zha was on holiday in Hangzhou. One day while he was going over a ruined temple, he came upon an old bell. It was very large and must have weighed near enough four hundred catties. While he was admiring it and reading the inscription, a beggar came striding into the temple, grasped the boss of the bell with his left hand, raised the edge two feet or more off the ground, pulled out a large bowl of cooked meat and a large stoneware bottle from underneath it and then set the bell down again in its original place. Astonished by this exhibition of superhuman strength, Zha looked at the man more closely and recognised him as the beggar he had drunk with the previous winter.

"Don't you remember me?" he asked the man with a smile.

The beggar looked at him for a moment and returned his smile.

"Ha, it's you! Today it's my turn to be host. Let's have another session. Come on, come on!" He held out the bottle. "Have a drink."

Zha received the bottle and took a large swig.

"This wine's not bad," he said.

The beggar grabbed a piece of meat from the chipped bowl with his fingers.

"This is dog's meat. Will you have some?"

Zha felt slightly squeamish, but reflected that, having treated the man so far as an equal, he would probably offend him if he refused, so he overcame his repugnance and took the proffered piece of meat. Surprisingly, after chewing it for a bit, he found it sweetish and rather pleasant. So the two of them sat on the floor of the temple, passing the bottle back and forth and helping themselves with their fingers from the bowl of meat, until before long both wine and meat were finished. The beggar let out a great laugh.

"What a pity there isn't more wine! Not enough to 'get the bachelor down!'"

"Our meeting at my place last winter was a chance one," said Zha, "and our meeting here today was quite unforeseen. It looks almost as if fate intended us to be friends. I've seen how amazingly strong you are. You are obviously a very remarkable man. To have someone like you as a friend would make me very happy. If you feel like it, why don't we go to a restaurant and have some more to drink?"

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The beggar enthusiastically agreed, so the two men adjourned to the restaurant on the shore of West Lake known as 'The Tower Beyond the Tower'. Zha ordered wine for both of them and before long had once more drunk himself into insensibility. When he came to, the beggar had disappeared and no one knew where he had gone.

These events took place in the Chongzhen period, during the closing years of the Ming Dynasty. A few years later the Manchus moved south of the Wall and the Ming Dynasty was overthrown. Zha Yihuang, having now abandoned any thought of a career, was living in idleness at home. One day an army officer accompanied by five private soldiers suddenly turned up at his door.

Fearing that calamity had caught up with him, Zha was naturally alarmed; but the officer was courteous in the extreme.

"Orders of General Wu, Guangdong Headquarters, sir. I am to present you with this gift."

"Surely there must be some mistake?" said Zha. "I've never met your Commanding Officer."

The officer produced an ornamental box and extracted from it a large red presentation-card flecked with gold on which were written the words:

For Zha Yihuang Esquire

and underneath:

With the Respectful Compliments of Wu Liuqi.

"I've never even heard this man's name," Zha thought. "Whatever should he be sending me a present for?"

As he remained rapt in thought and made no response, the officer spoke again.

"The General says this is only a trifling gift, sir. He hopes you won't think it beneath you to accept."

He then got the soldiers to place two round vermilion and gold lacquer gift-boxes on the table, dropped to his knee Manchu style, and took his leave.

Zha opened the boxes. To his astonishment the first of them contained fifty taels of gold. His astonishment grew when he looked in the second box and saw that it contained six bottles of foreign wine, beautifully embellished with pearl and malachite. He ran outside, intending to make the officer take back the presents, but soldiers move at a brisk pace and the officer was already too far away to catch up with.

Zha was puzzled.

"Windfalls like this are apt to mean trouble," he thought. "I wonder if this is a trap."

Deciding that he would take no chances, he sealed the gift-boxes with strips of sealing-tape and locked them away in a closet.

Though not exactly wealthy, the Zhas were a family of some means, so Zha Yihuang did not greatly regret the gold; but he had heard about foreign wine and would dearly have liked to open one of the bottles and have a taste.

A few months went by without anything untoward happening, then one day a very expensively-dressed young man presented himself at the house, a very energetic young man who, in spite of his youth—he could not have been more than seventeen or eighteen years old—had an air of authority about him. He was accompanied by a retinue of eight attendants. As soon as he was face to face with Zha Yihuang, he fell to his knees, kowtowed and introduced himself.

“Uncle Zha, I am Wu Baoyu.”

Zha hurriedly raised him to his feet.

“I don’t think I have the honour of being your uncle. Who is your father?”

A Chinese could not in those days utter his father’s name, but Wu Baoyu found a means of conveying that his father was Wu Liuqi, Military Governor of Guangdong Province, commanding both military and naval forces.

“My father has sent me here to invite you to spend a few months with him in Guangdong, sir.”

“Some time ago I received a very generous gift from your father,” said Zha. “I’ve been feeling very uncomfortable about it ever since. You see—I’m ashamed to say this, but I have such a terrible memory—I can’t remember ever having met your father. I’m only a simple scholar and I’ve never had any dealings with high officials. Would you mind just sitting here for a moment?”

He went inside and presently came back bearing the two lacquer gift-boxes.

“Look, would you mind taking these back? I really can’t accept these presents.”

He imagined that Wu Liuqi must have been appointed Military Governor of Guangdong comparatively recently and, having somehow or other got to hear about him, had sent this costly present in order to buy his services as a secretary. But a man in a high position like that could only have got there by making himself a lackey of the Manchus and helping them in their oppression of the Chinese. He would dirty himself by taking gifts from such a man. It was a most unfortunate situation to be in.

“My father was most insistent that you should come,” said Wu Baoyu. “If you have forgotten him, I have something here which may remind you of him.”

One of the attendants handed him a bundle which he undid, revealing a very worn, ragged-looking sheepskin-lined gown. On examining it, Zha recognised it as the one he had given to the beggar in the snow, many years before. General Wu, it dawned on him at last, was none other than his old drinking-companion, the beggar. He was suddenly smitten by an idea.

“The Tartars now control everything,” he thought, “but if someone *with an army* were to raise the standard of revolt, and if there was sufficient response from other quarters, we *might* just drive them out yet. If this beggar is capable of showing gratitude for those little kindnesses I did him all those years ago, he can’t be totally lacking in honourable feelings. Suppose I were

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to appeal to his sense of patriotism—there's just a chance it might work. If I'm ever going to do something for my country, this is the time to do it. Even if the worst comes to the worst and he kills me, it will have been worth a try."

He brightened up then and agreed to undertake the journey.

When they got to Canton, General Wu's behaviour as he welcomed Zha to his private residence was almost reverential.

"That time South of the River when you treated me like a friend, inviting me in to drink with you and then giving me that sheepskin gown," he said, "—that wasn't what impressed me so much. It was afterwards in the ruined temple, the way you didn't refuse to drink out of the same bottle or eat dog's meat with your fingers. You treated me like someone you respected. At that time I was at the very bottom of my luck and no one had a good word to say for me. Coming at a moment like that, your kindness gave me an enormous lift. That I've got to where I am today is entirely owing to you."

"I'm not at all sure that today's General is a better person than that beggar in the snow," said Zha drily.

Though looking somewhat startled, Wu assented and did not pursue the matter.

That evening there was a great feast to which all the officials in Canton, both civil and military, were invited. General Wu made Zha sit in the place of honour and himself took a lower seat. The Guangdong officials, from the Provincial Governor downwards, were secretly puzzled to see the great General Wu behaving so deferentially towards his guest. The Provincial Governor concluded that Zha must be some high-ranking official from the Court, travelling incognito on a secret tour of inspection. Why otherwise would the General, who normally treated one so off-handedly, be showing all this respect for a nobody from South of the River? He had a quiet word with General Wu as the party was breaking up. Come now, wasn't this guest of his someone important from the Court?

Wu's face wore an almost imperceptible smile.

"You're a clever man, my friend. Nine times out ten your judgement of people is correct."

The answer was ironical, meaning that this was one of the tenth times when he guessed wrong; but the Provincial Governor understood it as confirmation of his guess that Zha was an Imperial Commissioner.

As this 'Commissioner Zha' was staying in the General's private residence, the latter must have had plenty of opportunity for getting into his good graces. Unfortunately the Provincial Governor and the General had never got on well together. Suppose the Commissioner's report, when he got back to Court, contained something unfavourable about him? The consequences were too fearful to contemplate.

As soon as he got back, he prepared a very substantial gift and took it first thing next morning to the private residence of the Military Governor (General Wu), intending to deliver it in person to the Commissioner. He was met by Wu, however, who said that Mr Zha had been very drunk the night before

and had still not recovered. If His Excellency would leave the gift with him, he would see that Mr Zha got it. Let His Excellency set his mind at ease; there was really nothing to worry about.

The Provincial Governor was delighted with this reassurance and repeatedly thanked the General as he left.

The news that His Excellency the Provincial Governor had taken a large gift to Mr Zha was soon known to all the officials in the area. None of them had any idea who Mr Zha was, but if His Excellency had thought it expedient to take him an expensive gift, how could they not follow suit? Before many days had gone by, the piles of presents addressed to Mr Zha in General Wu's private residence were reaching mountainous proportions. The General told the clerk who kept his accounts to record each delivery but to say nothing about the presents to Mr Zha. He himself, apart from his daily visits to headquarters to do official business, spent all his time drinking with Zha.

One day towards evening the two men sat facing each other over their customary drinks in an open pavilion in the garden. After a few rounds, Zha began to speak.

"I've been enjoying your hospitality here for quite a long time now," he said, "and I am truly grateful. But it's time I was getting back north. I should like to start tomorrow."

"How can you say such a thing?" said General Wu. "It wasn't easy to get you here, and now that you are here, I'm determined not to let you go for at least a year. Tomorrow I'll take you on an outing to the Five Storey Pagoda. There are so many famous places to visit in Guangdong. You can't possibly see them all in only a few months."

Emboldened by the wine he had drunk, Zha now took his courage in both hands.

"The scenery is beautiful," he said, "but it's all Tartar-occupied territory. Looking at it only makes me feel sad."

The General's face darkened slightly.

"Mr Zha, you're drunk. Perhaps you ought to go to bed."

"When I first met you," said Zha, "I respected you because you struck me as someone out of the ordinary who had fallen on hard times, someone I judged worthy to be a friend. But I see now that I was mistaken."

"Why do you say that?" said the General.

Zha's voice rose challengingly.

"You have so many good qualities, but instead of using them in the service of your own people, you work for the oppressor. You've turned yourself into a lackey of the Tartars, helping them to keep us Chinese enslaved. And instead of feeling ashamed, you seem to be proud of it. Well, I for my part am ashamed to be your friend."

He rose abruptly to his feet.

"Hush!" said Wu. "If anyone were to hear you talking like this, it would be more than your life is worth."

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"I'm treating you still as a friend," said Zha, "and telling you what is for your own good. If you don't want to listen, you can always kill me. I haven't the strength to truss a chicken, so you won't meet with much resistance."

"I'm listening," said Wu. "I want to hear what you have to say."

"The military forces of this whole province are under your command," said Zha. "There will never be a better opportunity for a rising. At a good clear call from above, patriots everywhere in the empire will rise up to join you. Then even if you don't succeed, the Tartars will have had a nasty shock, and with this last glorious stand you will have made worthy use of the wonderful strength and courage you are endowed with."

Wu poured out a whole bowlful of wine and drained it at a single draught.

"That was bravely said."

He grasped his gown in the middle and gave it a jerk. There was a loud rending sound as it split open down the front, exposing his great chest, covered with a mat of long black hairs. Then he parted the hair with his fingers so that Zha could see the line of small characters tattooed on his skin:

By Heaven my father and Earth my mother
I will overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming.

Zha was both startled and delighted.

"What - what - what is this?"

The General covered up his chest again.

"I was full of admiration, listening to what you said just now," he said. "In order to show me where my duty lies, you spoke from the heart, knowing that you did so at the risk of your own life and the lives of everyone you hold dear. I used to be a member of the Beggars' Guild; I am now Red Banner Master of the Obedience Lodge of the Triad Society; and I am under oath to give my life if necessary in the cause of overthrowing the Tartars and restoring the Ming."

Zha now understood the significance of the tattooed characters.

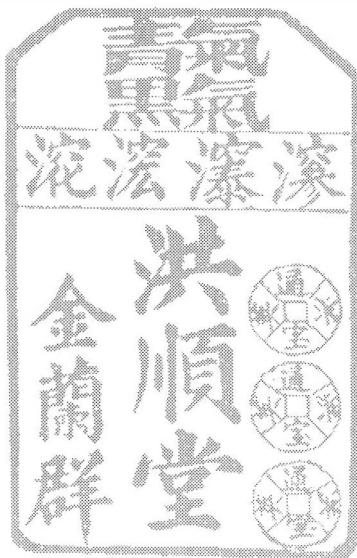
"I see," he said. "So you are 'in the Cao camp, but your heart is in Han'. I'm afraid I said some very offensive things to you just now. I hope you will forgive me."

By 'in the Cao camp' he was referring to an episode in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* when Guan Yu found himself similarly situated. To be compared with the God of War was hugely flattering. Wu modestly declined the compliment.

"But what is the Beggars' Guild?" Zha asked him. "And what is this Triad Society?"

"Let's have another cup first," said Wu. "It will take me a while to explain." They drank, and Wu began.

Certificate of the Obedience Lodge



5. *Beggars and Triads*

“There’s been a Beggars’ Guild among travelling folk since the days of the Song Dynasty. Ever since that time they have been a part of the outlaw world, part of the so-called Brotherhood of River and Lake. Members of the Guild have got to make their living by begging. Even if a rich man joins, he has to share out all his possessions and live by begging from that time onwards. The Guild has a Master; under him there are four Elders; and under the Elders there are five Guardians, one for each position: front, back, right, left and centre. I was a Guardian of the Left and my standing in the Guild was that of an Eight Bag member. Quite a high one. But then I had a disagreement with an Elder called Sun and got into a fight with him; and being drunk at the time, I hit him too hard and hurt him badly. Well, disrespect to a senior is a breach of Guild regulations for a start, but wounding an Elder is even more serious. So there was a council of the Master and the Elders and I was expelled from the Guild. That time you saw me outside your house and invited me in for a drink, I’d only just been expelled and I was feeling very low. That you should have seen fit to treat me as a friend at a time like that did a lot to raise my spirits.”

“I see,” said Zha.

“The year after that, in the spring, when we met for the second time beside West Lake,” continued Wu, “you treated me just as if I were an equal. You told me I was a ‘very remarkable man’ and you said you would like to have me as a friend. I did a lot of hard thinking during the days that followed. I’d been thrown out of the Beggars’ Guild; my Brothers all despised me; every single day I was stinking drunk; I was a hopeless case; at the rate I was going, I’d be dead within a few years. Then I thought to myself, if this Mr Zha tells me I’m a remarkable man, surely I should at least make an effort? Surely there must be some sort of future for me? Well, not long after that the Manchu army came south and, in a fit of enthusiasm, without really thinking what I was doing, I volunteered. I was a good soldier. I distinguished myself. Of course, that meant that I killed a lot of my own people. When I think of it now, I feel very ashamed.”

Zha looked grave.

“It was very wrong of you. Even if they wouldn’t have you in the Beggars’ Guild, you could have gone travelling as a loner or you could have settled down and become a family man. Why did you have to join the Manchu army? It was the worst choice you could have made.”

“I’m not a clever man,” said Wu, “and at that time I didn’t have you to advise me. I made a lot of mistakes. I did some really terrible things.”

Zha nodded.

“As long as you know they were mistakes,” he said, “it isn’t too late to redeem them.”

Wu continued.

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“Then the Manchus took over the whole of China and I became a Military Governor. Two years ago an assassin broke into my bedroom one night and tried to stab me; but he wasn’t a match for me and I overpowered him and made him my prisoner. When I lit the lamp to have a good look at him, I saw it was the Elder called Sun from the Beggars’ Guild, the one I’d once wounded in a fight. He started yelling curses at me. He said I was vile and shameless, that I’d chosen of my own free will to do the dirty work of foreigners, and a lot else besides. It got worse as he went on. And every word he said went straight to my heart. You see, I’d sometimes thought those things myself. I knew perfectly well that what I was doing was wrong. Sometimes in the early hours, when I was alone with my own conscience, I felt so ashamed. Only, the things I thought myself weren’t nearly as straight to the point as the things that Sun was saying. So I just sighed and set him free. ‘What you say is true, Elder,’ I said. ‘You’d better go now.’ He looked very surprised; but any way, he slipped out the window and went.”

“That’s something you did that *wasn’t* a mistake,” said Zha.

“At that time there were a lot of anti-Manchu patriots locked up in the prison-block of the Military Governor’s Yamen,” said Wu. “First thing next morning I started going over the charges and found some excuse or other to set each one of them free. Some I said were cases of mistaken identity, some I said were only accessories and could be given a lighter sentence, that sort of thing. More than a month later, I had another midnight visit from Sun. He asked me straight out, without any beating about the bush, was I really repentant, and if so, was I willing to engage in anti-Manchu activity? I took out my cutlass and with one chop I cut off two fingers of my left hand. ‘Elder,’ I said, ‘I am resolved to make a clean break with the past. From now on I shall take all my orders from you.’”

Wu held up his left hand from which the ring finger and little finger were missing.

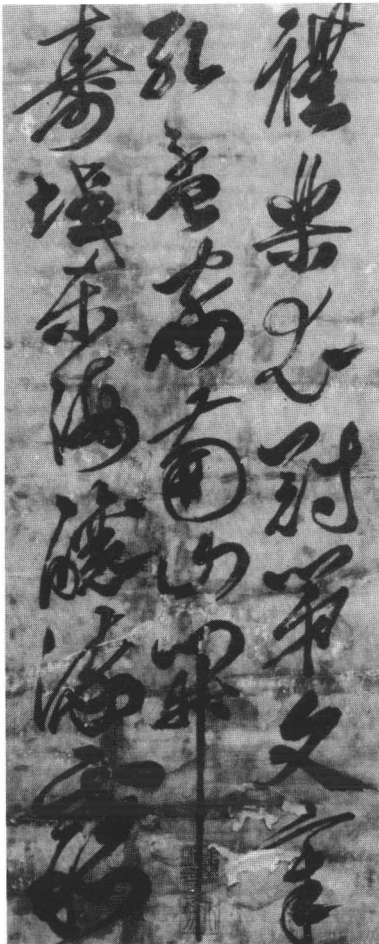
Zha held up his own thumb admiringly.

“Good man!” he said.

Wu continued:

“Sun could see that I was sincere and he knew that in spite of my limitations I always kept my word, so he said, ‘All right, I’ll have a word with the Master when I get back and see what he says.’ Ten days later he came to see me again. He said the Master and the Four Elders had had a council and decided to take me back into the Guild, only I’d have to start at the bottom again as a One Bag novice. He also told me that the Beggars’ Guild now had a pact with the Triad Society and was joining forces with them in their struggle to overthrow the Manchus and restore the Ming. The Triad Society was founded by Chen Jinnan, who is the military adviser of Marshal Zheng in Taiwan. He’s the Grand Master, or Helmsman as they call it. This last couple of years the Triads have been very active in Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong. Sun got me an introduction to the Master of the Obedience

Calligraphy of Koxinga (1624–1662)



Lodge of the Triad Society in Guangdong, so that I could apply for membership. They put me on probation for a year, in which time I was given a lot of important jobs to do. They knew then that I was completely loyal. In a recent despatch from Helmsman Chen in Taiwan I was appointed Red Banner Master of the Obedience Lodge.”

Zha didn't know anything about the Triad Society, but he had, like everyone else, heard of the courage and patriotism of Zheng Chenggong, or 'Koxinga' as the Europeans called him, whose army in Taiwan was still maintaining a heroic resistance against the Manchus. If this Helmsman Chen who founded the Triad Society was Koxinga's military adviser, then it must be all right. He nodded his approval.

“A year ago Marshal Zheng led a large army to besiege Nanking,” Wu continued. “Unfortunately he was heavily outnumbered and had to fall back on Taiwan. But there are still a lot of his former soldiers scattered about in the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Fujian who weren't in time for the evacuation and got left behind. It's these old companions-in-arms that the Helmsman has secretly contacted and organised to form the Triad Society. It's their motto that I have tattooed on my chest. Members of the Triad Society don't normally tattoo themselves. I did it in imitation of Yue Fei who had the words 'Loyal to the End' tattooed on himself.”

Zha was so impressed that he drank two cups of wine in quick succession.

“After all this,” he said, “I think you really do deserve to be called a 'very remarkable man'.”

“I don't know about that,” said Wu. “I'll be happy enough if you will allow me to call myself your friend. Now Helmsman Chen—there's a *real* hero for you! He's a Brave Man and True if ever there was one! Among the Brotherhood of River and Lake you'll never hear anyone speak of him without respect. There's a little rhyme about him:

If Helmsman Chen you've never seen,
A Brave Man True you've never been.

I've never set eyes on him myself, so you see, I can't claim to be anybody much at all.”

Quite carried away by his mental picture of this paragon among men, Zha poured out two more cups of wine.

“Come!” he said. “Let's drink to him then. A toast. To Helmsman Chen!”
The two men drained their cups.

“A single scholar like me is not much use,” said Zha. “I've never yet succeeded in doing anything that would benefit my country. But I promise you that when the moment comes for you to start your rising, I'll be there to volunteer. I'll do my bit, I promise you, however feeble it may be.”

From that time onwards Zha's days and nights were spent in secret conversations with his host in which all kinds of strategies were discussed for carrying on resistance against the Manchus. Wu told him that the Triad

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Society was gradually extending its influence in the northern provinces. Lodges had now been opened up in every major province of China.

Zha stayed on six or seven months longer in General Wu's residence before finally returning to his own home. But what a surprise was waiting for him when he got there! A group of large buildings had sprung up next door to his old home. The General had secretly had all the money donated by the Guangdong officials as 'gifts for Mr Zha' transferred to Zha's place in Zhejiang to pay for the construction of a magnificent new residence for his friend.

Knowing that Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu were passionately devoted to the cause of the Ming restoration and that they spent their days travelling about the country looking for likely recruits to join in the anti-Manchu resistance, Zha had felt no compunction about telling them this story and had concealed nothing from them in the telling.

6. *The Scholar in the Doorway*

This, then, was the story which Huang Zongxi retold, in all its details, for Lü Liuliang's benefit that evening on the boat in Jiaying.

"But if any of this leaked out," he concluded, "and the Tartars decided to gain the advantage by striking first, not only would our friend Zha and General Wu and their families be wiped out, but the backbone of the entire anti-Manchu resistance would be broken."

Lü Liuliang agreed.

"Except among us three, no word of this must ever pass our lips," he said. "Even in our friend Zha's company, if we ever see him again, we must never mention the name of General Wu."

"Anyway," said Huang, "you see now what the connection is which links Zha with General Wu. General Wu has made himself so indispensable to the great ministers at Court that when he risked his reputation by speaking out on Zha's behalf, they couldn't very well refuse him this favour."

"Yes, I am sure you are right," said Lü, "but what about Lu Qi and Fan Xiang? According to the *Gazette* they were given the same verdict as Zha: 'exempted from punishment and released from further questioning' on the grounds that they hadn't seen the book. Surely they too didn't have an influential friend at Court to speak up for them?"

"I suppose General Wu thought it would look suspicious if he only spoke up on behalf of one person," said Huang. "He probably added the other two names at random in order to make it look better."

Lü laughed.

"If that's the case," he said, "those two must still be wondering how on earth they managed to get off with their lives."

Gu nodded gravely.

"Every single scholar from South of the River who can stay alive represents a portion of the Primal Spirit that has been preserved," he said.

*Calligraphy of the
Ming Prince Ningjing*



Although what the three men were talking about was a matter of the utmost secrecy, they were in a boat on the Grand Canal with only Lü's wife and two sons in the rear cabin; and Huang had all the time been speaking in a very low voice. There seemed little danger of their being overheard. Boats have no walls, after all, in which the proverbial ears can be concealed. It was therefore all the more startling when Gu's last words were followed by a sinister laugh.

"Who's that?" the three of them cried out simultaneously, their hair standing on end. But all was silent.

The three of them looked at each other, all thinking the same thought.

"A ghost? But surely they don't exist?"

Gu was the boldest of the three and had moreover a rudimentary knowledge of self-defence. Listening intently, he extracted a dagger from the bosom of his gown and, pushing open the cabin door with his other hand, advanced to the bow of the boat and peered up towards the matting roof of the cabin. As he did so, a black shape suddenly rose up from it, leaped down on to the deck and made towards him.

"Who are you?" Gu shouted, raising the dagger and striking out at the shape. But while his arm was still in mid-air he felt a sharp pain in his wrist as someone caught it in a tight grip. Immediately after that, he experienced what felt like a sudden cramp in the centre of his back. The 'someone'—evidently a practised hand—had struck him on a vital point and paralysed him. The dagger dropped from his hand and he felt himself being pushed back inside the cabin.

Huang and Lü watched with astonishment as Gu staggered backwards into the cabin, followed by a tall fellow entirely dressed in black. The man's face wore an evil grin.

"What do you mean, sir, by bursting in on us like this in the dead of night?" said Lü.

The man gave a sardonic laugh.

"I must thank you three gentlemen for gaining me my promotion," he said, "—and a tidy fortune, too. When My Lord Oboi receives our highly secret report informing him that General Wu and this man Zha are plotting rebellion, I can be sure of a very large reward. Heh, heh! And you three gentlemen, by accompanying me to Peking, will be able to provide most useful corroboration."

The three gentlemen heard this, startled, and cursed themselves for their crassness in supposing that a private conversation held on a boat at night could not possibly be overheard. Each of them was thinking the same thought:

"It doesn't matter so much if *we* die, but by naming General Wu we have ruined everything!"

"My good sir, none of us has the faintest idea what you are talking about," said Lü valiantly. "If you wish to bring false charges against innocent people, that is your own affair; but pray don't try to involve *us* in it."

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He said this having resolved to resist and get himself killed, thereby eliminating himself as a witness.

The big man gave a scornful laugh, then, lunging forwards, he struck Lü and Huang in quick succession somewhere in the pit of the stomach, instantly immobilising them both. He laughed again, this time with satisfaction, at their helplessness.

“Come into the cabin, boys,” he shouted. “This time the Vanguard Battalion has done rather well.”

There was an answering cry from the stern. Four men, all dressed as boatmen, trooped into the cabin and joined in the laughter of their chief.

The three captives looked at each other questioningly. They knew that the Vanguard Battalion was part of the Emperor’s personal bodyguard. These men must have been with them throughout the journey. Disguised as boatmen they had, from the other side of the matting, been able to eavesdrop on every word they had said. How on earth had this happened? Huang and Lü could perhaps absolve themselves, but Gu who for the past dozen years or more had trodden the roads from one end of China to the other in quest of likely talent for the Resistance, Gu with his vast knowledge of men—how had *he* failed to see these spurious boatmen for what they were?

One of the spurious boatmen, resuming the voice and manner of a guardsman, called out now to the steersman in the stern.

“Turn about, steersman, we’re heading back to Hangzhou! And no funny business, if you value your dog’s life!”

An obedient “Aye, aye!” answered him from the stern.

The steersman was an old fellow in his late sixties whom Gu had personally interviewed when they hired the boat. He had a face lined all over with wrinkles and a back as bent as a bow—the very picture of an old waterman who had spent a lifetime handling paddles and pulling ropes. It had never occurred to Gu to question his credentials. In fact, the old steersman was genuine enough, but had been forced by threats and intimidation to accept these Imperial Guardsmen as substitutes for his own assistants. Gu now deeply reproached himself for having been so wrapped up in discussion of higher things with his two friends that he had neglected the elementary precautions that might have prevented them from falling into this trap.

The big fellow in black laughed again.

“*Mister Gu, Mister Huang, Mister Lü*, you are famous men, you know. Even the big shots in Peking know about you, otherwise we wouldn’t have been shadowing you.”

He turned to address his four subordinates:

“We’ve now got clear evidence that Governor Wu of Guangdong is planning rebellion. What we’ve got to do now is proceed as quickly as possible to Haining and arrest this Zha fellow. Now, you’ve got three very determined rebels here. They can’t get away, but they might try to poison themselves or jump in the canal, and you’ve got to stop them. I’m going to



assign each one of them to one of you to look after individually. If there are any accidents, you'll be in trouble."

"Very good, Major Gua," the men replied. "Leave it to us, sir."

"When we get back to Peking and report to Lord Oboi," said Major Gua, "there will be rewards and promotion for all four of you."

"It'll all be thanks to you, Major," said one of the guardsmen sycophantically. "The four of us would never be so lucky if it weren't for you."

A laugh rang out from the bow of the boat.

"The four of you never *will* be so lucky!"

The double doors of the cabin flew open and a thirty-year-old man in scholar's dress appeared standing in the doorway. He held his hands clasped behind his back and his face wore a faintly ironic smile.

"This is state business we're carrying on here," Major Gua shouted at him, "and we are Government officers. Who are you?"

The scholar made no reply but continued to smile as he stepped inside the cabin. Immediately, to left and right of him, two cutlasses flashed out and would have cut him down; but already he had dodged and was lunging towards Major Gua with arm upraised to slice down on his head. The Major parried the blow with his left hand, simultaneously striking out with his right fist. Ducking the blow, the scholar kicked backwards with his left foot at the nearest of the guardsmen, catching him in the pit of the stomach. The man let out a great cry and began vomiting blood. The other three guardsmen had their cutlasses up and were cutting and slashing at the scholar, who, because of the lack of space in the cabin, was now bringing into play his advanced 'grappling' skills. One blow, made with the edge of the hand, landed with a cracking sound on one of the guardsmen, breaking his neck. Major Gua swung a blow with his right palm towards the back of the scholar's head, but the scholar had already whirled about, bringing his own left palm round to catch the blow. He did this with such force that the two palms met in a mighty clap, throwing the Major off his balance, so that he fell against the cabin wall, hitting it heavily with his back and causing the whole structure to lean towards one side. In quick succession the scholar now aimed two chopping blows at the midribs of the two remaining guardsmen. There were sickening thumps as they landed and both men collapsed with broken ribs.

Major Gua now tried to slip out through the gap that had opened in the matting wall of the cabin when his collision with it had pushed the framework out of kilter.

"Where are *you* off to?" cried the scholar, striking out at him with the palm of his left hand. The blow was aimed at the upper part of his back, but just at that moment the Major kicked out backwards with his left foot and the forward-swinging palm of the scholar, chancing to catch the backward-kicking foot of the Major, so accelerated the latter's retreat that he went flying out over the canal. There was a weeping willow tree leaning out over the canal at that point, however, and the Major was able, with a great effort, to

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catch hold of its branches, then, with a mighty flip, to somersault right over the tree and on to the ground.

The scholar ran to the bow of the boat, picked up a boat-pole and hurled it, javelin-like, towards the Major. In the bright moonlight the bamboo pole gleamed like a flying snake. They heard the Major let out a long, terrifying cry—"Aaaah!"—and there he lay, face downward, pinned to the ground by the pole, which continued to quiver in his back.

The scholar returned to the cabin. With a few expert touches he restored the use of their limbs to the three paralysed captives; then he dragged the bodies of the four guardsmen to the side of the boat and pushed them in the canal. After that he relit the lamp in the cabin.

Gu, Huang and Lü, unable to find sufficient words to express their gratitude, inquired their deliverer's name.

The scholar smiled.

"My name was on Mr Huang's lips only a short time ago. I am Chen Jinnan. Most of our people refer to me as Helmsman Chen."



CHAPTER TWO

In which Trinket and Whiskers set out from Yangzhou for the Capital; of their adventures on the way; and of the stories Trinket tells concerning the Golden Age, Heroes and Mongols, Turtles, Elephants, and Mice.

1. *Yangzhou, City of Pleasure*

The city of Yangzhou has long been synonymous in China with wealth, pleasure and sybaritic luxury. The great poet Du Mu, of the late Tang Dynasty, sums it up in his famous lines:

From my Yangzhou Dream I wake at last—
Ten years a rake, ten years gone so fast!

And as the old saying has it, one of life's greatest pleasures has always been

To strap on a myriad strings of cash,
And ride a crane to Yangzhou Town.

When the Emperor Yang built the Grand Canal in the Sui Dynasty, Yangzhou's position at the hub of that great waterway made it an obligatory port of call for the grain barges from the surrounding provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. As time went by the great salt merchants built their mansions there, and during the Ming and Manchu Dynasties it grew to be one of the wealthiest places in the whole Empire.

'Slender' West Lake lies on the western outskirts of Yangzhou. In the early years of the Manchu Emperor Kangxi, the area beside the lake, known as the Alley of Chiming Jade, was famed for its high concentration of houses of pleasure, and for the beauty of its singsong-girls (whose skills extended to a great deal more than *bel canto*). Our story begins in the Alley one warm evening towards the end of spring. The coloured lanterns had just been lit, the warbling of flutes and the plucking of strings mingled with cries of pleasure and peals of laughter, and from every one of its establishments came the sound of drinking games, of voices raised in song and revelry. A veritable garden of earthly delight.

Suddenly, from both the northern and southern ends of the Alley, there burst a harsh chorus of voices:



“Hearken all! Madames, young ladies, and all you fine gentlemen who’ve come to spend your cash and have a bit of fun—hearken the lot of you! We’re after one man, and one man alone! He’s got nothing to do with any of you, so don’t make a fuss, and we won’t lay a finger on you! But if there’s trouble, don’t say we didn’t warn you!”

There was instant silence in the Alley. But it was short-lived. Very soon pandemonium broke out, and from every room came the sound of girls shrieking and gentlemen customers shouting.

There was an especially large party being held in the establishment known as Vernal Delights; a dozen or so prominent salt-merchants had booked three tables, and each of them had one of the more glamorous singsong-girls sitting by his side. The interruption caused considerable consternation in their midst.

“What *is* going on?”

“Who *are* these people?”

“Are they from the Yamen?”

“Are we being raided?”

Then came the sound of battering at the doors, which threw the serving boys into a regular panic.

Even as the boys were wondering whether or not to open up, the main door came crashing down and in stormed a gang of seventeen or eighteen strapping great fellows. They wore short tunics, tied with black sashes, and white bands round their heads; swords or nasty-looking metal stocks flashed in their hands. The merchants recognised them at once as belonging to one of the notorious salt-smuggling gangs. At that time the salt tax was extremely high, and anyone managing to sell the commodity on the black market could make a fortune. Yangzhou was the distribution centre for the salt produced in the Huai Basin north of the Yangtze, and a number of gangs operated in the neighbourhood. They were a mean and vicious bunch, who, while they tended to flee if confronted with a sizeable detachment of government troops, were quick to come to blows with lesser and more vulnerable opponents. On the whole the local gendarmerie turned a blind eye to their activities, and the salt-merchants for their part had come to regard them as relatively harmless (they were not given to attacking or robbing the merchants themselves, and even had a reputation for fair dealing in their illicit transactions, and for not causing trouble with ordinary folk). And suddenly here they were storming the Alley and creating the most dreadful scene! It was not just surprising, it was downright alarming.

One of the smugglers, an older fellow of fifty-odd, now spoke up:

“Our apologies, gentlemen, for the intrusion! We mean you no harm!” As he spoke he clasped his hands in salutation to the assembled company, left to right, and then bowed politely, right to left, before continuing, loud and clear:

“We have come to find Brother Jia, Scarface Jia, of the Triad Society. Would he happen to be anywhere on these premises?”



His eyes searched the salt merchants' faces one by one. His penetrating gaze struck terror into their hearts, and they all shook their heads with alacrity. (Simultaneously they breathed a sigh of relief: at least now they knew that this was a vendetta between different branches of the underworld fraternity, and had no direct bearing on them.)

The old fellow, who was clearly one of the smugglers' ringleaders, spoke again, louder this time:

"Now listen to me, Scarface! This afternoon, in the bar down by the Lake, there were words spoken ... There were names called. Gutless, you called us, too scared to stand up and kill a few troopers! Wasn't that it? Just a bunch of petty, cheapskate salt-peddlers? You'd had a bellyful of booze, I grant you—you were fair shooting your mouth off! And if we didn't like what you were saying we were welcome to come and find you down the Alley! Well, we didn't like it, not one bit! And we've come! Come on out, if you're a Triad and a real man! Or are *you* too chicken? Do you want to keep your dirty little turtle head under cover?"

The others in his gang joined in noisily:

"Come on out, Trusty Triad! Come on, turtle head!"

"Why, poke us a Red Hot Pussy! Is it a Triad we've got here, or a headless turtle?" And more of the like.

"Hold it lads!" chimed in the older fellow. "This little matter concerns Scarface and *his* mouthful of filth: so kindly leave other folk out of it! What we salt-smugglers do, we do to earn an honest bowl of rice: there's not one of us can compare with the Triads and their Brave Men 'n True ... But all the same, we're none of us chicken neither!"

A long silence and still no sound of Scarface Jia.

"Search the rooms!" ordered the older fellow. "If you find the turtle, bring him out! He's got a big scar across his face, you can't miss him!"

The other smugglers shouted in response and went off one by one. Suddenly, from a private room on the eastern side of the establishment, there came a great roar:

"What the blazes is going on here? D'ye mind leaving me alone? This may be *your* idea of fun ..."

"That's him!" came the ragged smugglers' chorus. "That's the turtle!"

"Come on out, Scarface, and look smart about it!"

"Cocky little rat!"

From within the room came a great guffaw:

"I'm *not* the man you're looking for! But I won't let scum like you blacken the name of the Triads! I may not be a Triad myself, but I'll vouch for every man jack of 'em! Fine fellows they are, and scum like you ain't fit to help them into their shoes or wipe the shit from their bumholes!"

The smugglers protested angrily at this and three of them went charging headlong into the room, brandishing their swords. In a matter of seconds howls of pain were heard, and the three came hurtling out again backwards, and tumbled onto the ground. One of them (a big burly fellow) had his own

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sword rammed down his throat. He fell to the ground in a pool of blood. Six more of the gang went bursting in. More cries, and one by one they too came tumbling out. They cursed and they swore, but no one else was willing to repeat the experiment.

At this point the ringleader stepped forward and peered into the side-room: in the dim light he was just able to make out the form of a great bewhiskered fellow sitting on a bed, his head wrapped in a white turban. There did not seem to be any trace of a scar on his face, and he was most definitely *not* Triad (or was it turtle?) Jia.

"That was no mean feat, sir!" exclaimed the older fellow. "Might I have the honour of knowing your name?"

"Your own father's name'll do me fine!" barked the man. "Just call me dad! Why, me young whippersnapper, have you even forgotten your own father's name?"

At this one of the singsong-girls in attendance could not help giggling. One of the smugglers weighed in and slapped her smartly twice across the face. The unfortunate woman began sobbing and snivelling.

"What's the big joke, you dirty slut!" snarled the smuggler. She was far too scared to reply.

A lad of twelve or thirteen came running out from the side of the hall, crying:

"You dare hit my mum, you rotten turtle! May you be struck by lightning and your hands fall off, your tongue rot, your belly fill with pus, your guts drop out, your.."

The smuggler (who wasn't going to stand for this) went for the boy, but he darted behind one of the salt-merchants. The smuggler's left hand smashed into the merchant instead and sent him flying, while with his right he swung round and began pounding away at the boy's back. The singsong-girl (whose giggling had caused all the trouble) cried out in alarm:

"Spare the boy, sir!"

But the boy was a crafty little blighter and had already ducked down between the smuggler's legs. On his way he reached up, grabbed hold of the man's balls and squeezed them for all he was worth. The smuggler let out a great howl of pain; by now the boy was well out of his reach. The smuggler thrashed out wildly with his fists and punched the boy's "mum" straight in the face. She fell senseless to the floor. The boy flung himself on top of her, yelping:

"*Mum! Mum!*"

The smuggler seized his chance. He grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, lifted him bodily off the ground and was about to lay into him when the ringleader shouted:

"This is stupid! Stop it! Put the little puppy down!"

The man obeyed, but not without having first given him a kick up the backside that sent him somersaulting across the room and smashing loudly into the far wall. The older fellow cast him an angry glance, and turned to



address the following remarks to the doorway that communicated with the side-room (and its bewhiskered inhabitant):

"We're from the Green Gang. One of the Triads, this fellow called Scarface, insulted our brotherhood, and we came down the Alley to settle scores with him. Seeing as you've nothing to do with the Triads, sir, there's really no cause for us to come to blows. If you'd be so good as to give us your name, I'm sure our chiefs will look into it and sort the matter out."

The man inside the room laughed:

"Your little argument's got nothing to do with me! I was just having a good time, and there was no call for your people to come and spoil my evening. But let me give you a piece of advice, my friend: you leave the Triads well alone. If one of them *did* insult you, just swallow your pride and go quietly about your business: smuggle a bit more salt, earn yourselves a bit more cash ..."

"Why, that's a bleedin' insult!" retorted the older fellow angrily. "No true Brother would ever talk like that! I can see you ain't one of us!"

"One of *you*!" sneered the other. "What are you trying to do? Splice me to one of your sisters? I'll talk as I damned well please, thank you very much!"

At this moment three more men came skulking in, also dressed in the smugglers' 'uniform'. One of them, a skinny fellow wielding a mace and chain, muttered:

"Where's this old codger at?"

"He won't talk," replied the older fellow, shaking his head. "Just keeps stickin' up for the Triads. I'll bet that turtle's hidin' in there somewhere ..."

The skinny one brandished his mace and tossed his head, while the older fellow drew two foot-long swords from his sash. The next instant the four of them went bounding into the room.

The clash of blades rang out. Vernal Delights was one of the smartest establishments in the Alley, a five-star bordello for the rich and famous, and the rooms were all luxuriously appointed—pearwood tables and chairs, rosewood couches and bedsteads, that sort of thing. It soon became clear (from the infernal din) that the fight was taking a heavy toll on the furniture. The fleshy jowls of the Madame quivered and she started mumbling frantic prayers to the Lord Buddha, and looking extremely *souffrante*. The guests in the main salon huddled together as far from the scene of action as possible, anxious lest they too be dragged in—like the proverbial fish, innocently caught in the moat of a bumming city. The din continued to mount, and then there was a long drawn-out howl of pain: one of the smugglers had clearly received a serious blow.

Meanwhile the big burly fellow who'd landed the kid a boot in the backside, and whose balls were still tender as hell, saw his little tormentor go creeping across the room, and his blood began boiling with rage again. He went for him, good and proper this time, waving his fists wildly in the air. The boy dodged but the big bloke managed to catch him a smart one



on the ear which sent him spinning twice round the room. The serving-boys and the salt-merchants could see the man was in an uncontrollable fury, quite liable to kill the little fellow, but none of them dared intervene. The man brought up his right fist and aimed a massive punch at the boy's head. The boy bolted, in the only direction left open to him—through the doorway and into the side-room where the *other* fracas was taking place. The audience in the main room let out a great gasp, and the boy's hefty pursuer stopped dead in his tracks. He wasn't going in *there*.

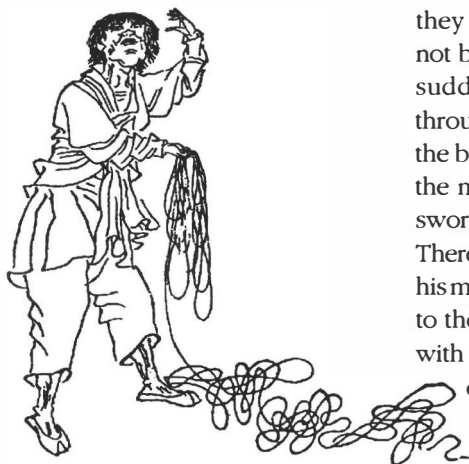
At first the boy could not make out what the devil was going on around him. Then amid the sparks thrown off by the clashing blades he distinguished the form of a man sitting on the bed, his whole head swathed in a white turban-like bandage; it was a fearful sight, and the boy let out a gasp of terror. Once more blades clashed and steel flashed and then the room was dark again. Gradually the lamplight from the main salon filtered in through the doorway, and he could see a cutlass in the hand of the man with the bandaged head, which he was using as best he could to ward off his attackers. Two of the more lightweight smugglers were already lying on the ground, but the other two were still in the fight: the older fellow with his two swords, and another towering hulk of a man.

"Looks like he's been badly wounded in the head," thought the boy to himself. "He can't even stand up. He'll never get the better of those salt-peddlers. I'll have to get the hell out of here. But what about Mum?"

He remembered how his mother had been struck in the face, and the insults to which she had been subjected, and rage surged in his young breast.

"Turtle-spawn!" he yelled back through the doorway. "Lousy rotten cowards! Sod the lot of you, you and all eighteen generations of your foul pickled ancestors! Salt—that's all you're good for! When they die—your grandmothers, your mothers, your wives—you salt them down, you soak them in brine and flog them on the street as pickled pork, three cattie a penny ... Only trouble is, no one'll buy the putrid stinking stuff!"

This, needless to say, put the salt-smugglers in an even greater fury, and they would have rushed in and given the boy a good dubbing, had they not been too frightened to enter the darkened room. The man on the bed suddenly lunged sideways with his cutlass: the blade swished through the air and sliced into the left shoulder of one of his two assailants—the big burly one—removing a goodly chunk of flesh and bone and sending the man tottering away in howls of pain. The older fellow raised both his swords and went for the bandaged man's chest. He parried with his cutlass. There was a dull thud. The big guy was back meanwhile, and had brought his metal stock down on the man's right shoulder. The cutlass fell with a clang to the ground. The older fellow now let out a ferocious yell and closed in with both swords. The man on the bed flailed out with his left fist: a series of nasty crunching sounds ensued and the older fellow (his ribs considerably the worse for wear) went hurtling out of the room, spattering



blood and collapsing in a heap on the ground. The big guy, despite his badly wounded shoulder, was still breathing fire. He raised his metal stock and struck at the crown of his adversary's head. The bandaged man seemed incapable of evading the blow; he seemed almost to have spent his strength and could barely move. The hulk's energy was also flagging, and the stock moved slowly through the air.

The boy could see it happening, and the crisis spurred him into action. He dashed forward and grabbed the big fellow by both legs, tugging him backwards for all he was worth. He must have weighed at least twenty stone, and the boy was only a skinny thing. Normally he wouldn't have stood a chance of budging him. But what with his wound, the man was all in, and the suddenness of the boy's attack pulled him off balance. He tumbled to the ground and lay motionless in a pool of blood. The man on the bed gasped for breath and then shouted out loud:

"Anyone else looking for a beating?"

The boy gesticulated frantically, to warn him not to provoke them any further. The older man, on his way out, had set the door swinging, and the lamplight from the main salon illuminated the man on the bed intermittently, his overgrown tangle of whiskers, his blood-stained face. He was a ghastly sight.

Back outside the salt-smugglers, who could not make out exactly what was going on, stared at each other aghast. The man bellowed again:

"Turtle-spawn! If you're too scared to come in, I'll come out myself and kill the lot of you ..."

The salt-smugglers let out a gasp of terror, picked their wounded up from the floor, and made for the main doorway as fast as they could.

The man on the bed started laughing. Then, sotto voce, to the boy:

"Bolt the door, kid!"

"*Yes sir!*"

He acted at once, and having made the door fast walked slowly back through the darkened room towards the bed, breathing in the reek of freshly spilt blood.

"You ... must ..."

Before he could say another word, the man slumped to one side: he seemed to have lost consciousness, and his body was about to slide to the ground. The boy dashed forward to prop him up. The body weighed a ton, and it was all he could do to heave him up onto the bed and prop his head on the pillow. The man took several gasps for breath, and after a while muttered:

"They'll be back any moment. I've no strength left. I must get away from them ... the lousy bastards!"

He tried to lift himself up, and groaned with pain. The boy supported him.

"Pick up the cutlass! Give it to me!"

The boy did as he was told, and the man slowly and unsteadily lowered himself from the bed. The boy stood at his left side, taking his weight on his right shoulder.

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"I must get away," said the man. "Let go of me. If they see you they'll kill you."

"Let them kill me, the lousy bastards!" replied the boy. "I'm not afraid. We're friends, and friends should stick by each other. That's the first commandment of Honour and Chivalry, isn't it? I'm sticking by you."

The man laughed loudly—which brought on a fit of coughing.

"What's all this about Honour and Chivalry, boy?"

"Why not? That's what it's all about. Friends *should* stick together. They *should* share everything, the rough and the smooth ..."

Gentle Reader, we should perhaps explain that the storytellers who plied their trade in the teahouses of Yangzhou were forever regaling their audiences with the heroic exploits of the great ages of Chivalry and Romance—episodes from the great sagas like *The Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, or *Heroes of the Ming*. And our little friend, who was forever dashing from bawdy-house to gambling-den, from tea-house to eating place, on one errand or another, day and night, would, whenever he had a free moment, squat by the side of one of the tables and listen to whatever story was being told (he was always obsequiously polite to the tea-house proprietor, and as a result was never chased away). He'd heard the stories told over and over again, and his young mind was alive with tales of derring do, it was peopled with the heroes of China's past and their wonderful exploits. So when he saw this man sorely wounded, and yet still capable of despatching several dastardly salt-smugglers single-handed, he felt as if he'd come face to face with one of his idols. It was only natural that he should begin to think and talk as if he were living in one of the storytellers' tales.

"Nicely spoken, young man!" laughed his newfound hero. "I've heard the same words spoken a million times among the Brothers of River and Lake: but when it comes down to it there are always plenty to take the smooth and precious few to share the rough! Come on, we'd best be on our way!"

The boy hoisted the man's right arm onto his shoulder, opened the door, and strode out into the salon. The others gasped and retreated from them in terror. The boy's mother cried out:

"Trinket! Trinket! Where do you think you're going?"

"Just seeing my friend on his way," replied the boy. "I'll be back."

"Friend!" chuckled the man. "So I'm your friend, eh?"

"Don't go!" cried the mother. "Hide, for goodness sake! Quickly!"
The boy laughed, and strode on out of the room.



2. *Trinket and Whiskers Become Acquainted on the Road to Victory Hill*

The two of them walked out of Vernal Delights, and down a silent and deserted street. The smugglers must have gone for reinforcements.

The man turned into a narrow alleyway. He looked up at the night sky.
"We'd better head west!"

They'd walked a few paces, when a donkey-cart came rumbling towards them.

"Driver!" called the man. The cart stopped; when the driver saw that they were both spattered with blood, he seemed more than a little suspicious. Then the man took a lump of silver from his jacket—five taels' worth:

"Here! Here's your money—in advance!"

Five taels was not an amount to be sniffed at, and the driver let down the footboard of his cart. The man heaved himself slowly up, produced an even larger ingot of silver—ten taels this time—and handed it to the boy.

"I really must be going now, young 'un. This is for you."

The sight of this enormous lump of silver made the boy gulp, then swallow, then mutter to himself:

"Cor! What a beauty!"

But many were the stories he'd heard told of Heroes Brave and True, and in every one the *real* heroes valued friendship above all, they didn't care a fig for money; and here was *his* chance to be a hero, here it was staring him in the face, and *nothing* was going to make him give it up for money! He wasn't going to stoop to being a filthy little mercenary!

"What matters to us," he declared proudly, "is Honour and Chivalry. Money is nothing. By giving me money, you're saying you despise me. You are wounded, sir; I shall stay by your side."

The man stared at him in utter disbelief, then looked up at the sky and let out a great guffaw.

"Terrific!" he cried. "Marvellous! I like it!"

He put the silver back in his pocket; the boy climbed up onto the cart and sat beside him.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver.

"West of the city," said the man. "Victory Hill."

"Victory Hill!" repeated the driver with horror. "West of the city—at this time of night?"

"That's right," affirmed the man. He tapped the wheels of the cart lightly with his cutlass.

"Very good sir!" cried the terrified driver smartly. He let down the curtains and drove out of the city. The man closed his eyes and rested, his breath coming in quick gasps, interspersed with the occasional cough.

Victory Hill stands ten miles or so to the north-west of Yangzhou. It was here, during the Shaoxing reign of the Southern Song Dynasty, that the great Chinese general Han Shizhong routed the Jurchen Tartars—hence its name.

The driver made good speed, and in a couple of hours they were at the foot of the hill.

"Here we are gentlemen!"

The man looked out and saw a little hillock, it can't have been more than a hundred feet high. He snorted contemptuously.

"Call this pathetic looking thing Victory Hill! Bloody hell!"

"*Yes sir!*" answered the driver promptly.

"It is," confirmed the boy. "I've been out here with my mum and my

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sisters. They come to burn incense at the shrine to the Hero's Lady, and I usually play. The shrine's a bit further on."

This 'Hero's Lady' was in fact the wife of the above-mentioned general. She was a former singsong-girl who had met the great warrior when she was young and had subsequently become his lady wife. She was no mean fighter herself. After her death she became the patron saint of all the local singsong-girls.

"Well, I'm sure you'd know," said the man. "Let's get down."

The boy jumped down from the cart and helped the man down. It was pitch black all around them.

"This should be a good spot to hide," thought the boy to himself. "Those lousy smugglers will never find us here."

The driver meanwhile was worried that his blood-spattered customers might be wanting to take another trip, and he wheeled his donkey round and made to set off.

"Hold it!" called out the man. "Take this boy back to town with you!"

"Yes sir!"

"I'll stay with you a bit longer," protested the boy. "In the morning I can go and buy you a steamed bun for breakfast."

"Do you really want to stay?"

"You wouldn't look right sir, without someone to wait on you ..."

The man guffawed again and turned to the driver:

"Oh very well—off you go!"

The driver needed no further encouragement.

The man went and sat down on a nearby rock. When the cart was well into the distance, and all was quiet, he suddenly shouted:

"Come on out of there from behind that willow-tree, you two lousy good-for-nothing turtle-heads! And look smart!"

The boy was dumbfounded.

"Is there someone there?" he gasped.

Sure enough two men sneaked out from behind a nearby willow. They both wore white headbands and black sashes, and were clearly members of the salt-smugglers' gang. Swords glinted in their hands. They took a couple of paces forward and stood still.

"Foul turtle-spawn!" cried the man. "You trailed me all the way from the whorehouse: but you're afraid to die, aren't you? Go on, beat it!"

"He's right," thought the boy. "They were just sent to trail him, and must have been planning to sneak off and get reinforcements."

The two smugglers muttered to one another and made a dash for it. The man leapt to his feet and would have given chase, but instead he let out a loud groan and sat down again. He was still too weak from his wounds for any such exertion.

"Things are looking pretty bad," thought the boy to himself. "The donkey-cart's gone and we're stuck here, and those two will soon be back with reinforcements, looking for blood."



Suddenly he let out a great cry:

"Alas! Woe is me! Why did it have to be so soon? *No, no!* How can you die on me like this!"

The two smugglers were running hell-for-leather when they heard the boy's cries and stopped dead in their tracks. He was still at it:

"You *mustn't* die! You *can't!*"

They were shocked, and not a little delighted.

"So the old rogue's dead then, is he?" said one.

"He had some nasty wounds. They must have been too much for him. He *must* be dead—just listen to the way the kid's howling!"

All they could see, from where they stood, was the man curled up on the ground at the boy's feet.

"Even if he's not dead," continued the first, "there'll be no fight left in him. Let's go and cut his head off! That would really be something!"

"Brilliant!" exclaimed the other, and the two of them drew their swords and slowly approached. The boy was still beating his breast, stamping his feet and howling:

"How *could* you just die on me like this? Oh brother mine! Those smugglers will be back for me and I'll be done for!"

This was music to their ears, and they quickened their pace. One of them yelled out:

"He had it coming to him, the scurvy knave!"

One grabbed the boy by his jacket, while the other raised his sword and brought it down towards the man's neck. Suddenly a blade flashed, a head went flying through the air, and the man holding the boy was left with a gaping hole between his chest and his belly. The whiskered man let out a great snort of laughter and heaved himself up from the ground.

"*Lawks!*" cried the boy. "This salt-smuggling friend of ours seems to be missing his head! Now that these two have gone to hell, to report to the King of the Dead, there'll be no one left to tell the others where we are! Dearie me, *what* a to-do!"

And with these last words, he too burst out laughing.

"You're a clever little tike!" said the man, with a grin. "And you certainly know how to wail! Without your performance they'd never have come back ..."

"Wailing's no problem," quipped the boy. "I can do it for you any time. When my mum used to take a stick to me, I'd wail like crazy just before it landed. That way she didn't dare hit me too hard."

"What did she want to beat you for?"

"That'd depend. Sometimes I might have stolen money from her; sometimes it was because I was giving her boss or one of the boys a hard time ..."

The man sighed:

"We had no choice but to kill those two spies. But hang on: just now, when you were doing your wailing act, I thought I heard you call me 'brother mine'—how come you didn't call me 'sir', or 'uncle'?"

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"That's because we're friends," replied the boy. "And friends are brothers. What sort of soddin' 'sir' would you be, anyhow? *Me* call you 'sir'? You must be kidding!"

The man guffawed:

"I like it! Tell me, young 'un, what's your name?"

"Would you be asking me to enlighten you as to my Esteemed Appellation?" replied Trinket. "Well ..." He hesitated a moment. "It's Trinket."

"No, I mean your full name."

The boy frowned.

"Wei—Trinket Wei."

The truth was that the boy had been born in the whorehouse. His mother's name was Wei, Spring Blossom Wei, but as for who his father was, even she could not work that one out. People just called him Trinket, and no one had ever bothered to ask him for his "full name." When the man put him on the spot, he just used his mother's name, without thinking. He'd been born and reared in the whorehouse, and never been to school. He'd only come out with that rigmarole about "esteemed appellation" because he'd heard it so often on the lips of the storytellers. "Prithee sir," quoth our hero, "enlighten me as to your Esteemed Appellation." Trinket, of course had gone and used the words of himself, which was quite wrong.

It was his turn now.

"Prithee sir," quoth he, "will you enlighten *me* as to *your* Esteemed Appellation ..."

The man smiled.

"Since you've treated me as your friend, I'll not tell you a lie. My family name is Mao, and I'm the eighteenth in the family, so I'm often called Eighteen. But people usually call me Whiskers."

Trinket leapt excitedly in the air.

"I've heard of you! The police are after you, aren't they! You're the notorious brigand, aren't you!"

Whiskers chuckled:

"Sounds like me. Scared?"

"Why should I be?" laughed Trinket. "I don't have a penny. You won't get anything off me. So what if you *are* a notorious brigand. So were the Outlaws of the Marsh—and they're my heroes!"

"Most flattered by the comparison, me boy!" chuckled Whiskers delightedly. "And who was it told you the police were after me?"

"Well, there are posters all over town. 'Wanted: The Notorious Brigand Whiskers Mao, Dead or Alive, Reward 2000 Taels of Silver. A Lesser Reward of 1000 Taels for Information leading to his Arrest.' I heard them all talking about it yesterday in the teahouse. They all said you were *much* too smart to be caught. But all the same, someone else could always inform the police of your whereabouts and pocket the reward. It'd certainly be a nice little windfall ..."



Whiskers cocked his head to one side, looked at Trinket and gave a little snort. A sudden thought flashed through Trinket's mind:

"Suppose *I* were to pocket the reward? With all that money to spend, just imagine the fine old time Mum and I could have, wining and dining, gambling and looning about till kingdom come ..."

Whiskers was still looking at him, a decidedly old-fashioned kind of look.

"And just what are *you* thinking?" snapped Trinket. "Think I'd tell on a friend? Is *that* what you think I'd do? Call *that* Honour and Chivalry? Call *that* the Brotherhood of River and Lake?"

"It's up to you ..."

"If you didn't trust me, why'd you go and tell me your real name?" protested Trinket. "With all those bandages round your face, you don't look anything like the poster. No one would ever have recognised you."

"I thought *you* said we were to stick together through thick and thin? What sort of friends would we be if I didn't even tell you my real name?"

"Exactly!" cried Trinket excitedly. "So don't you see, I'd never tell on you, not if they offered me a *hundred* thousand taels!"

"I wonder, though," Trinket was thinking quietly to himself. "For a hundred thousand, would I, or wouldn't I?"

He wasn't quite sure.

"Right," declared Whiskers. "It's time for us both to get some shut-eye. Tomorrow at noon I've got a couple of mates coming to see me. I swore a solemn oath I'd be here waiting for them."

Trinket was exhausted after all the day's excitement, and fell asleep at once, propped against a tree.

When he awoke the following morning, he looked up and saw Whiskers leaning over him.

"Up you get, my boy! You'd better shift those two bodies behind that tree, and give all three blades a sharpen while you're at it."

Trinket did as he was told. The sun had just risen, and in the light of day, as he dragged the bodies away, he was able to form a clearer impression of what Whiskers really looked like. He was a man in his forties: his hands and arms were all gnarled muscle, there was a keen look in his eyes, a fierce expression on his face. Trinket took the three swords down to the stream, dipped them in the water and started sharpening them on a stone, musing to himself the while:

"One sword was enough for *him* to put paid to those salt-smugglers. But if old Whiskers gets killed, what good will the other two be to me? Why bother sharpening them? For someone else to kill *me* with?"

He'd always had an incurably lazy nature, and after going through the motions a little longer he called out to his friend:

"I think I'll go and get some fritters and rolls for breakfast!"

"And where do you think you're going to find them out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Not too far back there's a little village. I say, Whiskers old mate, lend us a tael or two ..."

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“Lend?” chortled Whiskers, pulling out the big ingot he’d offered Trinket the previous evening. “I thought we were supposed to be brothers! What’s mine is yours, what’s yours is mine! Here, take this, spend whatever you need.”

Trinket was completely bowled over.

“He really *does* think of me as his friend!” he thought to himself. “And he’s a Brave Man and True, if ever there was one! And *I’m* his *friend*! Why, I’d *never* betray him, not for ten thousand taels! A hundred thousand taels? That’s a bit of a head-cruncher ... But they’d never offer such a big reward for someone like Whiskers, so what’s the use wearing my brains out?”

He took the money.

“Want me to buy you anything for your wound?”

“No need,” replied Whiskers. “I’ve got what I need.”

“O.K. then, I’m off. Don’t worry, Whiskers old mate, if the cops catch me, they can kill me, I’ll never give you away.”

Whiskers could see he meant it, and nodded.

“If you’ve got friends coming,” Trinket went on, as if talking to himself, “I’d better get a jug of wine and a few cattles of cold beef.”

“Good idea!” rejoined Whiskers. “And hurry up with it: I kill better on a full stomach.”

“Kill?” said Trinket in some surprise. “Are the salt-smugglers after you again? Do they know you’re here after all?”

“No! I’ve sworn to fight it out with someone else—to the bitter end. Why else do you think I came here in such a hurry?”

Trinket drew in a sharp breath:

“But you’re badlywounded! How can you fight in the state you’re in? You should wait until you’re better ... But I suppose the other party would never agree to that ...”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The other party is a Brave Man and True, of some renown, and would undoubtedly agree to a postponement. But I will never ask him for one. Today is the twenty-ninth day of the third month, isn’t it? This date was fixed upon six months ago. Then I was arrested and put in jail; I knew that come what may I must keep this appointment, and that’s why I broke out, and, unfortunately, killed one or two of their strongmen in the process. It caused the most terrible commotion in Yangzhou, and they went and put up a poster and offered a reward for my capture, the lousy sons-of-bitches! And then a couple of days ago I ran into a few more of them, not bad fighters either, and was obliged to kill another three. They left their mark on me too; I took a bit of a knocking. Been a bad few days!”

“Well I’d better be off anyway,” said Trinket, “to get that food and put some strength into you for the fight!”

Trinket hurried off, rounded a hill, and a couple of miles further down the road came to a village.

“Old Whiskers is that badly hurt he can hardly walk, let alone fight. And



he says the other man's a Brave Man and True of high renown—so *he's* sure to be a first-class fighter. If only there was something I could do to help?"

He had the silver in his hands and felt an uncontrollable urge to spend it! Never in his entire life had he had so much money in his possession. He knew he'd not be happy until he'd blown it all! He went into the little village "charcuterie" and bought two cattles of cooked beef, and a preserved soy-braised duck; then he bought two bottles of rice wine, and with the left-over money (which was still a considerable sum) he bought a dozen steamed buns and eight fritters, and that left him with just a few coppers.

"I know," he thought to himself. "I'll buy some twine and string it across the ground like a horse-tie. That way, when they do start fighting, the other fellow won't see it and will trip up, and then Whiskers can kill him with one blow."

He was thinking of one of the storytellers' tales, in which a general led his cavalry into battle and his horses tripped on string, throwing their riders to the ground where they lay at the mercy of the enemy, who hacked them to pieces. Off he hustled to buy his twine. He came to a general store and saw four large vats standing in a line inside, filled with rice, beans, salt and lime. Another idea suddenly flashed through his mind:

"Last year, when the salt gang got into a fight at Faery Bridge, someone threw lime in their eyes and completely routed them. Why on *earth* didn't I think of it before?"

So instead of twine he ended up buying lime, and set off back to where he'd left his friend, with a bag of it slung over his shoulder.

Whiskers was lying by the tree fast asleep, but awoke the moment he heard footsteps. He broached one of the bottles at once, took a couple of swigs, and made loud appreciative noises.

"Aren't you having any?" he asked the boy.

Trinket had never drunk wine in his life, but now he felt he had to live up to his new station in life, and grasping the proffered bottle he took a big gulp. He felt a warm, tingling sensation travel down to the pit of his stomach, and began to cough. Whiskers started laughing:

"Seems like my little champion needs a drinking lesson or two!"

Just at that moment they heard a voice shouting in the distance:

"Whiskers me old mate—been keeping well?"

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3. *Goatee Wu and Baldy Wang*

"Brothers Wu and Wang!" called back Whiskers Mao. "I trust I find you both in the best of health?"

Trinket's heart was pounding. He looked down the road and saw two men hastening along it. In a matter of seconds they drew up in front of them.

One of the two was an old fellow with a long white goatee beard that straggled down to his chest, a ruddy complexion that belied his age, and not

a trace of a wrinkle on his face. The other was a man in his forties, short and stout, bald on top and sporting a little pigtail at the rear. The front of his pate was as smooth and shiny as a boiled egg without its shell.

Whiskers Mao clasped his hands together in salutation.

"Excuse me for not rising to greet you! I've done my leg in rather."

The bald one frowned, but the old fellow replied amiably:

"Think nothing of it!"

"Isn't Whiskers giving too much away?" wondered Trinket to himself.

"Surely there was no need for him to give them the advantage like that?"

"Help yourselves to wine and meat," said Whiskers.

"Most kind," said the old fellow with the goatee, sitting down next to Whiskers, and accepting the proffered bottle.

"Oh! So they're *friends* of his!" thought Trinket, enormously relieved.

"They've not come to fight him after all. Great! When the others arrive, these two can join in on our side!"

The old man was about to put the bottle to his lips when Baldy called out:

"Brother Wu! Do not drink the wine!"

Goatee Wu paused a second, then laughed.

"Brother Mao is a trusty fellow, a tested Brave Man and True. You're surely not suggesting he'd put poison in the wine, are you, Brother Wang?"

He took a couple of loud gulps and passed the bottle to his companion:

"Have some yourself. Or would you rather insult our friend?"

Baldy Wang hesitated a moment, but seemed reluctant to go against the older man. He took the bottle and had just raised it to his lips, when Whiskers snatched it from him:

"We're running a bit low on wine, actually! Since you don't seem too keen on it, I'll help you out ..."

And he took two big gulps. Baldy's face flushed, and he sat down and tucked into the meat.

"I'd like to introduce you both to a new friend of mine," continued Whiskers. Then, indicating Goatee first, he went on:

"This gentleman is Sire Wu, known among the Brotherhood as the Great Roc, or Cloud Scraper. He is a Master at foot and fist fighting—a living legend!"

"Brother Mao, you flatter me!" Old Goatee looked around him and was still trying to puzzle out who Brother Mao's "new friend" could be, when Whiskers continued, this time indicating Baldy:

"*This* gentleman is Sire Wang, known as Lord Double Shaft, a great Master with the Twin Clubs."

"You are making fun of me!" protested Baldy. "You know you get the better of me every time!"

"Come come!" quipped Whiskers. Then, indicating Trinket, he continued:

"And *this* young fellow is my newly sworn brother-in-arms ..."



The two men looked at each other in utter amazement, then both stared at Trinket. What was going on? Who on earth *was* this skinny little fellow? Why, he couldn't be much more than twelve years old! Whiskers went on:

"This young camarado of mine is Wei, Trinket Wei ... In the Brotherhood he's known as ... his *nom de guerre*, you know ... is ..."

After a bit more umming and arring he finally came out with: " ... Little White Dragon! You should *see* him in the water, he's a wonder, a master-swimmer: he can swim for three days and nights, feeding on nothing but live fish and shrimps ..."

Whiskers very much wanted to give his newly acquired friend some 'face', and not let him feel too small in the presence of these two newcomers. But he knew that Trinket had no fighting skills whatsoever, in the true sense. He was a total novice, whereas Goatee and Baldy were both very much the real thing; they would quickly see through any false pretenses of that sort. A moment's thought had produced the inspiration: the two men were northerners and couldn't swim a stroke between them. They would therefore be quite incapable of judging the truth of his claims.

"The three of you must all be friends!" Whiskers went on. "Come now, no formality please!"

The two clasped their hands and nodded at Trinket:

"Honoured to know you, sir!"

He was quick to pick up the lingo:

"The honour is entirely mine, sirs!" But he was thinking to himself: "Old Whiskers has really gone overboard—I'm just a nobody, a nothing! Me—a *camarado* of his! But I mustn't let on ..."

The four of them had soon polished off the food and wine. Baldy was a terrific eater—a trifle inhibited at first, but by the end he was really tucking in, and putting away more meat, buns and fritters than the other three put together.

Whiskers dabbed his mouth with his long sleeve, and turned to Goatee:

"Sire Wu, my young friend here is a master swimmer, as I have just told you. But on land he is something of a novice, so on this occasion I shall have to take you both on single-handed. I hope you will not think this a slight?"

"I feel we should postpone our encounter another six months," said the old man.

"Why on earth?"

"You are wounded, and would not be able to give of your best. It would be no glory to defeat you in this condition. And to lose would be a terrible disgrace."

Whiskers laughed aloud.

"I don't see that it matters whether I am wounded or not. I think none of us could bear to see this thing drag on another six months."

Leaning with his left hand on the tree, he slowly heaved himself to his feet and took hold of his sword with his right hand. He addressed Goatee first.

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"You, sir, I know, have always preferred to fight with bare fists." Then turning to Baldy: "Sir, would you please present your weapons!"

"Certainly!"

There was a muffled clang as he reached inside his jacket and produced the Twin Clubs.

"I call upon you, Brother Wu," said Goatee, "to act as my reserve. If I fail, you can step in."

"Yes, *Sire!*" cried Baldy, and stood back three paces. Goatee Wang, the Great Roc, now brought up his left palm, circled with his right, and began closing in on Whiskers Mao, weaving through the air as he did so.

Whiskers lunged with his sword, aiming at his opponent's left arm. Goatee ducked low and came in under the blade, punching with his left below Whiskers' right arm. Whiskers dodged behind the tree and Goatee's palm hit the tree-trunk with a smack. It was a hefty tree, a good fifty feet high, and when Goatee smacked into it, the leaves came raining down in a shower.

"A mighty blow!" cried Whiskers, and immediately lunged at the small of Goatee's back. The Great Roc now leapt into the air and came hurtling down towards his opponent, the strands of his long white goatee fluttering about him. It was a wonderful sight. Whiskers countered with a move known as 'Westerly Cyclone', sweeping his sword up in an arc from below. The Roc swivelled in mid-air, and with a great somersault bounded beyond his reach—the sword missing his midriff by less than six inches. The blade had come up with enormous force, but the Roc had reacted with lightning speed.

Now Trinket had watched a fight or two in his short life: but they'd all been low-life scraps in the marketplace, one thug headbutting (or pigtailing) another. Apart from Whiskers' performance with the salt gang the previous day, he'd never seen anything to compare with the present display of sheer martial virtuosity. The Roc danced back and forth, his hands weaving through the air, while Whisker's sword flashed magically in front of him. Each time the old man was poised to strike, the glinting blade of his opponent's sword forced him away again.



4. *The Troopers Arrive*

The fight was raging, when suddenly they heard the sound of horses' hooves, and a dozen riders came galloping up, dressed in the livery of the Manchu Imperial Guard. They surrounded the four of them, and their Captain called out:

"Stay your hands! We have orders to arrest the notorious brigand Mao Eighteen, known as Whiskers! The rest of you stand back: this is no concern of yours."

When he heard this, the Great Roc lowered his fists and leapt aside.

"It's the troopers!" exclaimed Whiskers. "They're after me again—don't take any notice. Let's carry on."

The Roc turned to the Guards:

"This gentleman is an honourable law-abiding citizen, not a notorious brigand! There must be some mistake."

The Captain of the Guards sneered:

"If *he's* a law-abiding citizen, everyone else is a bleeding saint! Come on, Whiskers old lad, you've committed a heinous crime, and you know it—the whole of Yangzhou certainly does—so face the music like a man. Now, come along quietly with us, please."

"Just a minute: let me first settle this little contest with my friends here."

Turning to Goatee and Baldy, he continued:

"Gentlemen, this matter *must* be settled today. Another six months and who knows if I'll even be alive. So look to, and look sharp!"

"You two!" cried the Captain testily. "Unless you want to be taken in together with this brigand, stand well back both of you. I mean it. Don't go causing trouble for yourselves."

"Oh get lost!" snorted Whiskers contemptuously. "This hysterical shouting will get you nowhere!"

"Now you listen to me!" blazed the Captain. "You've broken out of jail, you've committed murder (several times over)—O.K., we'll leave all of that to the Yangzhou magistrate, where it belongs. But not treason! You made a big mistake in the whorehouse by calling the Triads heroes in public—when everyone knows they're rebels and vile treacherous scum!"

"Of course my friends the Triads are heroes!" declared Whiskers stoutly. "They're Brave Men and True of the first order! Unless you'd like people to believe that Tartar-licking sneaks like *you* are heroes?"

The Captain's eyes flashed angrily.

"We are here at the orders of Regent Oboi. We've been sent all the way from the Capital, to apprehend the treacherous scum who call themselves Triads. Now, you come with us, Whiskers Mao!"

Turning to Goatee and Baldy:

"As for the two of you, you were fighting against this man, and I shall assume that you are *not* his associates. You may go on your way."

"May I have the honour of knowing your name?" asked old Goatee.

The Captain of the Guard tapped the black whip he carried tucked into his sash, and replied:

"My name is Shi Song. I am usually called Black Dragon, on account of this little beauty here. I'm under orders from Regent Oboi, to round up the Triad rebels—as I have just told you."

Goatee nodded his head. Then, turning to Whiskers, he began:

"Brother Mao, by Heaven my Father and Earth my Mother ..."

Whiskers stared at him blankly.

"What *are* you going on about?"

Goatee smiled.



“Oh, nothing. Obviously *you’re* not a Triad member. So why do you think they’re such heroes?”

“Because they stand up for the common people,” was Whiskers’ unhesitating reply. “Because they kill the Tartars. They *act* like heroes, so in my book that’s what they *are*. There’s a saying in the Brotherhood:

If Helmsman Chen you’ve never seen,
A Brave Man True you’ve never been.

Helmsman Chen, he’s the head of all the Triads. They all owe him allegiance, every lodge. Of course they’re heroes, Brave Men and True, every last man of them!”

“Have *you* seen the Helmsman?” asked Goatee.

“What?” retorted Whiskers angrily. “Are you trying to make fun of me? Are you casting aspersions on my credentials?”

Evidently (from his angry response) *he* had *not* seen the Helmsman.

Goatee laughed:

“I wasn’t casting anything ...”

“And you? Have *you* met him?” growled Whiskers.

Goatee shook his head.

The Captain of the Guard now addressed Goatee and his friend:

“If you *do* know any Triad members, now’s the time to speak up: Regent Oboi has promised a rich reward for any of their leaders—that Helmsman Chen, for example.”

Before they had a chance to reply, Whiskers threw up his head and guffawed:

“Dream on, me old darling! Think some little whippersnapper like you’s going to land a big fish like the Helmsman? And the way you keep yabberin’ on about Regent Oboi, you’d think he was some sort of miracle-worker. He may reckon he’s the Manchu champ, but I’ll wager it’s all empty talk ...”

“The Regent’s a living wonder!” protested the Captain. “One of the great fighters of the age! Why, one day in the capital, he took on a wild bull in the street with his bare fists and knocked him down dead. But what would trash like you know about that?”

“The devil take him!” swore Whiskers Mao. “I’ll wager this Oboi chappy could do no such thing! I’ll go to Peking and take the fellow on myself!”

“Think *you’re* a match for the Regent?” sneered the Captain. “He could snuff you out with one finger! Now stop your empty boasting and come along with us.”

“Not so fast! You may be thirteen against one, but I’ll still give you a run for your money!”

“And what of *us*?” put in Goatee Wu, with a mischievous smile. “Aren’t you forgetting us? Which makes it thirteen against three, more like four to one: by no means a foregone conclusion ...”

Whiskers Mao was taken aback by this, as was the Captain, who warned Goatee Wu in no uncertain terms:



"I hope you realise what you're about? Assisting a known rebel, engaging in treasonous activities—this could land you in serious trouble ..."

Goatee laughed:

"I may be about to assist a rebel, but I'm certainly not engaged in treasonous activities!"

"It amounts to the same thing. Think carefully: do you really want to take sides with a known criminal?"

"Six months ago," replied Goatee, "Brother Mao made an agreement with my friend Wang," (pointing to Baldy), "to meet here for a friendly trial of strength. I agreed to come along. You Imps went and spoiled things by locking the fellow up. Mao's a man of his word, and it would have been more than his reputation's worth among the Brotherhood for him not to show up. So really and truly it was you who *forced* him to break out of jail. You gave him no choice but to commit a crime. Now listen here, sir: if you've any respect for me, take your men back and leave us to finish what we've started, and then tomorrow he'll be all yours!"

"Out of the question!" declared the Captain. One of his troopers yelled out:

"When's that old codger going to stop blathering?" He unsheathed his sword, and spurring his horse forward, raised the blade to bring it down on the old man's head. Goatee dodged the blow, shot out his right arm, and with a quick move, grabbed the trooper by the back of his jacket and yanked him off his horse and onto the ground.

"Mutiny! At them!" yelled the troopers, and they leapt from their horses and surged forward, forming a circle around the three men.

Whiskers' leg wound obliged him to remain propped against the tree. He raised his cutlass and with a single downward swing sent one trooper to his death, while a sideways blow sliced a second clean through the midriff. The remaining troopers were deterred by this display of ferocity from closing in any further. Their Captain sat on his horse, arms akimbo, surveying the scene.

Trinket had at the outset been inside the ring of troopers, but as the Captain and the others conducted their conversation, he had sneaked away unnoticed. No one attached any importance to the skinny little fellow anyway. When the fight started, he was hiding behind another tree some twenty or thirty feet away.

"Should I run, or should I stay and watch?" he was wondering. "Looks like old Whiskers and the other two are for it now: wonder if the troopers'll go for me afterwards ..."

"But then again: he called me his *friend*, we talked about sharing the rough and the smooth. If I leave him in the lurch now, a fine kind of Honour and Chivalry that'd be ..."

Old Goatee had meanwhile felled one of the troopers with his bare fists, and Baldy was laying about three more with his Twin Clubs. Whiskers brought another down with a devastating kick from his right foot, leaving him cursing and howling in a pool of blood.

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The Captain now let out a high-pitched screech, and began brandishing the Black Dragon in the air. He vaulted from his horse and before his feet had even touched the ground the tip of the Black Dragon had begun coiling through the air towards Whiskers. Eight times he cracked the whip, and eight times Whiskers countered with the sword riposte for which he was so famous, known as “Five Tigers Breaking the Door”. Meanwhile a great cry issued from Goatee and one more trooper flew through the air and landed with a thud on the ground.

Baldy was holding off three men, and slowly getting the worst of it. He had a nasty gash on his right leg from a sword with a saw-blade edge to it, and was losing blood fast and hobbling badly. Goatee was also up against three opponents, and not bad swordsmen either—two wielding short-swords, one a double-edged long-sword. They harried him persistently, and even his Cloud Scraper acrobatics were of no avail. He failed to land a punch anywhere near them.

The Black Dragon cracked faster and faster, but could not outdo Whiskers Mao. Then suddenly the Captain tried a new move known as the ‘Spitting Snake’. The tip of the whip grazed Whiskers’ right shoulder. He countered with a vertical parry, but his opponent was already one step ahead. The first move had only been a feint. The Captain flicked his wrist once, then twice, and the whip changed direction and began to form a great whirling loop, coiling itself around Whiskers’ waist: this was known as ‘Jade Sash Wraps the Waist’.

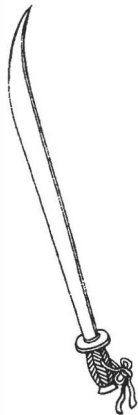
Normally Whiskers would have responded either by dashing forwards or by leaping backwards. But with his wounded leg he could only stay where he was against the tree and parry with his sword—to no avail. The Captain now let go of the whip-handle altogether and spun the whip through the air. It wound tightly three times around both Whiskers and the tree trunk, and the barbed tip came down with a final flick into his chest. The Captain wanted him alive, so he could grill him for information concerning the Triads.

Seeing that Goatee and Baldy were still far from subdued, and wanting to release the Black Dragon for further service, the Captain stooped to pick up a short-sword he’d spotted lying on the ground. With this he planned to slice off Whiskers’ right arm at the shoulder.

He had the sword in his hand and was just raising himself up again when something flashed past him and a shower of tiny dustlike particles flew into his eyes, up his nose, and into his mouth. He felt himself choking and his eyes began to smart. It was like the pricking of a thousand needles. He tried to cry out, but his mouth was full of some sort of powder, his throat seized up, and he couldn’t make a sound. He began to panic, and despite his years of experience in the apprehension of outlaws, dropped his sword and began rubbing his eyes with both hands. Then suddenly he knew:

“Lime! He’s thrown lime in my eyes!”

Raw lime reacts violently on contact with water. By now his eyes were raw and burning with an unbearable pain. And then he became aware of



another, colder sensation, that of a steel blade working its way into his stomach ...

When the whip had lashed him to the tree, Whiskers had written himself off. The next minute the air was a whirling blizzard of lime, his opponent's sword was on the ground, and before Whiskers could figure out what on earth was going on, Trinket had dashed forward, seized the sword, thrust it straight into the Captain's belly and disappeared again behind his tree.

The Captain reeled from side to side, tottered round and round and tumbled to the ground.

"Captain! Captain!" cried his remaining troopers, aghast. Goatee rammed home an electrifying left ('Steel Tree Blooming') and sent one of them flying thirty feet through the air, spewing blood. The remaining contingent of five knew they were finished, and having no heart for further battle turned and fled, without even stopping for their horses.

"Brother Mao!" declared old Goatee. "My deepest compliments for having despatched Black Dragon so effectively! His was no mean skill!"

He thought it must have been Whiskers' hand that dealt the death-blow. Whiskers shook his head:

"To my shame! It was my young friend here who killed him."

"*That* little kid!" cried Goatee and Baldy simultaneously. They had both been far too busy fighting to observe Trinket's little ploy, or to notice the lime scattered all around them, among the gore-stained corpses of the dead and the mud-spattered limbs of the wounded.

Whiskers now took hold of the tip of the Black Dragon, shook loose the whip itself, and cracked it towards the Captain's head. The sword hilt still protruded from the Captain's belly, but he was not quite dead. The whip struck him on the crown of his head, and snuffed out the last residual spark of life in him.

"That was a fine stroke of yours, Trinket!" cried Whiskers.

Trinket now emerged from behind his tree. The thought that he had actually killed a Captain of the Imperial Guard gave him a thrill of pride; but this was accompanied by a much deeper thrill of fear. Goatee and Baldy kept looking him up and down, unable to decide whether they could credit him with this mighty feat. His little face was deadly white, his whole body was trembling, tears started from his eyes. He looked for all the world as if he might at any moment break down completely and collapse on the ground, sobbing for his Mum. He certainly didn't in the least look like someone who had just sent a Captain of the Imps to his death.

"Tell us, young friend," asked old Goatee, "which move did you use to kill him?"

"I ... I ... Did I really ... kill the Captain?" stammered Trinket. "No, surely I didn't ... do it, not me ..."

The gravity of his crime had finally sunk home, striking terror into his heart, and he tried frantically to deny responsibility for the man's death.

Whiskers frowned and shook his head:

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"Gentlemen, many thanks to you both for coming to my aid and saving my life. Shall we continue our little contest now?"

"Please," protested old Goatee, "we ask for no thanks. Brother Wang, I hardly think that in the circumstances we need to continue ..."

"Certainly not," agreed Baldy. "I never had a serious quarrel with Brother Mao in the first place. Let's just make it up. He's a fine fighter, and a brave and wise man, and I offer him my sincerest respect."

"Very well," said Goatee. "Brother Mao, we must be on our way. But one day, somewhere in the hills and rivers that we all roam, we will surely meet again. I have noted your words of veneration for Helmsman Chen, and will find a way of communicating them to him."

Whiskers' eyes lit up, and he took a step towards the old man:

"You mean ... you actually know the Helmsman?"

Goatee gave a short laugh:

"Both Brother Wang and I are humble Triads, junior members of the Transformation Lodge. After the fine words you spoke earlier concerning our fraternity, we would anyway have dismissed all earlier bones of contention between us—if there had been any remaining!"

"But ... you really *have* met him!" exclaimed Whiskers, in an excited and somewhat awestruck voice.

"There are many Brothers, and few of us ever know the whereabouts of the Helmsman. I myself am far too humble to have met him face to face. But I will pass on the message nonetheless. That is all I meant."

"I see," replied Whiskers.

Goatee bowed to him with clasped hands and turned to go. As he strode off he sliced the air with his hands, and leapt from one trooper's body to another, dealing a few final blows. The wounded he put out of their misery, and if they were already dead he snapped their sinews and broke their bones.

"What power!" murmured Whiskers. As the two of them disappeared into the distance, he continued under his breath:

"So they were both of them Triad members!"

Then turning to Trinket after a moment's pause:

"Go and fetch me that horse!"



5. *Trinket on Horseback*

Now Trinket had never handled a horse in his life, and the sheer size of the beast struck terror into his heart. He tried creeping up to it from behind.

"From the front!" bellowed Whiskers. "Go behind the horse's bum, and it'll kick you in the face for sure!"

Trinket sneaked round the horse's front end and took hold of the reins. Luckily for him it was a docile creature and followed him quietly.

Whiskers was meanwhile tearing strips off his jacket and bandaging his wounded right arm. Then he put his left hand on the saddle and vaulted onto the horse's back.

"You can go home now!"

"Where are *you* going?" asked Trinket.

"Why should you want to know?"

"Because you're my friend: of course I want to know."

Whiskers' face darkened:

"*Your* friend? *Me*? Why, you little creep ..."

Trinket backed away. His face flushed, tears started from his eyes. He couldn't understand why Whiskers should suddenly be so angry with him.

"Why did you throw lime in the Captain's eyes?"

His voice was stern, his face grim. Trinket had never seen him like this. He retreated, terrified, and replied in trembling tones:

"I ... I thought he was going to kill you!"

"And where did you get the lime from?"

"I ... bought it."

"And why did you do that?"

"You said you'd be fighting, and I could see you were badly wounded ... So I bought it, to help you ..."

"Why, you misbegotten little brat! You dirty little mongrel!" cried Whiskers angrily. "Where in hell did you learn a cheap trick like that?"

Now Trinket's mother was a singsong girl, and neither he nor she knew who his father was: his paternity had consequently always been a sore point with him, and any slur on his own 'legitimacy' inevitably sent him flying into an instant rage.

"You mangy old mongrel yourself!" he yelled back. "Sod you and all your ancestors—all seventeen or eighteen generations of them! You rotten turtle! What business is it of yours what I learn and where I learn it? You foul, putrid old turtle!"

By the end of this, Trinket was safely back behind his tree. Whiskers spurred his horse forward, reached out, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him up into the air.

"Why you pesky little brat! Got anything more to say for yourself?"

Trinket thrashed the air wildly with his legs, and yelled back:

"You leprous old turtle! May you rot and die like a tramp by the roadside! May you be chopped into a million pieces like a dish of putrid sweet-and-sour pork ..."

He'd picked up an enormous repertoire of abuse in the whorehouse, from the extremely diverse clientele, who used both Northern and Southern variations on this eternal theme. Fits of rage (such as the present one) tended to inspire him to virtuoso outpourings of filth.

This had the effect of inflaming Whiskers all the more, and he dealt the boy a resounding box on the ears. Trinket now started howling and cursing for all he was worth, and then all of a sudden he sunk his teeth savagely into the back of Whiskers' hand. The pain caused Whiskers to loosen his grip momentarily and he dropped him to the ground. Trinket bolted for it, still cursing nineteen to the dozen. Whiskers came after him on horseback.

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Trinket was a reasonably fast runner, but he didn't stand a chance against a mounted pursuit. After a hundred feet or so he was puffed out, and looking round, saw Whiskers not much more than ten feet behind him. His heart missed a beat, he lost his footing and went tumbling to the ground, where he writhed around, and began howling and wailing. This was in fact an old trick of his: if ever he got into a scrape, in the whorehouse or out on the street, and it looked like he was getting the worst of it, he'd try his bawling act, and found that it was usually enough to stop his opponents in their tracks, make them shake their heads and walk away. No grown man wanted to be seen beating up a 'helpless little kid' ...

"Up you get," ordered Whiskers. "I've got something to say to you."

"I won't! I won't!" cried Trinket. "I'd rather lie here and die!"

"All right then," said Whiskers. "I'll let my horse trample you to death!"

Trinket had never taken kindly to intimidation. People were always saying things like "I'll brain you! I'll clout you one! I'll kick your head in!", and he never took the least bit of notice. This time was no exception.

"Go on then!" he cried. "Try it! I'll bet you're proud of yourself, a great big fellow like you, picking on a little kid! *Heeeelp!* There's a turtle-egg on horseback and he's going to trample me to death!"

Whiskers tugged on his reins, and his horse reared up on its hind legs, pawing the air with its hooves. Trinket scrambled out of its way.

"Little brat!" jeered Whiskers. "See—you *are* scared!"

"Dog's prick! *You're* no Brave Man and True!"

Whiskers could see that Trinket was all done in, and relented.

"And you *are*, I suppose!" he laughed. "Come on now, up you get. I won't hurt you. I'm going anyway."

Trinket stood up. His face was wet with tears and covered in snot.

"Hit me as much as you like. But *never, never* call me a mongrel!"

"Why," laughed Whiskers, "the things you called me were a hundred times worse! I think we're quits ..."

Trinket wiped his face with his sleeve, and a smile broke through his tears:

"Yes," he grinned. "You boxed my ears, I bit your hand: I think we're quits. So, where are you going?"

"Peking."

"*Peking?*" Trinket sounded flabbergasted. "But you're a wanted man! What's the sense in offering yourself up to them on a plate?"

"I'm forever hearing people say what a fighter that fellow Oboi is supposed to be," replied Whiskers. "The Tartar champ—some people even say the world champ. Well, I intend to prove them wrong. I'm going to take him on myself!"

Now *that* would really be something, thought Trinket to himself. He could already sense the excitement! He wouldn't want to miss a contest like that for all the world! Besides, in the tea-houses he'd heard so much about the wonders of Peking, and had always dreamed of going there one day. And here in Yangzhou he was in deep trouble, with the Captain's murder on his

hands. He could always try pinning the blame on Whiskers. But if the true story came out he'd be for it. He'd be well advised to get away while he could.

"Elder Brother Mao!" he began. "There's one favour I'd like to ask of you. But it's rather a tough one. You may not have the guts for it ..."

"Not have the guts! Why you dirty little ..."

Whiskers' reaction was true to form. He did, however, pull himself up in time, before uttering the forbidden "M" word.

"Go on, speak up. Of course I'll do it."

He hadn't, despite everything, forgotten that he owed the boy his life.

"A man should never break his word, remember, however tough the assignment: promise me you'll say yes!" insisted Trinket.

"I told you—I promise!"

"Good! Then I want you to take me with you to Peking!"

"You *what?*" exclaimed Whiskers. "Whatever for?"

"I want to see you take on Oboi the Regent!"

Whiskers shook his head.

"It's a *very* long way from Yangzhou to Peking. The Imps are after me, they've posted a reward, and it could be a very tough ride. I couldn't possibly take you."

"You see, I told you so, I knew you'd say no. You're afraid I'll slow you down, and make it easier for them to catch you."

"Of course I'm not afraid!" protested Whiskers indignantly.

"Then prove it: take me!"

"Well all right, it's true, you *would* slow me down quite a bit. And besides, you haven't told your mother. She'll be worried stiff."

"Oh I'm *always* going off for days on end. She never worries."

Whiskers spurred his horse on, muttering:

"You're a tricky little devil, aren't you!"

"*I know!*" yelled Trinket after him. "You won't take me, because you're scared I'll see you being beaten by Oboi!"

Whiskers wheeled his horse round angrily.

"What makes you think Oboi will beat me?"

"That *must* be it, that's why you won't take me! You're scared I'll hear you grovelling and begging Oboi to spare your puny little neck! You'd die of shame if I was there to see it!"

The very thought seemed to send Whiskers into a paroxysm of rage. He rode up to Trinket, scooped him up and deposited him sideways across his saddle.

"Very well then!" he growled. "I'll take you. And we'll see which man grovels first!"

"I'd certainly have put my money on you!" cried the delighted (but unrepentant) Trinket. "But now I'll be able to see for myself!"

Whiskers raised his left hand in the air and dealt him a resounding spank on the backside.

"*Yeeow!*" yelped the boy, grinning despite everything. "Not bad, for a dog's paw!"

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“Why, you little scamp! You little terror!” laughed Whiskers. To which Trinket, never one to be outdone, replied:

“And you’re a bigger scamp! And an even bigger terror!”

“I’ll take you to Peking; but on one condition. On the way there you’re to do *exactly* what I say. *No* trouble. *No* nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” protested Trinket. “Trouble? Who’s the trouble-maker around here? Who got put in jail? Who broke out of jail? Who killed the salt-smugglers? Who killed the troopers?”

“I can see I’ll never get the better of you,” laughed Whiskers. “I give in.”

He seated Trinket on the saddle in front of him, and spurred his horse round. Tying the other horse by a leading rein, he took his bearings, and set off in a northerly direction.

Trinket had never ridden on a horse before, and at first he was scared. But with Whiskers right behind him he gradually acquired a little confidence, and after a few miles he asked if he could ride the other horse.

“If you can ride, then go ahead. Otherwise, you’re better off where you are. We don’t want you breaking a leg.”

Trinket was eager to prove himself.

“Of course I can ride!” he boasted. “I’ve ridden dozens of times!”

He jumped down and ran over to the left flank of the second horse. He placed his right foot in the stirrup, swung himself up onto the horse’s back, and found himself staring straight at the horse’s rump ...

Whiskers roared with laughter. He promptly untied the horse, and cracked his whip at its rear. Off it cantered, with the terrified Trinket clinging desperately to its tail, clamping his legs frantically onto the saddle and lying as low as possible along the horse’s back. He went careering backwards, the wind whistling up the back of his ears. Luckily he was small and lightly built, and by dint of clinging onto the tail he managed to avoid being thrown to the ground.

“*Yikes! Help! For the love of Mum!*” he screamed as he sped along. “Stop the horse, or I’ll poke every last ancestor in your rotten family! *Heelp!*”

The horse continued to gather speed and galloped a mile or two down the highway without showing any signs of letting up. It rounded a bend and there ahead of them, to the right, where another road joined the highway, a mule-cart was rattling along and behind it came a white horse ridden by a man in his late twenties, also heading north. Trinket’s runaway horse went charging wildly towards them.

“Lord save us!” cried the driver of the cart, as it came closer and closer. “A mad horse!”

He pulled his cart over to the side, while the young man behind wheeled his horse round, reined it in and held his ground. Trinket’s horse came thundering towards him. The young man calmly reached out a hand, took a firm grip of the runaway horse’s head and checked its mad onward rush. Despite its speed, his sheer strength was such that the horse came to an immediate and absolute halt. It stood there snorting and rooted to the spot.



A woman's voice was heard from within the cart.

"Brother Bo, what has happened?"

"A runaway horse!" replied the young man. "There's a boy on its back. I can't tell if he's still alive."

Trinket promptly turned around, and sat upright.

"Of course I'm alive!"

He studied the young man on the white horse more carefully: he had a long handsome face (in a rather well-bred sort of way), lively sparkling eyes, and was wearing a dark silk gown and a hat set with a piece of jade. He was clearly from a wealthy family, the sort of family that Trinket the urchin had always spat upon—which he did now, a large gob of it landing on the ground.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "That was great! Gone with the wind—backwards! Terrific! Fantastic fun! And now I have to run into *this* carcass, and spoil my ..."

He ran out of breath and fell back coughing on the horse's rump. The horse was a little startled, stamped its rear left leg, and Trinket slid yelping to the ground.

The young man had been about to take offence at Trinket's remarks, but then seeing him make such a fool of himself, merely smiled, gave his own horse's reins a tug, and trotted off behind the mule-cart. Whiskers had meanwhile ridden up.

"Are you all right, little scamp?" he cried.

"Of course I'm all right. I was just having some fun riding back to front, when this poxy fellow had to get in my way. He's so annoying!"

He heaved himself up grunting from the ground; his kneecaps had taken a bad knock, and he promptly doubled up again. Whiskers nudged his horse forward, took hold of him by the collar and lifted him onto his saddle.

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6. *The Satrap's Men*

After this debacle, Trinket did not insist a second time on having his own mount. He rode with Whiskers, and they continued on their way for another ten miles or so, by which time the sun was high in the sky. They came to a small town; Whiskers slid gently from the saddle, lifted Trinket carefully down and they went into an inn for something to eat.

At meal-times Trinket was accustomed to sitting in the doorway of the whorehouse kitchen and holding out his blue-and-white bowl for left-overs. Whatever bits of chicken, duck, fish or meat the clients might have left uneaten would be piled up on top of his rice. He'd probably worked his way without knowing it through an extensive and varied menu. But never once in his life had he actually sat down at a table with a friend and had a proper meal out. Now here he was, with a fellow who genuinely seemed to consider him a friend, and though they were only eating noodles and a plate of stir-fried eggs, to him it was a feast.

He'd eaten half his bowl of noodles when there was the sound of whinnying and shouting outside, and in swaggered seventeen or eighteen men dressed in some sort of uniform. Trinket swallowed hard.

"Looks like troopers!" he muttered to his companion. "They must be after you. Let's get out of here!"

Whiskers humfed, put down his chopsticks and reached for his sword. But the newcomers seemed to be taking little notice of him. They were more concerned with their stomachs, and were noisily ordering their meals.

It was only a small town, and the menu at the inn was very basic. All they had to offer was the usual soy-cured meat, smoked fish, bean-curd strips in brine and fried eggs. The man who was evidently in command of the troopers gave orders for his personal supply of ham and cured chicken to be brought in. One of the others struck up a bit of a conversation:

"They're always telling us back home how wonderful this part of the country is: *such* gorgeous silks, *such* delicious seafood and finger-licking game. But just take a look at what they've got to offer us here! Give me good old Yunnan cooking any day!"

"It's all very well for you," chipped in another. "You people over at the Satrap's HQ eat and drink like lords. Everyone knows that. Anything else is bound to seem poor by comparison."

This comment met with a general growl of approval.

Whiskers' face visibly darkened.

"These scum must be in the service of that traitor Satrap Wu!" he thought to himself. Then one of the newcomers, a swarthy-looking fellow, said to one of the others:

"Excellency Huang, will you be seeing His Majesty on this trip to Peking?"

The man addressed, a fat, pale individual, replied, rather pretentiously:

"Strictly speaking, no: I'm not really senior enough for an audience. But His Majesty will probably grant me one, out of consideration for His Highness Satrap Wu. They usually make a big fuss of you at court, if you're in the Satrap's personal service."

"That's only natural," put in a third. "After all, he *is* the most powerful man in China, after the Emperor himself."

"Hey, Trink," said Whiskers rather loudly, "d'ye know who's the vilest creature in the entire world?"

"Of course I know!" piped Trinket. "Why, it must be that dirty misbegotten lump of turtle-spawn ..."

In actual fact he had not the least idea what Whiskers was talking about; but while his answer said nothing, it gave nothing away either ... Whiskers thumped the table enthusiastically and cried:

"You've hit it on the head, me boy! And tell me, what's he called, that dirty lump of turtle-spawn?"

"Why, blow me if I know! But I *do* know he's a good-for-nothing rotten piece of shit!"

This time Trinket brought *his* fist down most convincingly on the table.

*Li Zicheng, Chen Yuan yuan,
and Wu the Satrap*



“Let me tell you something, sonny,” said Whiskers, “and you listen to me good: that no-good, misbegotten, putrid piece o’turtle-spawn, that lousy treacherous son-of-a-bitch, what d’you think he did? Why, he took this fine and beautiful land of ours, and he just *banded* it to the filthy stinking Tartars on a plate ...”

By now the newly arrived contingent were staring at him as one man, fury written clearly in their eyes.

“And his name,” continued Whiskers, quite unperturbed, “is Wu. They call him the Satrap, and that ain’t far off, though personally I prefer Shat-rap. Rap that head of his and it surely is stuffed with shit!”

“And he *never* shuts his trap!” put in Trinket for good measure.

Fury now gave way to action, and there was a clang of metal as seven or eight of the Satrap’s men drew their swords and advanced on Whiskers. Trinket disappeared promptly under the table. There was a resounding clash as blade struck blade, Whiskers holding his own with his trusty cutlass. From his vantage point (beneath the table) Trinket could see his friend seated at the bench and realised that he was still immobilised by his leg wound. The outlook was pretty bleak. Then there was an almighty clang, and a sword went flying through the air, followed by the body of a man who tumbled to the ground howling with pain. But Whiskers was still surrounded. Trinket could see a melee of legs, that terminated in feet wearing cloth shoes and leather boots: Whiskers was clearly identifiable by his straw sandals. He was hacking away, cursing all the while:

“The Satrap’s a lousy rotten traitor! And so are all of you, and I’m going to cut off all your dirty little ... *Aiyeeeb!*”

It was a cry of pain. At the same moment one of his assailants bit the dust, blood spraying from his chest.

Trinket reached for a short-sword that had fallen to the ground. He aimed at one of the cloth-clad feet moving round the table and hacked away: there was a nasty tearing sound and a good portion of the sole of a man’s foot came away. The man tumbled screaming to the floor.

It was pitch black beneath the table, and in the general pandemonium no one could tell who was doing what: they assumed the blow must have been inflicted by their principal adversary, Whiskers. Trinket, exhilarated by the devastating effect of his latest ruse, struck again: this time his unfortunate victim managed to stay upright, grit his teeth and cry out:

“Under the table ... The *table!*”

As the man stooped to look in the direction he had himself indicated, Whiskers brought the back of his sword down on his head and he went out like a light. Trinket was already hacking away at another man’s shins. The man howled with pain and seized hold of the table, sending it and everything on it—bowls, chopsticks, soup and noodles—crashing to the floor. Then he raised his sword and aimed it square at Trinket’s head. Whiskers deftly parried the blow, while Trinket scrambled out through the melee. The most recent of his victims went wildly after him, with raised sword.

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“Great Balls of Sizzling Beancurd!” screeched Trinket, zooming under another table.

“Come on out of there, you little skunk!” the man yelled.

“Come on in after me, you big skunk!” he yelled back. The man was boiling with rage. With his left hand he made to tip up this table too, when suddenly there was a great crash, a fist landed smack in the middle of his chest and he went flying backwards. It was the man sitting at this very table who had dealt him the blow. And now the same man took a fistful of chopsticks from the container on the table and began flicking them one by one at Whiskers’ assailants. They let out great howls of pain as they were struck, each one in a vital spot—on eye, cheek, whatever. One of them finally shouted:

“These guys are lethal! Let’s get out of here!”

They beat a hasty retreat, dragging their wounded with them. Soon the sound of horses’ hooves could be heard as they galloped away.

Trinket began to laugh hysterically, as he emerged from under the table, still clutching the bloodstained sword. Whiskers hobbled over, and clasping his hands together bowed in respectful thanks to the man sitting at the table:

“I am indeed grateful to you sir for your timely assistance. I was sorely outnumbered, and without you I fear the day would have ended ill for me.”

Trinket took a closer look and recognised the man as the rider on the white horse who had so effectively halted his backwards flight (and about whom he had been so rude at the time ...).

The man rose to his feet and returned Whiskers’ bow.

“Brother Mao, you were already wounded, and yet your sense of honour inspired you to speak truth of a traitor. For that you suffered: I was deeply impressed.”

“Never in all my life,” replied Whiskers, “have I loathed a man as I loathe the Satrap Wu. He himself may be beyond my grasp, but at least today I have been able to vent my spleen a little on his underlings. And you, sir—would you enlighten me as to your esteemed appellation?”

“Not in this crowded place. I must be on my way, Brother Mao. Until we meet again!”

He escorted the lady who was sitting with him at the table out of the room. Throughout this exchange she had held her head lowered, and they had not been able to observe her face.

“Why sir, it is more than a little uncivil of you not to tell me your name!” exclaimed Whiskers.

The man said nothing, but continued on his way. As he walked past Whiskers he muttered something in his ear. Whiskers was like a man struck by lightning, an expression of intense awe stole across his face, and he bowed deeply.

“Yes ... Yes ... Today mine eyes have beheld a true hero, in very truth!” he declared solemnly. “A rare honour indeed ...”

The man said nothing further, but left the inn with the lady on his arm. She climbed into the cart, he mounted his horse, and off they went.



7. *Whiskers, the Would-be Master*

Trinket was extremely puzzled by this sudden transformation on Whiskers' part, from anger to abject awe.

"Who *is* that man?" he asked. "He seemed to put you in a dreadful funk all of a sudden."

"Mind your language!" retorted Whiskers. He looked around, and saw the innkeeper and waiters peering into the room, surveying the scene of destruction and the bloodstains on the floor.

"Let's go!" he said. He hobbled from one table to the next, and managed to make his way to the doorway. Pulling out the door bar and using it as a crutch, he limped out into the yard and loosened the horses from the post to which they had been tethered. Turning to Trinket:

"Grab hold of the saddle, put your *left* foot in the stirrup this time, and climb up ... That's right, that's how you're supposed to do it."

"I know how to ride!" protested Trinket. "I'm just a bit out of practice ..."

Whiskers chuckled and mounted the other horse. He rode off, still holding the reins of Trinket's horse.

"With these wounds," he said, "I could never hold my own against those troopers. We'd better keep off the main highway. And we need to find a quiet place where I can rest till my wounds heal."

"That fellow just now was quite something!" said Trinket. "The way he flicked those chopsticks! Wow! That made them run all right! Not quite in his league, are you, Whiskers?"

"Of course not. The man was one of Duke Mu's trusted paladins! Of course he's good!"

"Duke *who's what*?" replied Trinket. "You seemed terribly afraid of him, I was thinking he must be that Helmsman Chen, the chief of the Triads."

"*Afraid* of him! Stop talking such nonsense, you impudent young puppy! I just happen to have a deep respect for Duke Mu, which of course extends to his retainers."

"Well, he didn't seem to show *you* a great deal of respect. When you asked him his name, he just ignored you; all you got out of him was 'Till we meet again ...'"

"He spoke to me in confidence as he was leaving—how else would I have known who he was?"

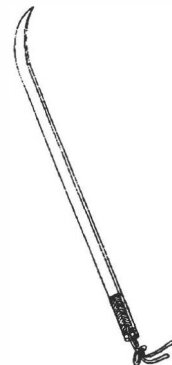
"And what did he whisper in your ear?"

"He told me he served under Duke Mu, and that his name was Bo."

"So what is it about one of Duke Mu's men that puts you in such a funk?" asked Trinket. "You don't seem scared of Oboi the Regent, or Wu the Satrap. Have Duke Mu's merry men got three heads and six arms? I know—you're probably scared he'll do his chopstick trick on you and put out both your eyes ..."

"For the last time, I am *not* scared of them. What you don't understand is that we Brothers revere Duke Mu as a hero. To offend him in any way is unthinkable. It's got nothing to do with fear, it's to do with *honour*!"

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“Why? What’s so amazingly special about Duke Mu?” asked Trinket.

“You wouldn’t understand even if I tried to tell you,” said Whiskers dismissively. “That’s because you are not one of the Brethren.”

“Up yours, Brother!” shot back Trinket. “What sort attitude is that? Think I’m impressed? And what about me? Don’t I even exist?”

“It is a rare enough thing to encounter one of Duke Mu’s paladins on one’s travels, and rarer still to strike up an acquaintance with one. Today I happened to be in a bit of tight spot with some of the Satrap’s men, and since Duke Mu’s men consider *him* to be their deadliest foe, it was only natural that that gentleman came to my aid. And then *you* went shooting under the table and let the side down completely with your pathetic, cheap little tricks. Your behaviour has brought disgrace on me!”

Whiskers’ face filled with indignation and disgust as he spoke.

“Dearie me!” sighed Trinket. “Dear oh dearie me! Just because someone’s given you the cold shoulder, there’s no need to go taking it out on *me*!”

“*You!* *You* were skulking under the table!” roared Whiskers. “*You* were hacking people’s feet off—for god’s sake, d’you call that fighting? What d’you think a *real* Brave Man and True is going to think of behaviour like *that*? Is he going to want to call us his friends after *that*?”

“Oh stuff it!” retorted Trinket. “If I *hadn’t* hacked off a few feet, you’d probably be dead by now! And you go blaming me!”

Whiskers’ sense of honour was too outraged for him to take in this line of argument.

“I told you I didn’t want you tagging along with me! But you wouldn’t take no for an answer. First it’s throwing lime in people’s eyes—that’s a cheap trick, something no proper Brother would ever stoop to, worse than disabling an enemy with drugs or incense, far worse! It’s not fair play! I’d rather have let that Captain kill me than be saved by a shameless low-down trick like that! The very sight of you makes my blood boil, you worthless little runt!”

Trinket was beginning to get the message. Throwing lime in the eyes of an opponent was not quite the thing. It was frowned on by decent practising outlaws. He’d clearly gone and broken an unwritten law. And no doubt hacking feet from underneath the table was not considered exactly heroic conduct either. But his newfound sense of shame merely made him angrier.

“Killing’s still killing,” he retorted fiercely, “whether you use lime or a sword. Why should one method be any better or more honourable than another? O.K., so I’m a little brat, I used a low-down, dirty little trick: but if I *hadn’t*, you’d be pushing up the daisies . . . You were already wounded—someone hacked *you* in the leg with a sword, so I hacked them back—a bit lower down, perhaps, but it’s all below the waist, so what’s the fuss about? If you don’t want me to go with you to Peking, fine, let’s go our separate ways and pretend we never even knew each other!”

Whiskers looked at the bedraggled little boy, covered with mud from the journey and blood from all the fighting. And all on *his* account. He’d started

the whole thing after all, in Yangzhou. They were a very long way from Yangzhou now, and he couldn't possibly abandon him in the middle of nowhere. Especially as he had twice saved his life. There was no escaping that fact. Didn't he owe him some sort of debt of gratitude?

"Oh all right! I'll take you with me to Peking. But this time you'll have to agree to *three* conditions."

"No problem!" chirped Trinket, pleased as punch again. "My word is my wand ..."

(His memories of the storytellers' turns of phrase were sometimes a little idiosyncratic ...)

"The first condition," began Whiskers, "is that you mustn't stir up trouble, you mustn't call people names and insult them all the time: in other words clean up your language!"

"No problem!" cried Trinket. "I'll be good. But what if someone *else* offends *me*?"

"Why on earth should anyone want to do that? Second: if you *do* get into a fight, you're not to bite, not to throw lime in your enemy's eyes, not to skulk under tables and hack their feet off, not to grab them by the balls, not to bawl your eyes out if you're beaten, not to pretend to be dead. In other words, *none* of your cheap tricks! No self-respecting Brother would stoop to any of them!"

"So what do I do if I'm getting the worst of it? Just sit back and let them beat the hell out of me?"

"Fight back: but fight clean! Fight properly! Your cheap tricks just make people laugh at you and despise you for a little street urchin! That kind of thing may have been all right in the whorehouse: but you're with me now, with one of the Brothers, so cut it all out!"

Trinket was thinking to himself:

"It's all very well for you to talk about fighting clean—but I'm just a kid, no one's ever taught me anything. All these conditions will just put me at my enemy's mercy."

"The ancient Martial Arts are transmitted from teacher to disciple," continued Whiskers, as if reading the boy's thoughts. "They are skills that have to be learned. No one's born with them. You're still young. It's not too late to start training. Get down on your knees, kowtow to me, and I'll take you on as my disciple. I've been a roamer all my life, I've never stopped in one place long enough to have a proper disciple, someone I could hand down my skills to. So you're the lucky first! Just do as I say, try hard, train hard, and one day *you'll* be a real fighter too! One day *you'll* be a true Brother!"

He was looking Trinket right in the eyes. He was obviously expecting the boy to say yes. Trinket shook his head.

"Sorry. I thought we were friends: you know, on the same level. If I start calling you Master, that'll be taking myself down a peg. Sod that! You're just trying to pull a fast one on me, that's what you're doing!"

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This was too much for Whiskers. Countless times people had asked to be his disciple—other members of the outlaw fraternity, men who wished to learn his dazzling sword technique, the famous “Five Dragons Breaking the Door”, for which he was renowned throughout the Brotherhood. Somehow it had never happened: the young men had either had the wrong motive, or were not of the right calibre, or else the time had not been right, and he’d been too busy with other things. And now he’d really *wanted* to pass something on, as a token of gratitude to this boy who’d saved his life. And the little brat had gone and turned him down! He was angry enough to hit him, and even raised his hand to do so, but thought better of it.

“I tell you boy, I offered to do this for you on an impulse. Take it while it’s there. Come back tomorrow and beg me a hundred times, go down on your knees and knock your head on the ground and I swear I’ll not repeat the offer!”

“Big deal!” quipped Trinket. “*You* come back tomorrow and beg *me* *three* hundred times to be your disciple and I swear I’ll still say no. If I’m your disciple, that means I have to do everything you say. Where’s the fun in that? Anyway, who wants to learn all your measly sword tricks.”

“Very well,” said Whiskers, huffily. “Don’t learn then. But when you’re pinned to the ground and death’s staring you in the face, don’t start wishing you had. It’ll be too late!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Why should I? Why should I want to be as good as you, anyway? Old Black Dragon had *you* pinned to a tree. And when that young fop of Duke Mu’s, that pooh-faced Aladdin, or whatever his name was, turned up, you just went to pieces: you were licking his ass and he wouldn’t even give you the time of day. I may not be as good a fighter as you, but at least I ...”

Whiskers could control his rage no longer, and clouted the boy on the face. Trinket was expecting it, and this time instead of bawling he burst out laughing:

“It’s because of what I said, isn’t it? It really upset you, didn’t it? You’re taking it out on me because I saw you greasing up to that fellow, and he wouldn’t even give you the time of day ...”

Whiskers was beside himself. This boy was incorrigible. It obviously wouldn’t do any good hitting him, or shouting at him, or threatening to dump him on the roadside. He had to find some way of containing his rage. He humfed and snorted and puffed his cheeks out angrily and flapped the reins of Trinket’s horse, which he was still holding.

“Dear horse!” he cried histrionically. “Do me a kindness: rear and buck and dance like a tiger for me! Throw this little imp on the ground and smash his skull in for me!”

Of his three conditions for taking Trinket to Peking with him, the second (clean fighting) had fallen flat on its face. And the third—why, he couldn’t even remember what it was.

Trinket meanwhile took a firm hold of his own horse’s reins, and the

horse trotted obediently forward. It certainly didn't try anything on. Trinket secretly rejoiced:

"See, he wouldn't teach me how to ride, but I've taught myself!"

His thoughts rambled on:

"From now on, wherever our travels take us, all I have to do is watch him when he fights. I don't need him to teach me. I've got eyes, haven't I? And I can watch his enemies too, and learn from them. That way I can put together my *own* fighting style and probably outclass him anyway—why not? There's nothing to it, for God's sake! Now that Aladdin with his chopstick-flicking trick, *there's* something worth learning! I wouldn't mind being *his* disciple—if he ever asked me, which of course he never will! Why the hell should he?"

He chuckled to himself.

"What do you find so amusing?" asked Whiskers.

"I was just thinking about that pooh-faced Aladdin from Duke Mu's ..."

"Paladin!" objected Whiskers.

"But his name *was* Bo wasn't it?"

"Yes it was, but kindly mind your tongue! That gentleman is very highly thought of among Duke Mu's followers. He belongs to one of the Four Families."

"So what? Who gives a stuff about Duke Mu and his Merry Men? Give us a break will you?"

"Please! *Language!*" protested Whiskers, desperately trying to preserve his one surviving condition. "The Brothers are most particularly respectful when it comes to Duke Mu's men."

Trinket grunted, unimpressed.

"When the founder of the Ming Dynasty was fighting the Mongol usurpers," Whiskers began, "Prince Mu Ying was one of his right-hand men, and took charge of operations in Yunnan. As a consequence his descendants ruled the province for many generations."

Trinket slapped his saddle.

"Now you tell me! You mean it's Prince Mu Ying's family, *the* Prince Mu, the great hero? Why the hell didn't you *say* so? That would have explained everything. But he's been dead and gone for thousands of years. Weren't you overdoing the 'awestruck' act a bit?"

"You don't know anything!" expostulated Whiskers. "Of course he hasn't been dead that long. Besides it's not solely on account of him that we in the Brotherhood revere the family, but on account of his descendant Duke Mu Tianbo, who loyally protected the Ming Pretender from the Tartars when he fled to Yunnan. Ah yes, I still recall it so well! Wu the Satrap chased the rightful heir to the throne, Prince Gui, into Yunnan and then later into Burma. The cowardly Burmese tried to assassinate Prince Gui, and Duke Mu Tianbo gave his life in defence of his lord. His loyalty and heroism were of the rarest quality."

"Oh, so *this* Duke Mu is a descendant of the great Prince Mu in *Heroes of the Ming*, the one that I know all about then, is he?"

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Trinket had often heard the storytellers telling the old tale of the founding of the Ming Dynasty, and remembered most of the heroes' names—including that of Prince Mu Ying.

"You should've told me at the time. If I'd known he was connected—I mean the pooh-faced Aladdin—I'd have been more civil."

"Yes, he's descended from one of the four loyal generals, the original Four Paladins, that fell with Duke Mu Tianbo. Only their children lived to tell the tale. That is partly why I held him in such high regard. The other reason of course was that he saved my life ..."

"So did I, remember," put in Trinket. "But I don't see much high regard coming my way."

"The Brothers all revere the Four Paladins. Take *their* name in vain and you will meet with universal contempt."

"In that case," said Trinket soberly, "I'd better be more civil to such folk in future."

"Why, that's the first sensible thing you've said since I've known you!" commented Whiskers.

"Lord knows how long I'll have to wait to hear any sense from *you!*" quipped Trinket.

8. *Trinket, the Storyteller*

"Of course everyone respects Prince Mu," continued Trinket. "We don't need all that waffle of yours to know *that!* Everyone knows the story of how he blew the horn at the Mongol rear, and dealt with the Elephant Rocket Brigade ..."

"He what?"

Trinket had a good laugh.

"See! All you know is how to lick Aladdin's little ass! You don't really know the first thing about Prince Mu, the *real* hero! Do you know, for example, what position he held under the Founder of the Ming?"

"Prince Mu was one of the founder's top generals. Everyone knows that."

"Hah! A top general! Of course he was—he's hardly likely to have been a foot-soldier, is he? The Founder had *six* top generals: Prince Xu, Prince Chang—do you know who the other four were?"

Whiskers was just an uneducated peasant turned outlaw and swordsman, and knew nothing but the barest bones of the story. Trinket, on the other hand, had heard it told so many times in the Yangzhou teahouses that he knew the whole thing off pat. At the time of our story, the Ming Dynasty had not long been overthrown, and there was widespread nostalgia for the "good old days" before the Manchu conquest—though no one dared speak openly of a Ming restoration. The teahouse storytellers found that their historical accounts of the founding of the Ming, in particular the defeat of the Mongol Tartars, went down very well: their audience found it easy to substitute

Manchu for Mongol and thereby to obtain a vicarious patriotic thrill. Every Chinese victory and every Mongol defeat gave them a special pleasure. And the Ming Founding Emperor's leading generals became objects of veneration for the teahouse habitués. The storytellers always laid it on thick when describing the slaughter of the Mongols: and it worked every time. The audience loved it.

Trinket was delighted to have exposed Whisker's ignorance. He now reeled off a list of the names of the four "other generals", while agreeing to spare him the details of their full titles (which he himself had forgotten). Whiskers breathed a sigh of relief.

"What about blowing the horn to deal with the Elephant Rocket Brigade? What was that all about?" he asked.

"Those are two quite separate stories," explained Trinket knowledgeably. "The first is called 'Blowing the Horn to Cross the River'. The Great Founder of the Ming had reconquered the rest of China., and only the south-west corner—the Provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou—was still in the hands of the Mongols, under the Prince of Liang: I can't remember his Mongol name: something like Gululaluhu. He was a nephew of the last Mongol Emperor, anyway, and he refused to surrender."

The Prince's actual name was Basalawarmi, but needless to say Trinket was just faking. Whiskers knew no better.

"So the wrath of the Great Founder was kindled, and he sent an army of three hundred thousand men—both infantry and cavalry—under the command of Prince Mu. They reached the borders of Yunnan, where they found the Mongol troops waiting for them, under their commander Delmek, a great giant of a man a hundred feet high, with a head the size of a barrel ..."

"No one could be a hundred feet tall!" protested Whiskers. Trinket had to confess to a little poetic license.

"Still, the Tartars are often quite a bit bigger than we are. He was clad in a suit of mail, this Mongol giant, and he held a mighty spear in his hand. He stood by the river bank bellowing some Mongol gibberish or other, and then suddenly, from out of the blue, he let out three great thundering roars. No sooner had he done so than he heard a series of splashes and saw ripples spreading across the surface of the water. What do you think had happened?"

"What? What?" cried Whiskers.

"Well," explained Trinket, relishing his newfound role as a storyteller, "when the mighty voice of Delmek echoed across the river, ten of Prince Mu's troops were so terrified they fell off their horses and into the river and were drowned. Prince Mu foresaw a catastrophe if this continued; he had visions of his entire army falling into the river, and racked his brains for a stratagem."

Trinket's conversation was normally a mishmash of uncouth urchinlike expressions, liberally spiced with "bloody" thises and "sodding" thats; but somehow in telling the story of Prince Mu both his manner and his language had been completely transformed into that of the storyteller—complete with the occasional garbled proverb. On he went:

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“The Prince saw the Mongol general open his cavernous red mouth a second time, and knew he was about to bellow again. He fitted an arrow to his bow and sent it whizzing through the air straight towards Delmek’s mouth. Prince Mu was a master archer. He could hit an arbutus berry at a hundred paces, and a man’s mouth at a thousand. Delmek, himself no mean warrior, saw the ferocious speed and accuracy with which the arrow was homing in on its target, and just managed to duck his head out of its way in time. As he did so he heard a ghastly cry from the troops drawn up behind him : “Horrors! Horrors!” Turning, he beheld not one, but *ten* of his finest commanders struck through the chest. The Prince’s arrow had pierced the chest of the first, emerged from his back to pierce a second, and so on, through ten men.”

“Impossible!” cried Whiskers, shaking his head in utter disbelief. “Even the world’s most gifted archer could do no such thing!”

“Prince Mu,” pronounced Trinket solemnly, “was no ordinary archer. He was a heavenly constellation in human form. The Jade Emperor sent him down to earth to protect the Great Founder of the Ming. Of course he was not a mere mortal like you. This feat of his even had a special name: ‘Threading the Clouds’.”

Whiskers was torn between incredulity and an overwhelming temptation to believe.

“So what happened next?”

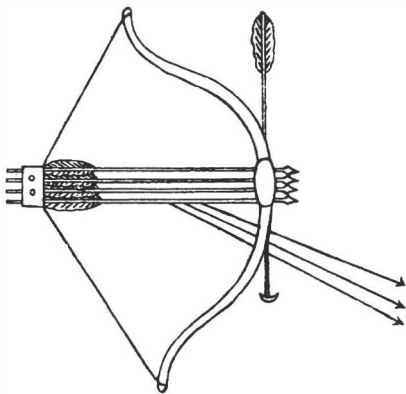
Trinket launched off again.

“Delmek flew into a towering rage when he saw how his men were sorely smitten, and thought to return like for like. He drew his great bow and sent one of *his* arrows winging towards Prince Mu. ‘Splendid!’ cried the Prince, catching the arrow neatly between two fingers of his left hand, literally plucking it out of the air! At that very moment a flock of wild geese flew honking across the sky, and the perfect ruse suggested itself to the Prince. ‘Watch me!’ he shouted. ‘Third goose from the end, left eye!’ And he let loose an arrow that sped through the sky and towards the flock of geese. Delmek marvelled secretly to himself: ‘To strike the bird at all were feat of arms enough! To strike it in the eye would be a miracle!’ He gazed up into the sky, and at that precise instant Prince Mu let loose a string of three arrows in quick succession, each aimed at the person of the Mongol commander!”

“Ha!” Whiskers slapped his thigh. “Brilliant! A feint! Call East, Strike West! The old trick!”

“It seems, however, that Delmek was not fated to die,” went on Trinket. “The first arrow caught him in *his* left eye and he fell back onto the ground, allowing the second and third arrows to strike down eight more of his Mongol commanders. So all told *eighteen* of them fell that day, and it was known as ‘the day Prince Mu waged war across the river and with three arrows brought down *eighteen* ...’”

“What’s that?” grunted Whiskers, whose real name, it will be remembered, was Mao Eighteen.



“Brought down eighteen!” repeated Trinket. “Get it?” And he collapsed in a fit of the giggles. It finally dawned on Whiskers that he was being made fun of, and that the whole story was a roundabout joke at his expense.

“To blazes with you and your nonsense! More like the day he locked Trinket in a trunk and dumped him in the water!”

“I wasn’t even alive!” protested Trinket.

“Anyway—go on with the story.”

“Well, panic spread among the Mongol troops when they saw their leader struck to the ground. Prince Mu was about to give the order for his men to cross the river when he heard a great commotion on the other bank. Mongol reinforcements had arrived. They unleashed a cloud of arrows that darkened the entire sky overhead. But Prince Mu’s ever fertile mind conceived a new stratagem instantaneously. He ordered four of his commanders to take their men and make their way secretly downstream. They were to cross and attack the enemy from the rear, sounding a huge blast on a brass horn as they did so.”

“I suppose they were the four generals you mentioned earlier?”

“No,” replied Trinket coolly. (He had no idea who they were, but he certainly didn’t want to credit Whiskers with any knowledge.) “It was four others. The four *I* mentioned stayed with Prince Mu.”

“Oh,” nodded Whiskers. “I see.”

“So, Prince Mu now gave orders for the troops still with him to start creating a great hullabaloo; for a flotilla of little boats and rafts to be got ready and launched; and for a contingent of one thousand men to make as if they were preparing for a crossing. The Mongols fell for this completely and let loose another great volley of arrows. Prince Mu gave his men instructions to hold back. Then an hour or so later he gave orders for the whole process to be repeated, with the same result. Goodness knows how many fish, turtles, prawns and crabs the Mongol arrows struck that day!”

“Come on!” cried Whiskers. “*Fish* maybe; but prawns are too small, and turtles and crabs are too well protected by their shells.”

“If you don’t believe me,” insisted Trinket, “then go to the market, buy a turtle, a crab, and a prawn, string them up and try shooting at them yourself. That should prove it for you.”

Whiskers reflected that they were in too much of a hurry to mess about with side-trips to the nearest market (wherever *that* was). Besides he was totally absorbed in the story, and the last thing he wanted was to cause his storyteller to go on strike.

“Very well then, if you say so, I’ll believe you. So—what happened next?”

“Next,” continued Trinket, “Prince Mu’s troops fished *eighteen* enormous, dead, whiskered *turtles* out of the river, cooked them up and ate them ...”

“You miserable little brat!” laughed Whiskers. “You won’t leave me alone will you! Go on: how *did* Prince Mu cross the river?”

“Well: Prince Mu repeated this trick several times, sounding the drums, making a great show of crossing, and letting the Mongol archers fire off all their arrows. Then he heard what he was waiting for—a great blast on the

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horn coming from behind the Mongol lines, and knew that his special force was crossing and would soon be attacking from the rear. This time he gave the order for a genuine assault. Holding their shields in front of them, his men rowed the little flotilla across with all their might, and went into the attack. The Mongols had been firing away all day, and had already spent most of their arrows; they could hear the enemy troops bearing down on them from the rear, their commander had been struck down, their morale was collapsing. When Prince Mu rode forward at the head of his men, they fled in panic. The Prince spotted a man slung across a horse in the midst of a group of retreating soldiers and knew it must be Delmek. He spurred his horse on, crying: 'Off your horse, Mongol, and surrender!' The man cried back: 'I'm not the man you want! I'm just *Whisk* ...' But Prince Mu could see an arrow sticking from his left eye, and could even read his own name inscribed in gold on the shaft: he reached over, pulled it out and threw it to the ground. 'Tie the man up!' he cried. The four commanders at his side did his bidding. That day saw a mighty routing of the Mongols, and countless numbers of them drowned in the waters of the river. Their hairy corpses were food for the turtles, and from consuming much hairy Tartar meat the turtles started to grow hairs themselves and evolved into a unique breed known as the Whiskered Turtle ..."

Poor Whiskers had a shrewd idea that Trinket was making fun of him again. He humfed but didn't feel quite confident enough to query this latest detail: for all he knew, perhaps there really *was* a hairy breed of turtle lurking somewhere in the rivers of Yunnan ...

"After this great victory, Prince Mu pressed on towards the city where the Mongol prince had his headquarters. As he approached the city, he found it deathly still. He was just giving the order to sound the drums and issue the call to battle, when he saw a wooden signboard being hoisted on the city wall, the word 'TRUCE' clearly inscribed on it."

"The Mongol prince must have known he faced sure defeat," commented Whiskers.

"Prince Mu," Trinket went on, "was a man of great compassion. He reckoned that the hoisting of the sign must indicate a willingness to surrender, and wished if possible to avoid the slaughter of innocent civilians that would surely follow upon further hostilities. He therefore declared a three-day truce, to give the enemy a chance to surrender without further loss of blood."

"How Heaven rewarded him for his compassion!" commented Whiskers sententiously, slapping his thigh. "How very just, that a man with such deep feelings for the plight of the common people should have been made Prince of Yunnan! What a glorious lineage it was! He helped to found the Ming, and by gad, his heirs were its bulwark to the very end!"

"Anyway," continued Trinket, impatiently, "that very evening Prince Mu was sitting in his tent reading the *Spring and Autumn Annals* by lamp-light ..."



"I thought it was General Guan Yu in the *Three Kingdoms* who did that?" interposed Whiskers, dimly recognising the source of Trinket's relentless plagiarising.

"Of course *he* did too," retorted Trinket, unabashed. "Any general worth his salt reads the *Spring and Autumn*. Only oafs read the *Summer and Winter*, and *they* always come to a sticky end."

Whiskers nodded gravely, hopelessly outwitted by this display of bogus knowledge.

"Anyway," Trinket went on, "the Prince felt the need to relieve his princely bladder. So he stood up and picked up the solid gold chamber-pot that the Great Founder had given him. He was about to commence delivery, when he heard a great bellowing sound coming from within the walls of the city. It wasn't exactly a tiger's roar, and it certainly wasn't a horse whinnying. As he heard the sound, the Prince had a deep premonition ..."

"Well?" asked Whiskers, ever the captive audience. "What was it?"

"Guess."

"Probably several Mongols like that big chap Delmek, blowing their lungs out ..."

"No," said Trinket, shaking his head gravely. "It wasn't that sort of sound at all.

Prince Mu, when he heard it, immediately abandoned all thought of relieving himself, deposited the chamber-pot on the table with all the deference due to an Imperial present ..."

"On the table?" Whiskers sounded puzzled.

"Well of course: it was no common-or-garden chamber-pot, was it? Then he sounded the drum and gave the order to strike camp, summoning his commanders for an urgent council of war. He handed an arrow inscribed in gold to one of his generals, Liu, and ordered him to take three thousand men out into the fields and conduct a day-and-night mouse hunt. Bonuses would be distributed for any mice over and above the quota, and those who caught none were to be court-martialled. General Liu set off at once on his mission ..."

"What the devil did he want mice for?" asked a bemused Whiskers.

"That was a secret part of the Prince's masterly plan, and was not divulged to a soul. His generals simply obeyed his orders implicitly. Any questions and the Prince would have flung the offending officer angrily out of his tent and chopped off his head. If *you'd* been one of his officers and kept on asking stupid questions all the time, he'd have had all your bloody heads off, all *eighteen* of them!"

"If I'd been one of his officers I'd have kept my bloody mouth shut! But you're not Prince Mu, and I don't see why I shouldn't ask *you!*"

"Just don't!" ordered Trinket with an imperious wave of his hand. "Don't ask anything! And let me get on with the story! Next Prince Mu handed the second arrow to General Bo (that's the ancestor of the man you were so awestruck by just now) and ordered him to take twenty thousand troops and

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start digging a trench two miles from the city walls. The trench was to be a mile long, twenty feet wide, and thirty feet deep. They were to dig all through the night, and *nothing* was to be allowed to interfere with their progress. General Bo went off at once to do as he was bidden. Then Prince Mu gave orders for the entire army to retreat, and pitch camp again two and a half miles from the city.”

“Damned peculiar!” exclaimed Whiskers, more puzzled than ever. “He’s really got me stumped this time!”

“If someone like *you* could see through his plans, he’d be really up the creek!” said Trinket, somewhat unkindly. “Well, next morning the two generals both reported their missions accomplished. More than ten thousand mice had been captured, and the trench had been dug to the Prince’s specifications. The Prince congratulated them on their work, and sent a scout to within sight of the walls to spy out enemy movements. At noon there was a great crashing of gongs from the city, accompanied by a tumult of voices, and the scout came galloping back in a great lather to report an impending catastrophe! The Prince smacked his fist down on the table and swore roundly at the man. ‘Pull yourself together for God’s sake!’ he cried. ‘But Your Highness,’ the scout panted, ‘the Mongol Tartars have opened the North Gate, and a great herd of long-nosed cow-monsters are pouring out of it—hundreds of them!’ The Prince let out a great peal of laughter. ‘What do you mean, long-nosed cow-monsters! Go back and bring me some better intelligence than that!’ Off went the scout once more.”

“What *are* long-nosed cow-monsters?” asked Whiskers.

“I didn’t think you’d know,” said Trinket, poker-faced. “They’re bigger than cows, they’ve got thicker skins, longer noses, two long pointed tusks and massive floppy ears: fearsome beasts, don’t you think, these long-nosed cow-monsters!”

Whiskers nodded his head and sort of grunted in agreement, struggling to put together the picture.

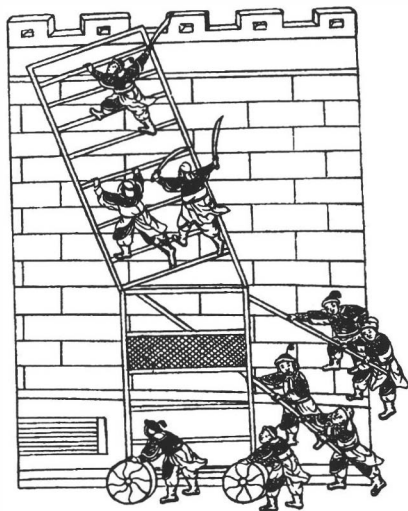
“Well, the Prince muttered to himself what an ignorant fool the scout was; the sort to mistake a camel for a horse with a hump-back, or an elephant for a cow-monster with a long nose!”

Whiskers stared at him for a moment and then let out a great guffaw.

“Why yes! What a fool he was! Not to know an *elephant* when he saw one! Still, one has to make allowances for Northerners . . .”

It was just the reaction the Yangzhou storytellers hoped for when *they* recounted this old chestnut. Trinket had spun the yarn out most effectively.

“So Prince Mu marshalled his troops. A cloud of dust rose in the distance and out of the cloud came a herd of several hundred stampeding elephants, pointed sword-blades lashed to their heads, flames blazing from their tails. Yunnan is, as you know, right on the Burmese border, and what this Mongol Prince had done was to buy a few hundred elephants from the Burmese and train his own Elephant Rocket Brigade. They tied pine branches to the creatures’ tails and set them alight. The terrified beasts thundered towards



the Ming army, their thick hides immune to the showers of arrows that rained down upon them. The Mongols were hot behind them, ready to pounce on their enemy once the elephants had thrown them into disarray. The Ming troops, being Northerners, had none of them ever set eyes on an elephant. At the sight of them they simply panicked and started whimpering that all was lost: the King of the Cow Demons had come to wreak havoc on them with his fiery tail.”

Whiskers looked sombre.

“Devilish effective it must have been too, that Elephant Rocket Brigade!” he muttered gravely.

“But Prince Mu was undaunted,” Trinket continued. “He just gave a knowing smile, waited till the elephants were about a hundred feet away and then issued the order to release the mice. Ten thousand mice were let loose all at once, the ground was literally thick with mice, a river of them, rushing straight towards the elephants. You see, elephants, while they’re not the least bit afraid of lions or bears or tigers or panthers, are absolutely *terrified* of mice! If a mouse gets inside an elephant’s ear and starts nibbling at its brain, the great beast just goes to pieces. So the sight of this torrent of mice struck abject fear into the rampaging elephants, who turned about and began stampeding back towards the city, trampling the Mongol troops beneath them and leaving the ground strewn with mangled Mongol limbs and crushed Mongol heads. Some of the elephants lost their sense of direction altogether and ended up careering towards the Ming army, and these beasts fell headlong into the great trench that had been dug that night. Then it was that Prince Mu gave the order: ‘Fire the rockets!’ And suddenly, at his command, the sky came alive with thousands of fireworks! It was a wonderful sight!”

Trinket explained to the incredulous Whiskers that the Ming artillery had been equipped with pyrotechnic cannon and mortars, and had been alerted the previous evening. This deafening display of theirs shattered whatever remnant of courage the elephants had left. The Mongol army was now crushed to a bloody pulp beneath the terrified, stampeding beasts. Prince Mu gave the order to advance, and with a great cry the Ming army followed the elephants back into the city. The Mongol Prince, Basalawarmi (or Gululaluhu, as Trinket insisted on calling him), was on the city ramparts, drinking himself silly with his favourite concubine, waiting for news of the destruction of the Ming army. Imagine his horror when he saw the very creatures he had unleashed crashing their way back into his city. ‘*Gu-lu-wa-ba-tu! Wu-li-wu!*’ he gibbered.”

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Whiskers.

“It’s Mongol, of course,” said Trinket smugly. “It means: ‘Lord save us, the elephants have risen against us!’ He rushed down from the battlements and jumped feet first into the nearest well, in a desperate attempt to kill himself. But he was so fat, he got wedged half way down. ‘Lord save me!’ he cried. ‘I’m neither up nor down!’”

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"A Pipe-bearer Attendant on the Mandarin of Tourane" pencil and watercolour, William Alexander (1767-1816)



"How come he was suddenly speaking Chinese?"

"He wasn't," answered Trinket, a little curtly. "But I knew you wouldn't understand, so I translated it for you ... Meanwhile Prince Mu rode in at the head of his men, and one of the first things he saw was this old geyser in his long yellow gown with a gold coronet on his head and his big fat belly jammed in a well. He knew it must be the Mongol Prince and burst out laughing. He grabbed him by the hair and yanked him out. The fellow stank to high heaven: he'd been so scared he'd pissed himself, and then he'd gone and pooped in his pants ..."

Whiskers laughed heartily.

"Trinket, you tell a rattling good yarn! Prince Mu was not only a brave man, he was a crafty one too! Without his Mice Militia, he and all the Ming army would have gone down to the Elephant Rocket Brigade, no mistake!"

"Of course they would," declared Trinket emphatically. "And just as *he* had to rely on his Mouse Militia, so *I* had to let fly a Volley of Lime ... Great minds think alike, eh?"

"*No!*" Whiskers shook his head vigorously. "All's fair in war, but *not* in man-to-man combat: in the Brotherhood such things are absolutely forbidden. Fight honourably, or not at all!"

"War and combat seem pretty much the same to me," said Trinket.

And so they continued their journey, whiling away the time in conversation. Whiskers did his best to communicate to Trinket one or two of the subtler points of the Brotherhood code. And gave him the occasional piece of personal advice:

"As a fighter, remember that you're *nothing*. Let other people *know* that, and they won't give you too hard a time. Whatever you do don't pretend to *be* something: you'll only end up taking a licking if you do!"

"I know, I'm just Trinket. Little White Dragon's the name, swimming's the game. Water sports. Staying under water. Eating raw fish and prawns. Ground fighting's not my scene, man!"

Whiskers guffawed.

That night they lodged in a peasant's cottage. Whiskers gave the man some money and they stayed there ten days or so until his wounds were healed. Then they hired a cart and continued on their way.