

THE DEER AND THE CAULDRON

The First Book

A Martial Arts novel

by Louis Cha

Translated and edited

by John Minford

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Author and translator join in dedicating this book,

with respect and affection, to their friend Professor Liu

Ts'un-yan, on the, occasion of his eightieth birthday.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

During the seventeenth century, in the last years of the Ming dynasty and the early years of the Manchu dynasty, the thriving southern city of Yangzhou was

the most prosperous place in China. More than two centuries later, as the Manchu dynasty gave way to the Republic, the great city of Shanghai took the place of Yangzhou. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all of that bustle and energy, that capitalist mixture of prosperity and decadence, moved to Hong Kong.

I began writing *The Deer and the Cauldron* thinking I might create a somewhat unconventional Martial Arts novel, set against the backdrop of the bustling city of Yangzhou. But then the main character of the novel came along. That mischievous rascal Trinket simply got out of control! He himself came to embody the spirit of decadence in traditional Chinese culture. He turned *The Deer and the Cauldron* into a very strange novel, a novel I had never imagined writing.

Martial Arts fiction is a very particular genre in Chinese literature, one which goes back a very long way. Actually, the Chinese term, *wuxia xiaoshuo*, really means fiction about Chinese knights-errant, or wandering swordsmen. It can be traced all the way back to the Han dynasty, to the 'Biographies of the Wandering Swordsmen' in Sima Qian's *Historical Records*, written at the beginning of the first century BC. Later, during the Tang dynasty, there were fine stories written on such themes in the classical literary language, stories like 'Curly Beard', 'Red Thread', and 'The Kunlun Slave'. The Song dynasty saw many more such tales, this time written in the common spoken language, and during the Yuan and Ming dynasties the great vernacular novel *Water Margin* was created. During the Manchu dynasty the Martial Arts genre flourished, and this continued right through the Republican era. After 1949, the tradition only survived in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and, although recently writers have begun producing Martial Arts novels again in the Mainland, so far no outstanding work has emerged there.

There is nothing quite like Martial Arts fiction in the Western literary tradition. There are certain similarities with the works of

Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexandre Dumas pere, and Prosper Merimee. But there are also huge differences. If someone were to try to explain Martial Arts fiction to a Western reader by simply calling it 'kung fu fiction', that person would be guilty either of extreme ignorance, or of excessive laziness. There is something more subtle involved. Western people believe in the Christian faith. Their idea of what is right is determined by God and interpreted for them by their priests. The Chinese have no pronounced religious sense. They have to decide for themselves what is right. If something is not right, if there is injustice, the weak may submit to it; but the strong will resist, they will often go to the aid of others, and be willing to sacrifice themselves in so doing. This is the spirit of the Chinese knight-errant. If a

knight-errant employs Martial Arts skills to achieve that chivalrous, altruistic end, that is a fit subject for Martial Arts fiction.

The Deer and the Cauldron presents Chinese culture in an overripe phase. There is something distinctly decadent about many of the characters and the phenomena portrayed in the novel. Deer seeks, often in caricature, to convey something of the less-admirable human qualities that were manifested during this early encounter between China and various less-developed non-Chinese peoples.

I am most grateful to John Minford for all the time and effort he has put into translating this novel of mine into English. His father-in-law David Hawkes has also honoured me greatly by contributing so much to the translation, although (in the spirit of modesty to be expected of such a fine scholar) he has not wished his name to appear on the book itself. Some years ago when I was at Oxford University, I had hoped I might be able to be one of his students. Alas, he had already retired into the Welsh hills! I must also thank his daughter Rachel, John's wife, for the excellent job she has done as editor. And finally, my thanks go to Oxford University Press, for agreeing to publish my work. It will bring me happiness if Western readers can discover in these pages something of what makes this form of fiction so especially Chinese.

Louis CHA

Hong Kong August 1997

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Louis Cha is one of the world's most widely read novelists. He is a household name in every Chinese community—in Hong Kong, Peking, Taipei, Singapore, and in Chinatowns the world over. And yet his novels are little known in the West. Readers of a translation such as this will be curious to know what sort of book they have let themselves in for. Martial Arts? Kungfu? Chinese history and culture? How do these things add up to a Chinese best-seller?

Perhaps the most helpful Chinese starting-point for such readers would be the kungfu movies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, products that have travelled to the West in a way that the Chinese written word, by and large, has not. But Bruce and Jackie are just the tip of the iceberg. Their films are only a tiny fraction of the vast kungfu film industry, and that industry itself is only one of the most recent growths of a much older tradition of Chinese storytelling that goes back well over a thousand years. Since at least the tenth century crowds have gathered in Chinese teahouses, marketplaces, and parks, to hear stories told of the great heroes of their past, often to the accompaniment of a drum and a musical instrument. 'And if you wish to find out what happens in the next instalment, come back at the same time tomorrow . . .'

Louis Cha writes in this same storytelling tradition. 'Since my childhood I have enjoyed reading Martial Arts fiction. I write it myself first and foremost for my own pleasure, and then for the pleasure of my readers (there is also, of course, the financial reward . . .). I am just a storyteller, like the professional storytellers of the Song dynasty. I believe Martial Arts fiction is like Peking Opera, or ballad-singing, or dancing, or music—its main function is to give pleasure.' The marketplace for Cha's performances, over a period of seventeen years, was his own newspaper, for which he wrote his novels in daily instalments of a thousand words, building up a huge and devoted readership. He is the Master kungfu storyteller of his generation.

Kungfu (it is really pronounced goong-foo) is one of the most Chinese of all Chinese words. Before it acquired its recent meaning of prowess in the Martial Arts, long before David Carradine and the TV series Kung Fu, the word was used to refer to a wide range

of skills or attainments, and to the underlying idea of application, of work and time devoted to a number of activities, from calligraphy to carpentry, from writing poetry to cross-country running, from meditation to statesmanship. Louis Cha's novels are about kungfu and kungfu Masters. They are also themselves a virtuoso kungfu performance, the work of a Master.

Cha is the descendant of an old and distinguished family of Chinese scholar-officials and poets, and writing has always been very much in his blood. So has a deep involvement in the destiny of his people. From his arrival in Hong Kong in 1948 up to the present day he has played an increasingly prominent role in public life, as newspaper proprietor and writer of influential editorials, as member of various public bodies, as a charismatic figure with strongly held views on the future of Hong Kong and of China. Many of his novels are set in periods of history when China was confronting barbarian aggression (Jurchen, Mongol, Manchu), and patriotism is a recurring and powerfully evoked theme. He is intensely proud of his Chinese heritage, and this cultural pride runs through every one of his fourteen novels (the complete works run to thirty-six volumes of over four hundred pages each).

Cha has spent almost fifty years of his life in Hong Kong, and has been able to travel extensively, and read widely in Western literature, especially the historical romances of Scott and Dumas. (There are definite echoes of *The Three Musketeers* in *The Deer and the Cauldron*) And, from his early years as a film critic and writer for the screen, he is familiar with modern cinematic technique. This has helped him to breathe new life into the ancient tradition.

The Deer and the Cauldron was written between 1969 and 1972. Louis Cha

insists that it will remain his last Martial Arts novel. It is also his most mischievous, and in many ways his least typical work. But it is still unmistakably and authentically Cha. Perhaps that is the most important quality of all of Cha's work. It is an authentic Chinese banquet not a take-away. Through the act of storytelling, Cha reaffirms an essential Chinese cultural identity. Beneath the excitement and humour of his stories lies a whole world. As a Mainland critic put it, 'Louis Cha's wit and humour are based on the inner realm of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. Behind the clownish, fool-like exterior lies a great subtlety and refinement.'

The Deer and the Cauldron is set in the mid-seventeenth century. The Manchus have been ruling China for a little over twenty years, and are gradually (though ruthlessly) managing to put out the last residual sparks of the Chinese Resistance, in the South and the South-West. The Prologue, which was written during the height of the early excesses of the Cultural Revolution, describes in gruesome detail the persecution of Loyalist intellectuals during the 1660s. (It is worth mentioning here that the Prologue, while setting the historical scene very effectively, is written in a very different style from the rest of the book. Readers impatient for a taste of kungfu low life will have to wait until the first chapter.) On the Dragon Throne at the opening of the novel is the young Manchu Emperor Kang Xi. Principal among the underground organizations fighting Manchu rule is the newly formed Triad Secret Society. The novel weaves its way through a host of historical events, culminating (at the end of the third volume) in the Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed between China and Russia in the year 1689. Holding all these episodes together is a wonderful character of Louis Cha's invention, Trinket, an incorrigible scamp, the opportunistic, lazy, but ultimately likeable and unforgettable, son of a singsong-girl from the Southern city of Yangzhou. As Louis Cha himself has written, '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.' Trinket somehow manages to have a finger in every available pie, and builds out of his multiple identities an absorbing and extraordinary card-castle of a life. It is his personality above all that turns the book into what the distinguished Hong Kong critic Stephen Soong has called 'a roller-coaster of a novel, packed with thrills, with fun, rage, humour, and abuse, written in a style that flows and flashes like quicksilver.'

This English version of *The Deer and the Cauldron* will be in three volumes. It will eventually be joined in the series by others, including *Book and Sword* (Louis Cha's first novel, written in 1955, translated by Graham Earnshaw) and the three-volume *Eagles and Heroes* (1957-1959, translated by Sharon Lai and myself). Through these versions, we hope to give English readers a glimpse of the rich Chinese cultural tapestry that is Cha's kungfu world.

This translation has been several years in the making. I must above all thank Louis Cha for his long-suffering and generous support of the project, ever since we first discussed it in April 1989.

My dear friend David Hawkes has contributed many chapters of the translation, and I cannot adequately express how much I owe to him for his unstinting help and guidance over the years. Rachel May has edited the book with her usual extraordinary eye and ear for detail. As Trinket would say, 'Hot-piece momma! Excellent kungfu!'

It has certainly been a challenge, trying to find ways of putting this most Chinese of storytellers into English. In Chinese his pages read with such deceptive ease. I hope that now some English-speaking readers will be able to share a little of the enormous pleasure his novels have given to millions of Chinese readers since they first appeared over twenty years ago.

JOHN MINFORD

Hong Kong

June 1997

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1559 Birth in the North-Eastern Long White Mountains of Nurhachi, the Exalted Founder of the Manchu Imperial House of Gioro, descended from a noble family of the Jurchen Tartars (rulers of China in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the Jin or Golden dynasty).

1592 Birth of Abahai, eighth son of Nurhachi.

1572-1620 Reign of the Ming Emperor Wan Li; beginnings of the decline of the Ming (Bright) dynasty.

1616 Nurhachi declares himself Khan or First Emperor of the Later Jin dynasty and presides over a growing Manchu state in the North-East.

1626 Death of Nurhachi, who is succeeded by Abahai, the Illustrious Ancestor.

1628 Accession of Chong Zhen, grandson of Wan Li, and last Emperor of the native (Han) Ming dynasty.

1636 Rise of rebel movements in Northern and Central China, including that

led by Li Zicheng (General Bash-em); Abahai proclaims himself Emperor of the Qing (Clear) dynasty, in the Manchu capital Mukden (present-day Shenyang).

1638 Birth of Fulin (later to be the Emperor Shun Zhi), fourth son of Abahai.

1644 Rebel leader Li Zicheng enters Peking; the Emperor Chong Zhen commits suicide; the Manchu army enters Peking, aided by the turncoat Satrap Wu and his force of Chinese troops; beginning of the Manchu Qing dynasty proper in China and of the reign of Shun Zhi.

1646-1647 Manchu conquerors try to consolidate their hold over central and Southern China; Ming Princes (Pretenders) establish short-lived refugee courts in the South.

1654 Birth of Xuanye (later to be Emperor Kang Xi), second son of the Emperor Shun Zhi.

1659 Coxinga, leader of the anti-Manchu resistance, tries to take Nanking but fails.

1661 Death of Empress Donggo, the Emperor Shun Zhi's favourite consort; also supposed deadi of Emperor Shun Zhi.

1662 Accession of Kang Xi. Ming Pretender Prince Gui taken prisoner in Burma and strangled in Kunming, with the connivance of Satrap Wu (acting on the orders of Oboi the Regent). Coxinga moves his base to Taiwan. Death of Coxinga; formation, under Coxinga's General, Helmsman Chen Jinnan, of the Triad Secret Society, committed to the overthrow of the Manchus and the restoration of the Ming Imperial House.

1662-1663 Inquisition surrounding the Ming History.

1663-1664 Dutch fleet helps Manchus drive Coxinga's son from Taiwan;

Manchu rule is established throughout mainland China.

1667 Kang Xi, aged thirteen, dismisses his Regents. 1669 Death of Oboi, formerly Chief Regent.

1673 Rebellion of Satrap Wu (Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces), Shang Zhixin (Guangdong Province), and Geng Jingzhong (Fujian Province)—the Three Feudatories.

1681 Three Feudatories are finally put down.

1683 Manchus finally conquer Taiwan.

1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed by China and Russia.

For an excellent, readable account of the historical background to *The Deer and the Cauldron*, see the first three chapters of Jonathan Spence's book, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990).

GLOSSARY OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

ABAHAI (1592-1643) Eighth son of Nurhachi, father of the Emperor Shun Zhi.

BASALAWARMI (died 1382) Mongol Prince of Liang.

BIG BEAVER Guan Anji, bearded Triad.

BLACK DRAGON see Shi Song

BLOSSOM One of the Empress Dowager's maids-in-waiting.

BO FAMILY TREES Maple and Pine, two Bo brothers.

BO HANFENG, Maple Mu retainer, descended from one of the original Paladins.

BO HANSONG, Pine Elder brother of the above, skilled at flicking chopsticks, killed by Xu the Eight-Armed Ape.

BRIDGE OF HEAVEN District of Peking famous for its storytellers, acrobats, and other street-performers.

CAI DEZHONG Elderly Triad, formerly an officer in Coxinga's army, Master of the Lotus Flower Lodge.

CHENG WEIFAN Chinese Secretary to Songkui, Manchu Military Governor of Hangzhou.

CHONG ZHEN (1611-1644) Zhu Youjian, last Emperor of the Ming dynasty, who hanged himself when the rebel leader Li Zicheng entered Peking.

COXINGA (1624-1662) This was the Western name (pronounced with a hard 'c' and sometimes written 'Koxinga', based on the title *Guo-xing-ye* given him by the Ming Court) for the naval warrior Zheng Chenggong, Marshal Zheng,

Prince of Yanpmg, leader until his death of the anti-Manchu resistance, cryptically referred to as 'Dragon Brother' by the Triads. His father was a Fujianese pirate and adventurer, his mother Japanese; the remnants of his army are supposed to have formed the first Triad Lodges.

CRANE, Father Taoist priest at Wudang Temple.

DELMEK Mongol General defending the last Mongol stronghold in

Yunnan against Old Duke Mu's Ming troops.

DOLONG Newly appointed Colonel in the Palace Guards.

DONGGO, Empress (1639-1661) The 'fox-woman', favourite consort of the Emperor Shun Zhi, and mother of Prince Rong.

DORGON (1612-1650) Fourteenth son of Nurhachi, regent during the early years of Shun Zhi's reign.

DRAGON BROTHER see Coxinga EBILUN (died 1674) Supporter of Oboi.

EMEI, Mount Buddhist sacred mountain in Sichuan Province, Western China, home of one school of kungfu.

EMPRESS DOWAGER Wife of Shun Zhi, daughter of the Mongol Prince Korcin, of the Borjigit clan; referred to by Trinket as the 'Old Whore'.

FAN, Brother Fan Gang, Triad with bass voice.

FENG, Brother Feng Jizhong, Triad with superb kungfu skills.

FU, Prince (died 1646) First Ming Pretender, cousin of the last Ming Emperor Chong Zhen; briefly made Emperor in the Southern city of Nanking, he was captured by the Manchus and died in Peking.

GAO YANCHAO Young Triad, member of the Green Wood Lodge.

GOLDEN GATE, Master of Martial Arts instructor of Satrap Wu's guards.

GOONG-GOONG Term of address for a Palace Eunuch. GREEN GANG Smugglers' gang from Yangzhou.

GU YANWU (1613-1682) Renowned Loyalist scholar and philosopher.

GUA, Major Commander of the Vanguard Battalion sent south to arrest dissident Loyalists.

GUANYIN The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, originally a male 'saint' in Indian Buddhism, was subsequently much revered in Chinese Buddhism in a new female form as the Goddess of Mercy or Compassion (literally 'She Who Attends to the Cries of Humanity').

GUI, Prince (1623-1662) This Ming Pretender (recognized by the Mu Family or faction), was named Emperor Yong Li in Canton late in 1646, and from 1650 wandered with his refugee court in the South, finally escaping into Burma only to be handed over by the Burmese and put to death by Satrap Wu (on secret instructions received from the Manchu Regent Oboi).

HAI DAFU Hai Goong-goong, Old Hai; an elderly eunuch, and formidable Martial Arts adept, loyal to the Emperor Shun Zhi; referred to by Trinket as the 'Old Devil', or 'Old Turtle'.

HEBACHA Former Captain of the Imperial Guard; accompanied Shun Zhi to the Wutai Mountains.

HELMSMAN CHEN (died 1680) Chen Jinnan, supreme leader of the Triad Society, in command of the Taiwan resistance forces.

HUANG ZONGXI (1610-1695) Renowned Loyalist figure who fought alongside the Ming resistance, retiring in 1649 to a life of scholarship.

ILLUMINATUS, Father Shenzhao, fat monk, kungfu specialist, the most formidable of Prince Kang's bodyguards.

RANG, Empress (1640-1663) Deceased mother of the Emperor Kang Xi. RANG, Prince (1645-1697) Giyesu, great-grandson of Nurhachi.

KANG XI, the boy Emperor (1654-1722) This was the reign tide of the second Manchu Emperor; his personal name was Xuanye (which means roughly speaking Dark Effulgence—he calls himself 'Misty', for Trinket's benefit). He was the third son of the Emperor Shun Zhi, whom he succeeded at the age of eight.

KONGDONG, Mountains Range in Gansu-Henan Provinces, home of the Kongdong School of kungfu.

LAUREL ('Laurie Goong-goong') Junior eunuch in attendance on Old Hai, murdered and subsequently impersonated by Trinket.

LEI YIXIAO Known in the profession as Tiger Face', practitioner of the Martial Arts style known as Iron Shirt (from its alleged invulnerability to sharp weapons).

LI, Brother Li Lishi, tall thin Triad, Acting Master of the Green Wood Lodge after the death of Brother Yin.

LI SHIKAI Triad, Master of the Transformation Lodge.

LI ZICHENG (c. 1605-?) General Bash-em, bandit leader from Shaanxi Province, whose rebellion against the Ming dynasty set the stage for the Manchu conquest.

LIN YONGCHAO Triad, Master of the Black Water Lodge.

LITTLE COUNTESS Mu Jianping, younger sister of Mu Jiansheng, descended from Old Duke Mu.

LU, Prince (1618-1662) One of the Ming Pretenders, who briefly held court in Fujian Province, and died in Taiwan.

LU LIULIANG (1629-1683) Loyalist scholar.

MA BOREN Warden of the Watergate district and a member of the Golden Lotus sect.

MA CHAOXING Fat Triad, Master of the Clan Lodge.

MAPLE see Bo Hanfeng

MISTY Familiar name adopted by the boy Emperor Kang Xi.

MU FAMILY This was the common appellation for the powerful faction surrounding the descendants of Old Duke Mu, who had made the southwestern Province of Yunnan their personal fief throughout the Ming dynasty, and were loyal to the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui. They were implacably opposed to Satrap Wu, who after the arrival of the Manchus supplanted them in the South-West. The Family had its own distinctive style of kungfu.

MU JIANSHENG Young Lord Mu, young member of Mu Family. MU JIANPING set The Little Countess

MU, Old Duke (1345-1392) Mu Ying, one of the foremost generals, and adopted son, of the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang. He was the founder of the Mu Family, and was much spoken of in The Heroes of the Ming, from which Trinket loves to tell stories.

MU, Young Duke (died 1661) Mu Tianbo, descendant of Old Duke Mu, loyal supporter of the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui.

MYSTIC DRAGON This fanatical sect, with its powerful mantra-based kungfu, is based on Snake Island. It becomes important in subsequent volumes.

NURHACHI (1559-1626) The Grand Progenitor, founder of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty.

OBOI, Lord (died 1669) This Imperial Guardian and Former Regent was one of Dorgon's trusted men. He was elevated to rank of Duke in 1656 and at the death of the Emperor Shun Zhi (1661) he was one of the Four Regents for the boy Emperor Kang Xi (with Soni, father of Songgotu; Ebilun; and Suksaha).

OBSCURUS, Father Xuanzhen Daoren, Taoist Triad.

PALADINS, the Four These were the four original aides of Old Duke Mu, whose surnames were Bo, Fang, Liu, and Su, and whose descendants continued to be loyal retainers of the Mu lineage.

PINE see Bo Hansong

PING, Fat Ping Wei, fat gambling friend of Trinket.

QI YUANKAI Skinny member of Prince Kang's bodyguard.

QIAN, Butcher Triad, pork-butcher to the Palace.

REAL GOLD Jia Jindao, elder sister of Scarface, married to Big Beaver.

RONG, Prince The 'little Prince', son of the Emperor Shun Zhi and his favourite consort, the Empress Donggo; died in infancy, in suspicious circumstances.

SCARFACE Jia Laoliu, bald Triad, with a tiny pigtail and a large scar on his face.

SHI SONG Captain of the Imperial Guard sent to arrest Whiskers, known by his weapon (a whip) as the Black Dragon.

SHUN ZHI, Emperor (1638-1661?) This was the reign tide (the words mean literally 'obedience and rule') of Fulin, first Emperor of the Manchu dynasty, the ninth son of Abahai. He was known to have been deeply interested in Zen Buddhism, and it was widely believed that after the death of his favourite consort, the beautiful Empress Donggo, in the autumn of 1661, the young Emperor, 'pining for his lost mistress and weary of the dull routine of statecraft, voluntarily handed over the government to four of his Ministers and retired to the contemplative life.' As one contemporary poet wrote, 'He threw away the Empire as one who casts away a worn-out shoe. Following the example of the Lord Buddha, he preferred to seek the mystic solitudes.' This is the legend that lies behind the plot of The Deer and the Cauldron. The more conventional version of Shun Zhi's death is that he died of smallpox.

SNAKE ISLAND Island off the north-east coast of China, base for the sect of the Mystic Dragon.

SNOWGOOSE, Father Taoist, priest-in-charge of Wudang Temple.

SONGGOTU (died 1703) This powerful Manchu statesman of the Heseri clan, third son of the elderly Regent Soni, becomes Trinket's 'adopted brother'.

SONGKUI Military Governor of Hangzhou.

SONI (died 1667) This trusted minister of the Emperor Shun Zhi, appointed one of the Four Regents, was the father of Songgotu.

SPRING FRAGRANCE Yangzhou trollop, mother of Trinket.

SQUINTY Cui Xiazi, one-eyed Triad.

SU GANG Known as the Magic Hand, a distinguished member of the Mu establishment.

SUKSAHA One of the Four Regents, executed at the insistence of Oboi.

SUTRA IN FORTY-TWO SECTIONS A short but significant Buddhist text.

TANG, Prince (1602-1646) The Third Prince, the Ming Pretender recognized by the Triads, was proclaimed Emperor Long Wu briefly in Fuzhou, but was soon captured and put to death by the Manchus.

TERTIUS Qi Biaoqing, sarcastic Triad.

TRINKET Wei Xiaobao, the novel's principal character. He is an incorrigible scamp born to Spring Fragrance in the Yangzhou whorehouse, Vernal Delights. He is an egregious impostor, knave, and poltroon. In the course of his (never very convincing) attempts to learn kungfu he acquires the nom de guerre Little White Dragon. In the Imperial Palace he kills, and takes the identity of, the eunuch Laurel. Subsequently in his encounter with the Triads he is made Grand Master of the Green Wood Lodge.

VERNAL DELIGHTS One of Yangzhou's more up-market pleasure-houses, home of Trinket's mother.

WANG, Baldy Younger companion of Goatee Wu, also known as Lord Double Shaft for his skill with the twin clubs.

WANG WUTONG Known as Gold Spear, manager of the Victory Security Agency.

WEN YOUDAO Brother of Wen Youfang. WEN YOUFANG Gambling partner of Trinket.

WHISKERS Mao Eighteen, notorious brigand, who escapes from prison, befriends Trinket, and takes him to Peking.

WISDOM, Father Shaolm High Master, Abbot of Shaolin Temple.

WU, Goatee Triad member of the Transformation Lodge (Zhejiang Province); also known as the Great Roc, or Cloud Scraper, for his skill as a kick boxer and fist fighter.

WU LIUQI General Wu, Military Governor of Guangdong Province; the Beggar in the Snow; Grand Master of the Obedience Lodge.

WU, Satrap (1612-1678) Wu Sangui, the Old Traitor, was a turncoat Ming general who joined forces with the Manchu commander Dorgon to drive the Chinese rebel Li Zicheng (General Bash-em) out of Peking. He subsequently established his own fiefdom in the South-West, in Yunnan Province.

WU YINGXIONG (died 1674) The Little Traitor, eldest son and heir of Satrap Wu.

WU ZHIRONG Corrupt District Magistrate of Gui'an, responsible for starting the Ming History purge.

WUDANG, Mount This sacred Taoist mountain in Hubei Province was

the home of the Wudang School of kungfu, second only to the Shaolin School. Here in the later years of the Song dynasty, a Taoist master named Zhang Sanfeng retreated deep into the mountains and developed a softer style of kungfu, based on Shaolin, but placing greater emphasis on meditation and on inner training of the Qi. This is the forerunner of the Taiji (Grand Ultimate) kungfu so popular in the West today. WUTAI, Mountains (literally 'Mountains of the Five Terraces') This was a sacred range in Shanxi Province (said to have been the location of an apparition of the Bodhisattva Manjusri), with a long-standing link to the Imperial houses of China. Of its 150 monasteries, some twenty-four were Lamaist. The Manchus regarded their great Founder Nurhachi as a reincarnation of Manjusri, and according to some, the name Manchu itself derives from this.

XU TIANCHUAN Triad, plaster-seller, nicknamed the Eight-Armed Ape. YANG YIZHI One of the Little Traitor's entourage, a big man befriended by Trinket.

YANGZHOU This historic city in Jiangsu Province, central China, on the Grand Canal a few miles north of its junction with the Yangtze River, was famous for its wealthy salt-merchants, its beautiful gardens, tea-houses, and singsong-girls. It was brutally sacked by the Manchus in 1645. YAO CHUN One of the foremost exponents of the Close Combat branch of Catch-Can, well known as an expert wound-doctor and bone-setter.

YIN, Brother First Master of the Green Wood Lodge, killed by Oboi two years before the story begins.

YULIN, Venerable Buddhist priest; teacher of the Emperor Shun Zhi. ZHA SHIBIAO (1615-1689) Sometimes referred to by his other name as Erzhan; celebrated painter and calligrapher.

ZHA YIHUANG (1601-1676) This Loyalist scholar for a time joined the Court of the Prince of Lu. He was a cousin of Zha Shibiao. The Zha family of Haining in Zhejiang Province produced many distinguished men of letters in the early years of the Manchu dynasty. Louis Cha, or Zha Liangyong (author of The Deer and the Cauldron) himself belongs to this same family.

ZHEN, Lady Younger sister of the Emperor Shun Zhi's favourite consort, the Empress Donggo; died shortly after her sister.

ZHENG, Marshal see Coxinga ZHENG, Prince Son of Coxinga.

ZHU CHANGZUO Civil Governor of Zhejiang Province.

ZHU GUOZHEN (1557-1632) Former Chancellor of the Ming court, whose draft formed the basis for the Eptitome of Ming History.

ZHU YOUMING Wealthy resident of Huzhou.

ZHUANG TINGLONG (died c.1660) Nominal author of the Mmg History, eldest son of Zhuang Yuncheng.

ZHUANG YUNCHENG (died c.1663) Resident of Huzhou, patron of learning.

GENERAL QLOSSARY OF TERMS

BANNERS, EIGHT This was the system of military and social organization used by the Manchus. The three Higher Banners were the Plain White, and the Plain and Bordered Yellow; the five Inferior Banners were the Bordered White, the Plain Red, the Bordered Red, the Plain Blue, and the Bordered Blue. There were also Mongol and Chinese Bannermen.

BEGGARS GUILDS Widespread during the Manchu dynasty, these syndicates, with their leaders and their Bag hierarchy (see Eight Bag), formed an important element in the underworld of River and Lake.

BRAVE MAN AND TRUE (yingxiong haoan) This is the stock term used to designate a personification of the virtues of Honour and Chivalry held in high esteem by the Brotherhood of River and Lake.

BUDDHISM The third of the three Chinese Religions, and the only one of foreign extraction. The close connection between Buddhism and kungfu is evident in the fact that the Shaolin Temple was at the same time a centre for Zen Buddhism and the birthplace of the most important tradition of Martial Arts. According to tradition, Bodhidharma, in order to help himself and the monks at the Shaolin Temple withstand the rigours of long periods of concentrated meditation, developed breathing techniques and other exercises that subsequently became the basis for Shaolin kungfu.

CATTY This is a traditional Chinese measure of weight, the 'Chinese pound', divisible into sixteen taels (or 'Chinese ounces').

CATCH-CAN (cjin'nd) This branch of Chinese Martial Arts concentrates on grapples and holds. Some authorities believe that the export of Catch-Can to Japan at the end of the Ming dynasty provided the basis for Judo and Ju-jutsu.

CLOSING VITAL POINTS (dianxue, c.f. Japanese atemi) This is one of the most specialized branches of Chinese Martial Arts, using pressure on selected sensitive vital points (the points of the acupuncture system) to immobilize and even kill an opponent. By means of the same technique, the points can also be 'opened', or re-activated.

CONFUCIANISM Although not referred to very specifically in *The Deer and the Cauldron*, this is the State ideology that pervaded Chinese society from the Han dynasty (second century BC) until the early twentieth century. Based loosely on the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BC) and his foremost disciples and successors, this placed social cohesion and loyalty to ancestor, father, and Emperor, above all other considerations. This was

often in conflict with the more subversive and consciousness-centred beliefs of Taoism, Buddhism, and the whole spectrum of 'marginal' (i.e. anti-Confucian) thinking, but over the years the Confucian ideologues exhibited a remarkable knack for absorbing and co-opting their own 'opposition'.

DIMSUM Cantonese term for a large variety of delicious snack-like dishes.

EIGHT BAG Member of the Beggars Guild. The ranks of the beggars guilds were graded according to the number of cloth bags they carried over their shoulders. The highest rank was a Nine Bag member, who was entitled to special privileges at occasions such as weddings.

EUNUCHS The Chinese system of court eunuchs (the Japanese scholar Taisuke Mitamura in his classic study calls them 'palace termites') endured well over 2,000 years and through twenty-five dynasties. During the late Ming dynasty, eunuchs (in existence since at least the second century AD) dominated the Court. Under the first Manchu Emperor Shun Zhi, their number and their powers were greatly reduced. Under Emperor Kang Xi there were only 400 or 500 eunuchs, compared with 100,000 in the last years of the Ming dynasty. Castration was performed by a specialist for a fee of six taels, and both the scrotum and the penis were removed. The severed parts, known as the bao or 'treasure' (it is interesting to note that Trinket's Chinese name, Xiaobao, means 'little treasure'), were processed, placed in a container, sealed, and then placed on a high shelf. This had to be shown whenever the eunuch was advanced in rank, and was buried with the owner after his death (eunuchs hoped to be restored to full masculinity in the next world).

FLYING, Art of (qing-gong) This is a semi-legendary type of levitational kungfu, by means of which the practitioner can move with extraordinary lightness and rapidity, and without actually touching the ground or leaving any trace.

HONOUR (yiqi) This word sums up the perennial code of the Chinese Knight Errant, or swordsman (xia). As the ancient historian Sima Qian (c. 145-C.85 BC) wrote: The word of the knight-errant is to be believed, his actions bear fruit; his promises are kept, he has the courage to offer his own life to free the righteous from bondage.' Or, in the words of Liang Qichao (1873-1929): 'He treasures his country above his own life; he treasures friendship and duty above his own life; he treasures the keeping of promises and the achieving of vengeance above his own life; he treasures honour and righteousness above his own life.'

INNER FORCE (neigong) Literally 'inner work', this is the part of kungfu concerned not so much with particular techniques (moves, styles), but

with the basic underlying physical (breathing, posture, etc.) and spiritual (meditation, concentration, consciousness) training, which gives the techniques their inner strength.

KOWTOW (ketou) Literally, 'knock-head', this salutation was used in China before the Emperor, his representatives, or symbols, and consisted of prostrations repeated a fixed number of times, the forehead touching the ground at each prostration. It was also used as the most respectful form of salutation from children to parents, and from servants to masters on formal occasions, etc. (Yule & Burnell, Hobson-Jobson, 1886).

KUNGFU (gongfu) This is the general term used in the West and in Cantonese usage for all types of Martial Arts, and, in a broader (and more ancient) sense, a word for time spent in training and self-cultivation, and for all forms of skill and attainment. ('In this sense, Margot Fonteyn and Otto Klemperer are masters of kungfu.' Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior*, 1995) Traditionally the fighting arts were referred to in Chinese as Arts of the Fist (quanshu), and more recently as Martial Arts (wushu). The various Schools of kungfu developed many different styles of fighting.

KUNQU OPERA Southern form of lyric opera, reaching its height in the Ming and early Manchu period.

LAMAISM This was the broad term for the Buddhism of Tibet and Mongolia, to which the Manchu Imperial House subscribed.

LODGE see Triads

LOYALIST This is the general term for those elements loyal to the ancient regime of the Ming dynasty, during the early years of the Manchu conquest.

MACE The tenth part of a Chinese tael of silver,

MANCHUS This clan of the lurched Tartars, from the north-eastern region now known as Manchuria, conquered and occupied China during the mid-seventeenth century, founding the dynasty known in Chinese as the Qing.

MARTIAL ARTS see Kungfu

MARTIAL ARTS FRATERNITY (wulin) The kungfu Brothers, literally the Martial Forest, the Chinese Greenwood, the subdivision of the Brotherhood of River and Lake that consisted of practitioners of the Martial Arts.

MING DYNASTY (1368-1644) Literally Bright dynasty, this was the last native (i.e. Han) dynasty, founded by the monk and rebel-leader, Zhu

Yuanzhang. After a period of decline beginning in the reign of the Emperor

Wan Li (1572-1620), it succumbed to internal and external pressures and was replaced by the Manchu (Qing) dynasty.

MONGOLS These Central Asian nomadic warriors conquered and occupied first Northern and then Southern China during the thirteenth century, founding the dynasty known in Chinese as the Yuan (literally Original or Primordial, 1260-1368). During the mid-thirteenth century their Empire stretched across Eurasia from the eastern coast of China to the valley of the Volga.

MOVE (zhao) This is one of the most basic elements in kungfu. A single move would have its own name, sometimes a graphic description of the move itself (e.g. 'Armpit Mallet Strike'), more often a fanciful and poetic suggestion of it (e.g. 'Breaking the Branch of the Plum Tree', 'Bucking Antelope', 'Buddha of the South Seas', 'Monkey Picking Fruit'). A particular style or form of kungfu (e.g. Misty's variant of the Lesser Catch-Can Soft Hand Wudang School, or Old Hai's Greater Catch-Can Shaolin) would consist of one or more series or sets of moves. Such sets often had names of their own (such as Misty's 'Eight Trigrams of the Roving Dragon', and Old Hai's 'Thousand Hands' or 'Merciful Guanyin').

PEACH TREE GARDEN This was the setting in which the three third-century heroes of the novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu, swore an oath of brotherhood.

PEACH TREE STREAM This was the legendary Utopia stumbled upon by the fisherman in the famous story by the poet Tao Yuanming (365-428).

QI This is a fundamental concept in traditional Chinese philosophy, medicine, and kungfu. It is the energy, breath, or inner life-force cultivated by Taoists and kungfu practitioners through meditation and self-cultivation, the whole process being known as Qigong, or Work on the Qi.

QING DYNASTY (1644-1911) This dynasty, literally the Pure or Clear dynasty, was the last Imperial dynasty, during which China was ruled by the Manchus.

RIVER AND LAKE, BROTHERHOOD OF (jianghu) In earliest times 'River and Lake' referred to the backwaters (originally the Yangtze River and Dongting Lake, then by extension the Three Rivers and the Five Lakes) into which hermits disappeared in order to live a reclusive life. It became the expression for the whole underground culture of traditional China, the vagrant outlaw fraternity, as opposed to the Confucian establishment. Especially in the South, such people travelled about largely by water (river, lake, canal), hence the name. It was a world fraught with danger, but with its own romance and mythology. 'Ten years may a scholar make, But not a veteran of River and Lake.' Once individuals belonged to this alternative

Brotherhood, mere existed between them a tacit understanding and bond. They had their own code of conduct, their own concepts of honour and loyalty, their own language and wisdom, their own hierarchy. In the broad sense River and Lake embraced every 'marginal' and dispossessed element in society: from the roving swordsman, bodyguard, and Martial Arts adept (Shifu) to the lowliest travelling performer with his monkey and his hurdy-gurdy; from the storyteller, the juggler, and the acrobat to the medicineman selling patent plasters, the travelling barber, and the fortune-teller consulting the Book of Changes; from the wandering Taoist monk selling talismanic charms to the rebel-leader gathering together members of some religious secret sect in his mountain lair. It included cripples, beggars, tramps, singsong-girls, bawds, pirates, junkmen-buccaneers, drug-runners, smugglers, bandits, gangsters, and thieves. (In later usage to be a 'River and Lake man' came to have the popular sense of to be 'wise in the ways of the world', 'street-wise, smart', and thence 'charlatan, or quack'.)

Their British counterparts were the 'travelling folk' or 'gentlemen of the road'. The beat characters and hobos in Jack Kerouac's novels (*On The Road*, *The*

Dharma Bums) are members of an American River and Lake fraternity. In the Australian 'bush', bushrangers shared a similar camaraderie of mateship. The French Resistance took to the 'maquis' or scrub-country. In each case the terrain connoted a shared way of life, outside the mainstream of respectable society.

The more inclusive Brotherhood of River and Lake embraced within itself the more exclusive Brotherhoods such as that of the secret societies (e.g. the Triads). In *The Deer and the Cauldron* the term *Brodier* is used both between Triad members (who have been formally initiated into a Lodge), and within the less formal fellowship of River and Lake.

All of Louis Cha's Martial Arts novels are set against the rich backdrop of the Chinese River and Lake world.

SHAOLIN KUNGFU This School of kungfu was named after the Shaolin Temple near the Central Sacred Peak of Mount Song in central China, and is the oldest of the Martial Arts lineages, its origins dating back to the Indian Buddhist monk Batuo in the fifth century, and to the six-century Zen patriarch Bodhidharma (also an Indian). Over the ages, it developed into countless styles and sub-divisions, the so-called Seventy-Two Arts of Shaolin. For example, the style made famous by the late Bruce Lee, Wing Chun, is a Cantonese development of the Southern Shaolin tradition. Many secret societies in Chinese history had links with Shaolin (e.g. the White Lotus sect, the Boxers).

SHIFU This is the traditional term of respect (meaning Master, or Guru) used of a Martial Arts adept by his disciples. 'A Teacher for a day is a Father for life.'
SOFT CRUSH KARATE (huagu) This lethal and highly unorthodox form

of kungfu included the art of killing by causing bones to disintegrate gradually, without inflicting any visible injury, and was taught only by the sinister Master of Snake Island, off the coast of Liaodong.

SPRING AND AUTUMN This period (722-468 BC) was the subject of one of the earliest and most famous works of Chinese history, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*.

TAEL A 'Chinese ounce'; a weight of silver, used as money. In 1613, a tael of silver was roughly equivalent to 'five shillings sterling'.

TAOISM This was one of the Three Chinese Religions or Schools of Philosophy (along with Confucianism, and Buddhism, which was imported from India). The two great early Taoist sages were Laozi (reputed, if indeed he ever existed, to have been 'author' of *The Way and Its Power*, and a contemporary of

Confucius) and the scintillating wit Zhuangzi (contemporary of the second Confucian sage, Mencius, and much admired by Oscar Wilde). The Taoist mystics placed great emphasis on living in Harmony with Nature, or with the Tao (the Way, the underlying Principle, or Logos, of the Universe), and to this end perfected techniques of meditation and self-cultivation. Much of the philosophy accompanying kungfu is an amalgam of Taoism and Buddhism. Unlike Buddhist monks, Taoist priests did not shave their heads but let their hair grow long.

THREE KINGDOMS (San Guo) This was a famous period in Chinese history (220-265), when three rival contenders fought it out for the succession to the Han dynasty. Stories surrounding the exploits of the main contestants provided rousing material over the centuries for endless ballads, story recitations, operas, and films (including an enormously long TV adaptation recently released in China). The story reached its first culmination in the epic novel (probably written in the fifteenth century), *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, of which there are echoes throughout Louis Cha's work. There is a new translation by Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

TRIADS The Triad Society, or Society of Heaven and Earth (Tiandihui), was a secret society dedicated to the overthrow of the Manchus and the restoration of the Ming dynasty, pledging loyalty to the Ming Pretender Prince Tang. It was divided geographically into several Lodges (tang or, in Cantonese, long). The Five Forward Lodges were: Lotus Flower (Fujian Province), Obedience (Guangdong), Clan (Guangxi), Unity (Hunan and Hubei), and Transformation (Zhejiang). The Five Rear Lodges were: Green Wood (Jiangsu), Red Fire (Guizhou), White Metal (Sichuan), Black Water (Yunnan), and Yellow Earth (Henan and the central provinces). Many legendary accounts of the Triad Society's origins exist, some of which describe a link between the Five Ancestors (Tiger Generals) of the Triads and the Five Fighting Monks of the Southern Shaolin Temple in Fujian,

who escaped after the burning of their temple during the reign of Emperor Kang Xi. This resistance organization continued to operate throughout the Manchu dynasty, spreading to the Overseas Chinese communities in South-East Asia and the United States (Sun Yatsen was inducted into the

Hawaii Lodge

in 1904). It was the forerunner of today's notorious world-

wide Triad network.

WATER MARGIN (Shuihuzhuah) This is the classic bandit novel in Chinese

literature, set in the twelfth century, precursor of all Martial Arts fiction. Several translations are available (Pearl Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, 1933; Jackson, *Water Margin*, 1937; Shapiro, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, 1981), but none of them does justice to the infectious spirit of the original.

WONTON Cantonese term for dumpling.

YAMEN Term for a Chinese mandarin's official compound.

NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

In this book, Chinese names and place-names are in general spelt according to the Chinese system known as Hanyu Pinyin, which is now internationally accepted. (Occasional exceptions to this rule include well-established geographical names such as the Yangtze River, and the cities of Peking, Nanking, and Canton.) The following short list may help readers with some of the more difficult sounds used in the Pinyin system:

Letter Pronunciation

c

q

x

z zh

ts ch sh

dz

These very rough equivalents may also be of help to readers.

Word

Bo

Cai

Gang

Chen

Cheng

Chong

Chuan

Dang

Dong

Emei

Feng

Gui

Guo

Jia

Jiang

Kong

Pronunciation

Boar

Ts'eye ('It's eye', without the first vowel)

Ts'amg

Churn

Churng

Choong (as in 'book')

Chwan

Dung (as in 'cow dung')

Doong (as in 'book')

Er-may

Fcrng

Gway

Gwore

Jeeyar

Koong (as in 'book')

Li

Long

Lu

Qi

Qian

Qing

Rong

Shi

Si

Song

Shun

Wen

Xi

Xiao

Xing

Xiong

Xu

Yan

Yi

You

Yu

Yuan

Zha

Zhe

Zhen

Zhi

Zhou

Zhu

Zhuang

Zi

Zong

Zuo

Lee

Loong (as in 'book')

Lew, as in French 'tu'

Ghee

Chee-yenne

Ching

Roong (as in 'book')

Shhh!

Szzz!

Soong (as in 'book')

Shoon (as in 'should')

as in 'forgotten'

Shee

Shee-ow (as in 'shee-cow' without the 'c')

Shing

Sheeoong

Shyeu (as in French 'tu')

Yen '

Yee

Yo-heave-ho

Yew tree (as in French 'tu')

You, Anne!

Jar

Jem!

Jurn

Jim!

Joe

Jew

Jwarng

Dzzz!

Dzoong (as in 'book')

Dzore

PROLOQUE

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

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 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 girl's only a baby,' said the boy. 'What 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, my son!' 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, 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 young 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 in, 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 Emperors 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 seen 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 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 planning to 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 only 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 recognized 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, like his host, was a man of Zhe-jiang Province. The other one, a tall, thin man with a swarthy complexion, was Gu Yanwu, a native of Kunshan in Jiangsu Province. 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—Lu Liuliang. His family had lived for generations in Chongde, a prefecture in the Hangzhou district of Zhejiang Province. Like Huang Zongxi and Gu Yanwu, to whom you have just been introduced, he is an historical personage, famous among those Southern gentlemen who, 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.

Lu Liuliang observed the grave expression on his visitors' faces. Knowing of old how unfailingly Gu Yanwu's political judgement was to be trusted, he realized 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 pate 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 balancing some plates of cold meat. Lu 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 Lu Liuliang. 'Precisely, ' said Huang Zongxi. Gu Yanwu raised his wine-cup and, in ringing 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 Lu Liuliang's patriotic unwillingness to serve, a local official, impressed by what he had heard of Lu's reputation, had once sought to recommend him as a 'hidden talent' meriting a summons to the Manchu Court for suitable employment; but Lu had made it clear that he would die rather than accept such a tones, recited

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', Lu realized 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.

Gu Yanwu's enthusiasm for Lu'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, how e'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 Lu's wide acquaintance, and Huang, hearing them recited now by Gu, responded to the challenge by raising a 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 Lu 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 Lu.

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.

Lu 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 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 my 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 Lu Liuliang, and he took the huge scroll carefully 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 on to the painting and with pauses only for moistening the brush, he quickly completed the following poem:

Is this the sane of Great Song's south retreat,

This lovely land that hides its face in shame?

Or is it after Mount Yai'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 Hong Wu'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 Lu. '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 of mist and haze". When that time
comes, we shall gaze at even the poorest, meanest, most barren landscape with
a feeling of joyful liberation. Then, indeed, we shall look down with "wild joy . . .
from each height"!'

'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 Lu, 'yet here we are, like typical scholars, frit-

* Note to Reader:

Lu's impromptu poem is full of politically dangerous allusions to the shame of occupation by the Tartars (both Mongol and Manchu). The first lines refer to the thirteenth century and the dying days of the Southern Song dynasty, when the last Emperor, carrying his infant son, was hounded southwards by the Mongols, and finally flung himself and his son into the sea from the cliffs of Mount Yai. Hong Wu (towards the end of the poem) was the reign tide of a period during the heyday of the Ming dynasty (when China was still ruled by Chinese), to which these Loyalist scholars looked back with such nostalgia.

taring our time away on poetry and painting instead of attending to business. What was it, exactly, that brought you here?'

'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 Lu. '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 Lu, 'no, he's not here. I don't know where he can have gone.'

'If he had been 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,'

Lu 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's much likelihood of your meeting the Tartar Emperor face to face. You would be 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 Lu. '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 to stay alive.

Indulging in heroics at this juncture might be satisfying, but would

be merely falling into their trap.'

Lu 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 chorused their approval of his decision, but Lu 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 the poet 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, Peach Tree 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, Lu 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 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 Lu 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.' Lu 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.

The Ming History

Hangzhou, Jiaxing, and Huzhou, the three prefectures of Zhejiang Province 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. The poet 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 inkstones of Zhaoqing and Duan are celebrated 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. This 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 reign of the first Manchu Emperor Shun Zhi, in sixteen forty something, Zhuang Tinglong, probably because of excessive reading, 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 Ming 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 fere 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 doing any 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.

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. Zhuang Tinglong was named on the title page as the book's author, 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 organization 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 regime. 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 fere 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 Mag-

istrate, 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 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 the money even to return to his hometown. 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 rich and very 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. Instead, 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.'

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 Chron-

icle of Zuo by Zuo Qiuming, the Annals of an Historian by Sima Qian, and Ban Gu's History of the Han Dynasty are universally recognized 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 since his host showed no sign of wanting to move, 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, et cetera, et cetera, 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 'Huzhou's treasures three' 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. 'Whatever possessed me to say that? They're all so mean, these Nanxun millionaires. If only I'd told him that the three 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. 7nen—who knows?—he might cough up a whole lot more.'

At once he trimmed 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 Nurhachi 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 Wan Li'. He read swiftly on. Here it was again: the year 1627 when Abahai succeeded Nurhachi as Emperor of Later Jin was referred to as 'the seventh year of the Ming Emperor Tian Qi'; 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 Chong Zhen'; 1645 was called 'the first year of Long Wu', and 1647 'the first year of Yong Li'. ('Long Wu' and 'Yong Li' were the reign-titles of Prince Tang and Prince Gui, Ming Princes who set up shortlived regimes 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!'

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 regime 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.

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 again 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 regime had disappeared without trace. From 1615 onwards, the year in which Nurhachi 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.

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

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

Old Zhuang 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 Yemens 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. 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. 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. 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, and so on, had been infringed. And so, in hugger-mugger fashion, the affair was laid to rest.

Wu had realized what he was up against as soon as 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, took 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 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, 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, old Zhuang 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 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 handbill 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 handbills, 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 Shun Zhi to act as Regents for his Heir, the boy Emperor Kang Xi. 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 inves-

tigation. 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 Provincial Governor of Zhejiang, 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. •

By the Slow Process

This was the story that Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi related in all its details to Lu Liuliang and to which Lu 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 Lu Liuliang with his wife and sons and his two friends Gu and Huang embarked on their journey to Yangzhou. South of the Yangtze 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 Ting-long could not be executed because he was already dead, so they had broken open his coffin and gibbeted his corpse. His father 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. (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.) Vice-President Li's 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 either. He refused to give a lower age in his deposition and was executed along with the rest. Songkui and the Provincial Governor of Zhejiang 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 booksellers' 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 Shanghai, 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 Shanghai, 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 bought or sold copies of the book. By this time Li Shanghai 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'. •

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

The feelings of Lu Liuliang and his friends when they heard this news, their cries of anger and horror, can well 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 Huang's 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 Lu 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 were positively sumptuous. There was even a troupe of Kunqu opera-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.

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 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 to the man. 'How about coming inside for a drink.'

'Good idea,' said the beggar.

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

'Your health,' he said.

The beggar raised his wine-cup and drained it at a gulp.

'Good wine,' he said appreciatively.

Zha poured him three more cupfuls in succession and the beggar drank them down with evident gusto. Zha 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 are too few; in the wrong company a single word is too many.'

The well-known saying, though unremarkable in itself, struck Zha as somewhat odd coming from the mouth of a beggar. He gave instructions to his servant to get out a large jar of his best rice-wine, 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's page-boy first heated up the wine and then poured it out for them, a big wine-bowlful for the beggar, a tiny wine-cupful 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 position 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 Zha, 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 apologize.'

The beggar took the money.

That's all right, ' he said.

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

Some time 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

recognized 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 preferred 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 even enough to make a scholar tipsy!'

'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?'

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 Chong Zhen 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 before,' 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, saluted 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 man presented himself

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at the house, a very energetic young fellow 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. Look, I wonder if you'd mind just sitting here a moment?'

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

'Is there any chance of your being able to take these back? I really can't accept presents of this kind.'

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 therefore 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 recognized 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 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.

'You remember that time at your home, when you treated me like a friend, inviting me in to drink with you and then giving me that sheepskin gown?' he said, 'Well—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 of 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 present, 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.'

'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 two lines of small characters tattooed on his skin:

(By Heaven my father and Earth my mother)

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e~"

(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 with the 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 famous historical novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms when the great warrior 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.

Beggars and Triads

There's been a Beggars Guild since the days of the Song dynasty. Ever since that time they have been a part of the outlaw world, part of the 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 Eve Guardians, one for each of the Five Directions: 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.

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 anyway, 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, if I was 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. Chen is the Grand Master, or Helmsman as they call it. This last couple of years the Triads have been very active in the three south-eastern provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Guangdong. Sun got me an introduction to the Master of the Obedience Lodge of the Triad Society in Guangdong, so that I could apply for membership. They put me on probation for a year, during 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 Marshal Zheng, or 'Coxinga' 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 Coxinga'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 organized 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 the great patriot General Yue Fei who had the words "Loyal to the End" tattooed on himself, to show his devotion to the Imperial House of the Song dynasty, in their struggle against the Jurchen Tartars.'

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 just 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:

Who's never yet met Chen Jinnan
Can't call himself a proper man.

'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.

'An individual 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 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.

The Scholar in the Doorway

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

'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.'

Lu 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 Lu, 'but what about the

other two men? 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.'

Lu 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 of our nation that has been preserved,' he said.

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 Lu'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, coming from somewhere above their heads.

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

They looked at each other, all asking themselves the same silent question.

'A ghost? But surely there are no such things as ghosts?'

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

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 vice-like grip. Immediately after that, he experienced what felt like a sudden cramp in the centre of his back. The 'someone'—evidently a prac-

tised 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 Lu 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 Lu.

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 my confidential 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 with growing alarm, 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 Lu 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.'

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 Lu and Huang in quick succession somewhere in the pit of the stomach, instantly immobilizing 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 Lu 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 really were?

One of the so-called 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 Lu, 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.

'We're on Government business here, ' Major Gua shouted at him, 'and we are officers of the law. 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, using a kungfu technique known as Catch-Can. 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 struck home 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 catch hold of its branches, and 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 over into the canal. After that he relit the lamp in the cabin.

Gu, Huang, and Lti, unable to find sufficient words to express their gratitude, inquired as to 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 people refer to me as Helmsman Chen.'

_.CHAPTER 1

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

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

Stray 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 (named in imitation of the famous West Lake by the city of Hangzhou, on the shores of which Zha Yihuang entertained his beggar friend in our last chapter) lies on the western outskirts of Yangzhou. In the early years of the Manchu Emperor Rang Xi, the street beside the lake, known as the Alley of Chiming Jade, was famed for its high concentration of pleasure-houses, 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. It was a veritable garden of earthly delight.

Suddenly, from both the northern and southern ends of the Alley, there burst forth a harsh chorus of voices, demanding the attention of everyone present (both ladies and customers) and announcing that they were conducting a search for 'one man and one man alone':

The man we want has 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 direction 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?'

'Is this a raid?'

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

Even as the boys at Vernal Delights 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 recognized 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 unusual, it was downright alarming.

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

'Apologies, gents, for the intrusion! We don't mean you any 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've come to find Brother Jia, Scarface Jia, of the Triad Society. He wouldn't happen to be anywhere on the premises, would he?'

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, even louder this time:

'Now listen to me, Scarface—wherever you are! This afternoon, in the bar down by the Lake, there were words spoken . . . There were names called. Gutless, you said we were too scared to stand up against a few troopers! Wasn't that it? Just a bunch of petty

salt-peddlers? You'd had a bellyful of booze, I grant you! And if we didn't like what you were saying we were welcome to come and find you down the Alley, you said! Well, we didn't like it, not one bit! And we're here! So come on out, if you're a Triad and a real man! Or are you too chicken? Trying to keep your dirty little turtle-head under cover?'

The others in his gang joined in noisily:

'Come on out, Triad! Come on out, turtle-head!'

'Is it a Triad we've got here, or a "try-hard"? Looks more like a headless turtle to me?' And more of the like.

'Hold it lads!' chimed in the older fellow. This little matter concerns Scarface and Scarface alone. We've got nothing against the Triads as such. What we salt-smugglers do, we do to earn an honest bowl of rice. We're humble folk. There's not one of us can compare with the Triads and their Brave Men and 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. 'Find the turtle, and 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 salon, there came a great roar:

What the blazes is going on? D'ye mind leaving me in peace? 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!'

From within the room came a great guffaw:

'I'm not the man you're looking for as it happens! But I won't let scum like you blacken the name of the Triads all the same! I'm not 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 carry their shoes or wipe the shit from their bum-holes!'

The smugglers protested angrily at this abuse and three of them went charging headlong into the side-room, brandishing their swords. In a matter of seconds howls of pain were heard, and the three came hurtling out again backwards and tumbled on to the ground. One of them (a big burly fellow) had his own sword rammed down his throat and 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, the top of his head swathed in a white turban. There did not appear to be any trace of a scar on his face. He was most definitely not Scarface Jia.

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

'Just call me dad!' barked the man. 'Why, you young whip-persnapper, have you forgotten your own father's name?'

At this one of the singsong-girls in attendance could not help giggling. A smuggler 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 into the salon, crying:

'You dare hit my mum, you rotten turtle! I hope you're struck by lightning and your hands fall off, I hope your tongue rots, your belly fills 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 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 as hard as he could. The smuggler let out a great howl of pain. By now the boy was well out of his reach.

The smuggler began thrashing 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 at the top of his voice: 'Mum! Mum!' The smuggler seized his chance. Grabbing the boy by the scruff of the neck, he lifted him bodily off the ground and was about to lay into him when the ringleader shouted:

'Stop being stupid! Put the little runt down!'

The man obeyed, but not without first giving him a kick up the backside that sent him somersaulting across the room and

crashing 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 us, and we came down here to the Alley to settle scores with him. Seeing as you've nothing to do with the Triads, sir, there's really no cause for you and us to come to blows. If you'd just be so good as to give us your name, I'm sure everything can be sorted out.'

The man inside the room laughed:

'I'm not interested in your little squabble! I was having a perfectly good time, until you people turned up to spoil my evening. I'll give you a piece of advice, my friend: you leave the Triads well alone. If one of them does happen to insult you, just swallow your pride and go quietly about your business: smuggle a bit more salt, earn yourselves a bit more cash—'

'Why, what an insult!' retorted the older fellow angrily. 'The way you talk, I can see you're not one of us!'

'One of you\' sneered the other. 'What have you got in mind? Want to marry me off 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 'uniform' of the Green Gang. One of them, a skinny fellow wielding a mace and chain,

muttered:

'What's the old codger on about?'

'I don't know,' 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 they 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 dear (from the infernal din) that the fight was taking a heavy toll on the furniture. The Madame's fleshy jowls quivered and she started mumbling frantic prayers to the Lord Buddha, and looking more than a little 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 burning city. The din continued to mount, and then there was a long drawn-out howl of pain. It sounded as if one of the smugglers had received a serious blow.

Meanwhile the big burly fellow who'd landed the boy a boot in the backside, and whose testicles were still very tender, saw his little tormentor go creeping across the room, and his blood began boiling with rage again. He went for him, launching an all-out attack this time, waving his fists wildly in the air. The boy dodged but his opponent succeeded in fetching him a box 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, and quite liable to kill the little fellow, but none of them dared intervene. When 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, as he tried to size up the situation in the side-room, the boy could not make out what the devil was going on. Then amid the sparks thrown off by the clashing blades he distinguished the form of a man sitting on the bed, his 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 that the man with the bandaged head had a cutlass in his hand, 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 going strong: the older fellow with his two swords, and another towering hulk of a man.

That head looks badly wounded, ' 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. 'Cowards! Salt—that's all you're good for! Sod the lot of you, you

and all your foul pickled ancestors! Go and salt your grannies' fannies and sell them as pickled pork—if anyone'll buy the 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 drubbing, 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 now raised both his swords and went for the chest of the bandaged man, who parried with his cutlass. There was a dull thud: the burly one was back meanwhile (minus the missing chunk), and had brought his metal stock down on the man's right shoulder. The cutlass fell to the ground with a clang. The older fellow now gave 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 burly one, despite his badly wounded shoulder, was still breathing fire. He summoned his last drop of energy to raise his metal stock and strike at the crown of his adversary's head. The bandaged man seemed incapable of evading the blow; he looked as if his strength was spent and he could barely move. The stock made its way slowly through the air.

The boy could see it happening, and the crisis spurred him into action. He dashed forward and grabbed the assailant by both legs, tugging him backwards for all he was worth. The man 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 because of his wound the man was already nearly done for, 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 the salt-smugglers any further. The old man, on his way out, had set the door swinging, and the lamplight from the main salon shone inside, intermittently illuminating the man on the bed, with his

overgrown tangle of whiskers and his blood-stained face. He was a ghastly sight.

Back outside the smugglers stared at each other aghast, unable to make out exactly what was going on. The man bellowed again:

Turtle-spawn! If you're too scared to come in, then I'll come out 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 turning to the boy, said, sotto voce:

'Bolt the door, kid!'

'YessirY

The boy 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 again on to 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—'

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

'Tick up the cutlass! Give it to me!'

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

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

'Tuck them!' cried the boy. 'Let them kill me! I'm not scared. I'm talking about Honour! Friends should stick together, and I'm sticking by you.'

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

'Honour, is it, boy? Friends, is it?'

'Yes. Friends should stick together, and share everything together, the rough and the smooth!'

Gende Reader, we should perhaps explain that the storytellers who plied their trade in the tea-houses of Yangzhou were forever regaling their audiences with the heroic exploits of the great ages of Chinese Chivalry and Romance—episodes from the great sagas like The Three Kingdoms, Outlaws of the Marsh, or Heroes of the Ming. And our young 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 down by 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 epic tales of derring-do, and 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 finally 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 new-found 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 arm on to his shoulder, opened the door, and stumbled 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 the two of them made their way out of the room.

Trinket and Whiskers become acquainted on the Road to Victory Hill

The two of them walked out of Vernal Delights, and into the Alley, which was now silent and deserted. The smugglers must have gone

for reinforcements.

The man turned into a narrow side-street. 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. But 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:

'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 inaudibly to himself:

'Cor! What a beauty!'

But many were the stories he'd heard told of Heroes Brave and True, the Brothers of River and Lake, or the 'kungfu fraternity' as they sometimes called themselves, and in every story the real heroes valued friendship above everything else, they didn't care a fig for money. Here was his chance to be a hero, it was staring him in the face, and nothing was going to make him give it up for the sake of money! He had no intention of stooping to the level of 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 on to 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 Shao Xing 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!'

'Yes sir\' answered the driver promptly.

'It is,' confirmed the boy. 'I've been out here with my mum and the girls. They come here to burn incense at the shrine to the Hero's Lady, and I usually muck about. 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 off 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 steered 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 need someone to look after you. It wouldn't be right otherwise.'

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 poxy turtle-heads! And look smart!'

The boy was dumbfounded.

'Is 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 whore-house: but you're afraid to die, aren't you? Go on, run for it while you can!'

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

The two smugglers muttered something to one another and made a dash for it. The man leaped to his feet to give chase, but then 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 more men, looking for blood.'

Suddenly he let out a great cry:

'Oh don't die! Please! Oh why did you have to die?'

The two smugglers were running hell-for-leather when they heard this and stopped dead in their tracks. The boy went on:

'You mustn't die! You can't!'

The smugglers were shocked, and not a little delighted.

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

'He took some nasty wounds. They must have done him in. He must be dead—just listen to the way the kid's carrying on!'

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 to tell the others!'

'Brilliant!' exclaimed the second, and the two of them drew their swords and stealthily approached. The boy was still beating his breast, stamping his feet, and howling pitifully: • *-.":':

'Dear brother, why have you gone and left me like this? The smugglers will be back for me and I'll be done for!'

This was music to their ears. They quickened their pace.

'He had it coming to him, the scurvy knave!' yelled one of them, grabbing the boy by his jacket, while the other raised his sword and brought it down in the direction of the man's neck. Suddenly a blade flashed, the head of one smuggler went flying through the air, and the one holding the boy was left with a gaping hole somewhere between his chest and his belly. The whiskered man let out a great snort of laughter and heaved himself up from the ground.

'Phew1.' cried the boy. This salt-smuggling friend of ours over here seems to be missing his head! Now that these two have gone to hell, to report to King Yama, there'll be no one left to tell the others where we are! Dear oh dearie me!'

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 that performance of yours they'd never have come back!'

'Wailing's no problem,' quipped the boy. 'I can do it for you any time. When my mum takes a stick to me, I wail like crazy just before it lands. That way she never dares hit me too hard.'

'What does she beat you for?'

That depends. Sometimes it's because I've stolen money from her; sometimes it's because I've been giving one of the customers a hard time.'

The man sighed:

'We had to kill those two. We had no choice. But tell me one thing: just now, when you were doing your wailing act, I thought I heard you call me "brother"—shouldn't it have been "uncle" or "sir"?'

'But we're friends,' replied the boy. 'And friends are brothers. What sort of 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?'

Trinket, 'said the boy, after a moment's hesitation.

'No, I mean your full name?'

The boy frowned.

'Wei—Trinket Wei.'

The truth was that the boy had been born and raised in the

whore-house, and had certainly never been to school. While his mother's name was Wei, Spring Fragrance Wei, even she had never been able to work out who his father was. People just called him Trinket, and no one 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. What's yours?' Trinket asked.

The man smiled.

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

Trinket leaped excitedly in the air.

'I know who you are! The police are after you, aren't they! You're that Notorious Brigand, aren't you!'

Whiskers chuckled:

'Sounds like me. Scared?'

Why should I be?' laughed Trinket. 'I haven't got 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, my 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 Two Thousand Taels of Silver. A Lesser Reward of One Thousand Taels for Information leading to his Arrest." I heard them talking about it yesterday in the tea-house. They all said you were much too smart to be caught. But all the same, someone could always inform the police and pocket the reward. It'd certainly be a nice little windfall.'

Whiskers looked at Trinket, cocked his head to one side, 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 having fun 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? Call that Brotherhood?'

'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 head, you don't look anything like the poster. No one would ever have recognized you.'

'You were the one who 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 meanwhile 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 over 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, a keen look shone in his eyes, a fierce expression lit up 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 against those salt-smugglers. But if he 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, so 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 those, out here in the middle of nowhere?'

'Not too far back I noticed a little village. If you'll just lend us a tael or two, Whiskers my old mate

'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. '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! Or a hundred thousand! . . . Well, I wonder.

But they'd never offer such a big reward for someone like Whiskers, so what's the point of even thinking about it!

He took the money.

'Want me to buy you anything for your wound?'

'No need,' replied Whiskers. 'I've got what I need.'

'I'm off, then. 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 catties of cold beef.'

'Good idea!' rejoined Whiskers. 'And hurry up about it: I kill better on a full stomach.'

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

'No! I've sworn to fight it out with someone else—to the death. Why else do you think I came here in such a hurry?'

Trinket drew in a sharp breath:

'But you're badly wounded! 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, and I'm sure he'd agree to a postponement. But I'd never ask him. Today is the twenty-ninth of the third month, isn't it? That's the date we fixed upon six months ago, before I was arrested and put in jail. Come what may I knew I had to keep this appointment. That's why I had to break out. Unfortunately, I killed one or two of my jailers in the process. It caused a big stir in Yangzhou. They went and put up a poster and offered a reward for my capture, the bastards! 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 though; I took a bit of a knocking. Been a bad few days!'

'Well I'd better be off anyway,' said Trinket, 'to get some food for your stomach

before 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,' he fretted to himself. 'And he says the other man's a Brave Man and True—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, and he knew he'd not be happy until he'd spent the lot! He went into the little village grocer's and bought two catties of cooked beef, and a 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. 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. It'll work like in the story. When they start fighting, the other fellow won't see it: he'll 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 got their legs caught in twine. They threw their riders to the ground, where they lay at the mercy of the enemy, and were hacked 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 Fairy 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 a bag of lime, slung it over his shoulder, and set off back to where he'd left his friend.

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 so much as tasted wine, but now he felt he had to live up to his new station in life as the friend of a true hero, 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 then he 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 old mate—been keeping well?'

Goatee Wu and Baldy Wang

Well, if it isn't my old friends! How are you both?' called back Whiskers Mao.

Trinket's heart was pounding. These must be the dreaded adversaries. He looked down the road and saw two men hastening along it towards them.

One of the two was an old fellow with a long white goatee beard straggling down to his chest, a ruddy complexion that belied his age, and a firm skin without the slightest trace of a wrinkle. The other was a man in his forties, short and stout, bald on top but 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 injured my leg.'

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, they're friends of his!' thought Trinket, enormously relieved. They've not come to fight him after all! When the others arrive, these two will be on our side!'

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

'Brother Wu! Don't drink it!'

Goatee Wu paused a second, then laughed.

'Our friend Mao is someone we can trust, a 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 carry on insulting our friend?'

Baldy Wang took the bottle with some hesitation 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 the stuff, I'll help you out.'

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

'I'd like to introduce you to these friends of mine,' Whiskers said to Trinket amiably. Then, indicating Goatee first, he went on:

This is Brother Wu, known among the fighting folk of River and Lake as the Great Roc, or Cloud Scraper. He's a master at kick boxing and fist fighting—a legend in fact!

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

'This is Brother 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 comrade of mine is Wei, Trinket Wei. In the Brotherhood of River and Lake he's known as ... as ..."

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, in fact, feeding on nothing but live fish and shrimps ...'

Whiskers very much wanted to give his newly acquired friend some 'face' in the presence of these two recent arrivals. But he knew that Trinket possessed no true fighting skills whatsoever, whereas Goatee and Baldy were both very much the real thing and would quickly see through any false pretences. Swimming was a safe enough bet, though: the two men were northerners, couldn't swim

a stroke between them, and would be quite incapable of judging the truth of his claims.

'I want the three of you to be friends!' Whiskers went on. 'Come now, no formality please!'

The two clasped their hands together and nodded politely at Trinket:

'Honoured to know you, sir!

He was quick to pick up the lingo:

The honour's mine!' But he was actually thinking to himself: 'Old Whiskers has really gone overboard, calling me a comrade of his! I'm just a nobody, a nothing! But I'd better keep quiet about it.. .'

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

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

'This young friend of mine is a master-swimmer, as I have just told you. But on land he is a novice. I shall have to take you both on single-handed. I hope you won't mind?'

'I feel we should put this whole thing off another six months, ' said the old man.

'Why on earth?'

'You're wounded, and wouldn't be able to give of your best. There'd be no glory in defeating you in the condition you're in. 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'm sure none of us can bear to drag this thing 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.

'I know you've always preferred to fight with bare fists.' Then turning to Baldy: 'Present your weapons, please!'

'Certainly!'

There was a muffled clang as Baldy reached inside his jacket and produced the twin clubs.

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

'Agreed!' cried Baldy, and stepped 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, but 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 smacked into the tree-trunk. It was a hefty tree, a good fifty feet high, but when Goatee hit it, the leaves came raining down in a shower.

'What a blow! Most excellent kungfu' 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 beard 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 apart from Whiskers' performance with the salt gang the previous day, they'd all been low-life scraps in the market-place, one thug head-butting (or pigtailing) another. This was altogether different. While the Roc danced back and forth, his hands weaving through the air, Whiskers' 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. Trinket had never seen anything to compare with this present display of sheer martial virtuosity. . .

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 friends, and their Captain called out to them to stop fighting:

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.

They're after me again!' exclaimed Whiskers. Take no 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, I'm a bleeding saint! Come on, Whiskers old boy, you're in deep trouble and you know it—the whole of Yangzhou does at any rate. So you might as well face the music like a man. Come along quietly with us, please.'

'Just a minute: let me finish this little contest with my friends here first.'

Turning to Goatee and Baldy, Whiskers continued:

'Gentlemen, this matter must be settled today. Another six months and who knows if I'll even be alive. So—on guard, then!'

'You two!' cried the Captain testily. 'Unless you want to be taken in along with

this brigand, stand well back both of you. I mean it. Don't go making trouble for yourselves.'

'You're wasting your breath!' snorted Whiskers contemptuously.

'Now you listen to me!' blazed the Captain. 'You've broken out of jail, and you're guilty of murder (several times over)—we'll leave all of that to the Yangzhou magistrate, where it belongs. But we'll not let you get away with treason! You made a big mistake in the whore-house, calling the Triads heroes in public. 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! I suppose you'd have us believe that Tartar-licking traitors like you are heroes?'

The Captain's eyes flashed angrily.

'We are here at the orders of Lord Oboi. We've been sent all the way from the Capital, to bring in the treacherous scum who call themselves Triads. You're coming with us, Whiskers Mao!'

Turning to Goatee and Baldy:

'As for you two, you were fighting against this man, and I shall therefore assume that you are not his associates. You can 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, but I am usually called Black Dragon, on account of this little beauty here. I'm under orders from Lord 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 talking about?'

Goatee smiled.

'Oh, nothing. Obviously you're not a Triad member. So tell me, why do you think they're such heroes?'

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

Who's never yet met Chenjinnan Can't call himself a proper man.

Chen Jinnan, 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 implying that I'm not a proper man—is that what you're trying to say?'

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

Goatee laughed: '

'I meant nothing of the sort.'

'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. Lord Oboi has promised a rich reward for information leading to the capture of any of their leaders—that Helmsman Chen, for example.'

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

'You're dreaming! You think you can land a big fish like the Helmsman? And this Lord Oboi, you seem to think he's some sort of miracle-worker. He may call himself the Manchu Champion, but I'll bet it's all empty talk.'

'You don't know what you're talking about!' protested the Captain. 'Lord Oboi's a living wonder—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 it down dead. But what would scum of the earth like you know about that?

The devil take him!' swore Whiskers Mao. 'I'll lay my money on it that this Oboi can do no such thing! I'll go to Peking and take him on myself!'

'Think you're a match for the Lord Oboi?' sneered the Captain. 'He could snuff you out with one finger! You might as well stop your empty boasting and come along quietly with us.'

'Not so fast! You may be thirteen against one, but I can still give you a run for your money!'

'And what about 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 realize what you're doing? Assisting a known rebel, engaging in treason—this could land you in serious trouble.'

Goatee laughed:

'I may be about to assist a rebel, but I'm certainly not engaging in treason!'

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

'Six months ago,' replied Goatee, 'my friend Mao here made an agreement with my friend Wang,' (pointing to Baldy), 'to meet at this spot for a friendly trial of strength. I agreed to come along. You and your troopers 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 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 sense you'll take your men back and leave us to finish what we've started. Tomorrow he'll be all yours!'

'Out of the question!' declared the Captain. One of his troopers then yelled out impatiently:

'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 on to the ground.

'Mutiny! At them!' yelled the troopers, leaping from their horses and surging forward, to form 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 in for it now: wonder if the troopers'll go for me afterwards . . .

'But then again: he called me friend, we talked about sharing the rough and the smooth. If I leave him in the lurch now, a fine kind of Honour that would 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 the victim cursing and howling in a pool of blood.

The Captain now let out a high-pitched screech, and brandished 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 was coiling its way 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 received 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—two wielding short-swords, one a double-edged long-sword—and not bad swordsmen either. They harried him persistently, and even his Cloud Scraper acrobatics were of no avail. He failed repeatedly 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 whiplash 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 had only to flick his wrist once, then twice, and the whip changed direction and began to form a great whirling loop, coiling itself around Whiskers' middle: 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—with no success. The Captain now let go of the whip-handle and spun the whole 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. It was clear the Captain wanted Whiskers 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 standing up again when something flashed past him and a shower of tiny dust-like particles flew into his eyes, up his nose, and into his mouth. He felt himself choking and his eyes beginning 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! Someone's thrown lime in my eyes!'

Raw lime reacts violently on contact with liquid. 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 Whiskers to the tree, he 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 chose that moment to ram 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, assuming that it was Whiskers who had dealt the death-blow. 'My deepest compliments for dealing so effectively with Black Dragon! He was no mean fighter!'

Whiskers shook his head:

To my shame, it was my young friend here who killed him. Not me.'

The 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, on the gore-stained corpses of the dead and the mud-spattered limbs of the wounded.

Whiskers now extricated 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 had given him a thrill of pride; but it was overshadowed by a much deeper feeling of fear. Goatee and Baldy kept looking him up and down, unable to decide whether they could really credit this little fellow with such a mighty feat. His 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 mother. He didn't in the least look like someone who had just sent a Captain of the Guard to his death.

Tell us, young friend,' asked old Goatee, 'which move did you use?'

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

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

Whiskers frowned and shook his head:

'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. 'We never had a serious quarrel in the first place. Let's just make it up. He's a fine fighter, and a brave and wise man, and has earned my sincerest respect.'

'Very well,' said Goatee. 'Friend Mao, we must be on our way. But one day we'll meet again. Meanwhile I shall remember your words of respect for Helmsman Chen, and will find a way of passing them on 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 naturally 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 none the less. 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 Triads!'

Then, turning to Trinket after a moment's pause:

'Go and fetch me that horse!'

Trinket on Horseback

Now Trinket had never handled a horse in his life, and the sheer size of the beast he found himself looking at struck terror into his heart. He tried creeping up towards 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 bridle. 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.

'What's that to you?'

'You're my friend: that's what.'

Whiskers' face darkened: '

Tour friend? Me? Never!

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 little bastard!" cried Whiskers angrily. "Where in hell's name did you pick up a cheap trick like that?"

Now, because Trinket's mother was a singsong-girl and neither he nor she knew who his father was, his paternity had always been a sore point with him, and any slur on his own 'legitimacy' inevitably sent him flying into an instant rage.

'Bastard yourself!' he yelled back. 'Sod you and all your ancestors—all seventeen or eighteen generations of them! Rotten turtle! What business is it of yours what I do? 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.

'You pesky little brat! Got anything more to say for yourself?'

Trinket thrashed the air wildly with his legs, and yelled back:

'Dirty old turtle! I hope you rot and die by the roadside like a tramp! I hope you're chopped into a million pieces like stinking sweet-and-sour pork!'

He'd acquired an extensive repertoire of abuse in the whorehouse, from the diverse clientele, Northern and Southern. 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 Trinket dropped to the ground and bolted for it, still cursing nineteen to the dozen.

Trinket was a reasonably fast runner, but he didn't stand a chance with Whiskers after him on horseback. After a hundred feet or so he was puffed out. He looked round, and 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. There he began writhing around, howling and wailing. This was in fact one of his oldest tricks: if ever he got into a scrape, whether in the whorehouse or out on the street, and it looked as if he was getting the worst of it, as a last resort he'd try bawling his head off. It usually worked. His opponent would stop dead in his tracks, shake his head, 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. 'Til let my horse trample you

to death!'

Trinket had never taken kindly to intimidation. People were always saying things like 'Til brain you! I'll clout you one! I'll kick your head in!', and he always refused to take 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 poor little kid! Heeeeelp\ 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 hero!'

Whiskers could see that Trinket was all done in, and relented.

'And you are, I suppose!' he laughed. 'A hero, I mean. 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 don't ever, ever call me a bastard!'

Why not!' 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 too. 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 always hearing people say how unbeatable that fellow Oboi is supposed to be,' replied Whiskers. The Tartar Champion—some people even say the World Champion. Well, I'm going 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 miss a contest like that for all the world! Besides, it was Peking; in the

tea-houses he'd heard so much about the wonders of the Capital, and had always dreamed of going there one day. Here in Yangzhou he was in deep trouble now anyway, with the Captain's death on his hands. He could always try pinning the blame on Whiskers. But if the true story came out he'd be done for. He'd be well advised to get away while he could.

'Uncle Mao!' he began. 'There's one favour I'd like to ask you. But it's rather a tough one. You may not have the guts for it.'

'Not have the guts! Why you dirty little b—'

Whiskers' reaction was true to form. He did, however, pull himself up in time, before uttering the forbidden 'B' word.

'Go on, ' he continued, '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,' insisted Trinket. 'Promise me, now. By your face and troth—'

'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 Lord Oboi!'

Whiskers shook his head.

'First, it's a very long way from Yangzhou to Peking. Second, the Guards 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 sick.'

'Oh I'm always going off for days on end. She never worries.'

Whiskers spurred his horse on, muttering:

Tricky little devil, aren't you!'

7 knowl' 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! "Please, Great Lord Oboi, spare me sir! Spare my poor little neck!" You'd die of shame if I heard you talking like that!' .. • ••. ••• •-.-, - ,

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 bet it will be you!' cried the delighted (but unrepentant) Trinket. 'Anyway, 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!'

'You little devil! I don't know what I'm going to do with you!' laughed Whiskers. To which Trinket, never one to be outdone, replied:

'You big devil! I don't know what I'm going to do with you!'

Til 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 troublemaker 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 swung his horse round. Tying the second horse to his own with a leading rein, he took his bearings, and set off in a northerly direction.

Trinket had never so much as 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 on his own.

'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!'

So saying, he jumped down and ran over to the left flank of the second horse, placed his right foot in the stirrup, swung himself up on to 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 on to the saddle and lying as low as possible along the horse's back. He went careering backwards, the wind whistling behind his ears. Luckily he was small and lightly built, and by dint of clinging on to the tail he managed to avoid being thrown to the ground.

'Ow! Help! Mother's!' he screamed as he sped along. 'Whiskers, stop the horse, or I'll bugger every last ancestor in your rotten family! HeedpY

The horse continued to gather speed and galloped a mile or two down the highway without showing any signs of letting up. After a while it rounded a bend and there up ahead of them, to the right, where another road joined the highway, was a mule-cart. It was rattling straight towards them. Behind it galloped a white horse ridden by a man in his late twenties. Trinket's runaway horse went charging wildly on.

'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 closer and closer 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. There it stood, snorting, and rooted to the spot.

A woman's voice could be heard from within the cart.

'Brother Bo, what has happened?'

'It's 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 a great ride! Gone with the wind—backwards! Terrific! Fantastic fun! Well, it was fun until this dickhead got in the way!'

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 sent Trinket sliding 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 all over again, merely smiled, gave his own horse's reins a gentle pull, and trotted off behind the mule-cart. Whiskers had meanwhile come riding 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 that spastic idiot went and got in my way. I might have been killed!'

He heaved himself up whimpering 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 on to his saddle.

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. When they came to a

little village, Whiskers slid gently from the saddle, lifted Trinket carefully down, and took him into an inn for something to eat.

At mealtimes in the whore-house Trinket had been accustomed to standing in the kitchen doorway and holding out his blue-and-white bowl for leftovers. Whatever bits of chicken, duck, fish, or meat the clients might have left uneaten would be piled up on top of his rice. Without knowing it he'd probably worked his way many a time through an extensive and varied menu. But never once in his life had he actually sat down at a table with a friend for 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 as though he'd been invited out to 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 again. Let's get out of here!'

Whiskers humphed, 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 village, and the menu at the inn was very basic. All it 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 new arrivals gave orders for his personal supply of ham and pheasant to be brought in. Meanwhile, his men chatted amongst themselves:

They're always going on back home about how wonderful this part of the country is: the gorgeous silks, the delicious seafood, and the finger-licking game. But just take a look at this stuff on offer here! Give me good old Yunnan cooking any day!'

'You people over at the Satrap's H.Q. eat and drink like lords,' chipped in another. 'Everyone knows that. Anything else is bound to seem rubbish 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 Wu Sanguil!' he thought to

himself. Then one of the newcomers, a swarthy-looking fellow, said to one of his superiors:

'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, Trinket,' said Whiskers rather loudly, 'who's the vilest creature in the entire world? Do you know?'

'Of course I know!' piped up Trinket. 'It must be that dirty lump of turtle-spawn—'

In actual fact he had not the least idea who Whiskers was referring to. 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, 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.

'Let me tell you something,' said Whiskers. That no-good, putrid piece of turtle-spawn, that lousy treacherous son-of-a-bitch—why, he took this beautiful land of ours, and handed 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 I'll tell you his name,' continued Whiskers, quite unperturbed. 'It's Wu. Wu Sangui. The Satrap they call him.'

The Shit-trap more like,' suggested Trinket helpfully.

Controlled fury now gave way to action, and there was a loud clang of metal as seven or eight of the Satrap's men drew their swords and advanced on Whiskers. Trinket promptly disappeared 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 still seated at the bench and realized that he was immobilized 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, terminating in cloth shoes and leather boots. Whiskers was clearly identifiable by his straw sandals. He was smiting 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 . . . AiyeehV

It was Whiskers who let out the cry of pain. But at the same moment one of Whiskers' 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 at it. There was a nasty tearing sound and a good slice of the sole of the foot came away. A man tumbled screaming to the floor.

It was pitch-black beneath the table, and in the general pandemonium none of the Satrap's men 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 by now 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 (the now exposed) 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.

'Great Balls of Sizzling Bean Curd!' screeched Trinket, zooming under another

table.

'Come on out of there, little skunk!' the man yelled. 'Come on in after me, big skunk!' he yelled back. The man was boiling with rage. With his left hand he tried to tip this table up too, when suddenly there was a great crash, and a fist landed smack in the middle of his chest and sent him flying backwards. It was the man sitting at this very table who had dealt him the blow. And now this 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—eye, cheek, whatever—until one of them finally shouted: 'Let's get out of here!'

They beat a hasty retreat, dragging their wounded with them, and soon the sound of horses' hooves could be heard as they galloped away.

Trinket began to laugh hysterically, and 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:

Thank you for coming to my rescue, sir. That was most excellent kungfu! I was badly outnumbered, and without your help I'm afraid I would have come out of it badly.'

Trinket took a closer look and recognized 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.

'Mao, you were already wounded, but your sense of honour inspired you to denounce a traitor and pay the consequences. I was deeply impressed.'

'Never in all my life,' replied Whiskers, 'have I loathed a man as I loathe Satrap Wu. I may not be able to lay hands on him, but at least today I have been able to vent my spleen a little on his underlings. And you, sir—may I know your name?'

'I cannot tell you in this public place. I must be on my way, Brother Mao. Until we meet again!'

He escorted his lady companion out of the room. Throughout this exchange she had held her head lowered, and they had not been able to observe her face.

'I'm afraid I consider that as less than civil of you, sir!' exclaimed Whiskers.

The man said nothing, and continued on his way. But as he walked past Whiskers he leant towards him and muttered something in his ear. Whiskers was like a man struck by lightning. A radiant expression of awe illuminated his face, and he made a deep bow.

'A true hero! Yes, today I have seen a true hero!' he declared solemnly.

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.

Whiskers the Would-be Master

Trinket was intrigued by this sudden transformation on Whiskers' part.

'Who is that man?' he asked. 'What made you start arse-licking 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, he instructed him:

'Grab hold of the saddle, put your left foot in the stirrup this

time, and heave yourself 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 Trinket's reins.

With these wounds of mine,' he said, 'I'd be no match for the troopers. We'd better keep off the main highway. And we need to find a quiet place where I can rest and get my strength back.'

That fellow just now was quite something!' said Trinket. The way he flicked those chopsticks! Wow! That made them run all right! You're not quite in his league, are you, Whiskers?'

'Of course I'm not. The man is attached to the Mu Family! Of course he's good!'

'Attached to the what?' replied Trinket. 'You seemed so 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 Old Duke Mu, which of course extends to his descendants and their 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 that "till we meet again" stuff.'

'He spoke to me in confidence as he was leaving—how else would I have known who he was?'

Well? What did he whisper in your ear?'

'He told me he served the Mu Family, and that his name was Bo.'

'So what's so special about that?' asked Trinket. 'You don't seem scared of Lord Oboi, or the Shit-trap. Have they got three heads and six arms, Old Duke Mu's merry men, or whatever they're called? I know—you're probably scared shitless he'll do his chop-stick trick on you and poke out both your eyes.'

'I am not scared of them. You don't understand. We brothers of River and Lake revere the Mu Family as heroes. To offend one of them in any way is unthinkable. It's got nothing to do with fear, it's to do with honour\'

'Why? What's so amazingly special about these people?' asked Trinket.

'You wouldn't understand even if I tried to tell you,' said Whiskers dismissively. 'That's because you are not one of us. You're not a fighting man.'

'Fighting man my arse!' Trinket shot back. 'I wouldn't want to be one anyway!'

The Mu Family Paladins are very special people. You're lucky to have set eyes on one! I was in a bit of a tight spot today with those men of the Satrap's—but luckily Mu's men consider him their deadliest foe too, so this gentleman naturally came to my aid. Then you went shooting under the table and disgraced me with your cheap little tricks!'

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—d'you call that fighting? What d'you think a real fighting man is going to think of that kind of behaviour? 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!'

Whiskers' sense of honour was too outraged for him to appreciate 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 something no proper fighter would ever stoop to, it's worse than knocking a man out 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 done 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 a table was not considered exactly heroic conduct either. But his new sense of shame merely made him angrier.

'Killing's still killing,' he retorted fiercely, 'whether you use lime or a sword. I don't see why one method's any better or more honourable than another. All right, so I'm a brat, I used a low-down, dirty trick: but if I hadn't, you'd be dead by now! 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 to Peking with you, fine, let's go our own separate ways and pretend we never even knew each other!'

Whiskers looked at the bedraggled little boy, covered with mud from the long journey and spattered with blood from all the fighting. And he, Whiskers, was responsible for it all. After all, he'd started the whole thing in Yangzhou. They were a very long way from Yangzhou now. He couldn't possibly abandon him in the middle of nowhere, especially as he owed him his life—twice over. There was no escaping that fact. Didn't he owe him something?

'Oh all right! I'll take you with me to Peking. But this time I'm going to make three conditions.'

'No problem!' chirped Trinket, pleased as punch. And then, showing that his memory of the storytellers' turns of phrase could sometimes be a little idiosyncratic: 'My word is my wand!'

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 do it. But what if someone offends me?'

'Why on earth should anyone want to do that? Second: if you do get into a fight, you're not to bite, or throw lime in your enemy's eyes, or skulk under tables and hack their feet off, or grab them by the balls, or bawl your eyes out if you're beaten, or pretend to be dead. In other words, none of your cheap tricks! No self-respecting fighting man would stoop to a single one of them!'

'So what do I do if I'm getting the worst of it? Sit back and let them beat the hell out of me?'

Tight back: but fight clean! Fight properly! Dirty fighting will just make people laugh at you and despise you as a little street urchin! That kind of thing may have been all right in the whorehouse: but you're with me now!'

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 I know is a few tricks. Without them I wouldn't stand a chance.'

'Since the olden days the Martial Arts have been 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 wanderer 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. You're in the right place at the right time— your luck is in! Just do as I say, try hard, train hard, and one day you'll be a real fighter too! One day you'll be one of us!'

He was looking Trinket straight in the eyes, obviously taking it for granted that the boy would say yes. Trinket shook his head.

'Sorry. I thought we were supposed to be friends: you know, on the same level.'

If I have to start calling you Master, I'll be putting myself down. I'm not having that! You're just trying to pull a fast one on me, that's what you're doing!'

This was too much for Whiskers. Countess people had asked to be his disciple—other members of the Oudaw fraternity, men who wished to learn his dazzling sword technique, moves such as the famous Five Tigers Breaking the Door, for which he was so widely renowned. 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 made the offer of passing 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!'

'You come back tomorrow and beg me to be your disciple three hundred times,' returned Trinket, 'and I swear I'll still say no. If I'm to be your disciple, diat means I'll have to do everything you say. Where's the fun in diat? Anyway, who wants to learn all your measly sword tricks.'

'Very well,' said Whiskers, huffily. 'Don't learn from me then. But when you're pinned to the ground and death's staring you in the face, don't start wishing you'd said yes. It'll be too late!'

'Don't worry, I won't. Why should I? Why should I want to be only as good as you, anyway? Old Black Dragon had you pinned to a tree. And when that cissy of Duke Mu's turned up, Pooh or Boo, or whatever his name was, you just went to pieces. You ended up licking his arse when 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 side of the head. Trinket had been expecting it, and this time instead of bawling he burst out laughing:

That's it, isn't it? It really upset you, didn't it? You're taking it out on me. You were greasing up to him, and he cut you dead—'

Whiskers was beside himself. This boy was incorrigible. It was no good hitting him, or shouting at him, or threatening to dump him on the roadside. He struggled to contain his rage, humphing and snorting and puffing his cheeks out angrily. Then he jerked at the reins of Trinket's horse, which he was still

holding, and cried histrionically:

'Dear horse! Do me a favour, will you? Rear for me, buck for me, dance like a tiger for me! Throw this little devil on the ground and smash in his skull 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 reins, and his horse trotted obediently forward. It certainly didn't try anything on. The boy secretly rejoiced:

'See, he wouldn't teach me to ride—and I've taught myself!'

His thoughts rambled on:

'From now on, wherever we go, I'll just watch Whiskers when he fights. I don't need him to teach me—I've got eyes, haven't I? And I'll watch the people he fights against, and learn from them too. That way I can put together my own style. I'll probably end up a better fighter than he is—why shouldn't I? That chopstick-flicking trick, for example, now there's something worth learning! I wouldn't mind being his disciple—if he ever asked me, which of course he won't!'

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.

'Whatever.'

'And his name is Bo, not Pooh. That gentleman is very highly thought of by the Mu family. He is descended from one of the Four Paladins. So please mind what you say about him!'

'Who gives a stuff about Old Duke Mu and his Merry Men?'

'Please!' protested Whiskers. 'Show a little respect! Let me try and explain a thing or two. When the first Emperor of the Ming dynasty drove the Mongols

out of China, Old Duke Mu Ying was one of his right-hand men. Later he took charge of things in Yunnan Province, and his sons and grandsons have ruled there for generations.'

Trinket slapped his saddle. This rang a bell. He had listened many a time to the tale of the founding of the Ming dynasty.

'Now you tell me! You mean we're talking about the Old Duke Mu, the great hero? Why on earth didn't you say so? That explains everything. But he's been dead and gone for thousands of years. Weren't you overdoing the respect thing a bit?'

'You don't know anything about anything!' expostulated Whiskers. The Old Duke hasn't been dead that long—more like three hundred years actually. And anyway, he's not the only hero in that family; there's the one we call the Young Duke—Mu Tianbo. He was with the Ming Prince Gui when he had to flee to Yunnan. That was only a few years ago, when Satrap Wu and his Tartar friends chased Prince Gui right down into the south-west, through Yunnan and into Burma. The Burmese cowards tried to murder our Prince, and Young Duke Mu died fighting them. He was a true hero.'

'You should've told me!' protested Trinket. 'If I'd known your Aladdin was connected with that lot, I'd have been a bit more respectful myself.'

'I should think so. As I told you, he's descended from one of the four loyal generals, the original Four Paladins, that fell with the Old Duke. That's one of the reasons I look up to him. And then of course he saved my life—'

'So did I, remember,' put in Trinket. 'But I don't see you doing much looking up in my direction . . .'

Trinket the Storyteller

'Of course we all know about Old Duke Mu,' continued Trinket. 'Everyone's heard the story of how he blew the horn on the Mongol rear, and drove back the Elephant Rocket Brigade—'

'He what?'

Trinket had a good laugh.

'See! All you know is how to lick Aladdin's arse! You don't really know the first thing about Old Duke Mu, the real hero! What position he held under the Founder of the Ming, for example?'

'He was one of his top generals. Everyone knows that.'

'Obviously—he's hardly likely to have been a foot-soldier, is he? The Founder had six top generals: Duke Xu, Duke Chang—do you know who the other four were?'

Whiskers was just an ordinary peasant turned outlaw and swordsman, and knew nothing but the bare bones of the story. Trinket, on the other hand, had heard it told so many times in the Yangzhou tea-houses that he knew the whole thing off pat. 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 tea-house storytellers found that their historical accounts of the founding of the Ming, in particular the defeat of the Mongol Tartars, went down extremely 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 Founder's leading generals became objects of veneration for the tea-house habitués. The storytellers always laid it on thick when describing the slaughter of the Mongols. It worked every time. The audience loved it.

Trinket was delighted to have exposed Whiskers' ignorance. He now reeled off the names of the four 'other generals', while agreeing to spare him the details of their full tides (which he had himself forgotten). Whiskers breathed a sigh of relief.

'What about blowing the horn to drive back 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". And it goes like this.'

Trinket proceeded to embark on a description of the Founding of the Ming, relating how the Great Founder had reconquered all of China from the Mongols, except the south-west corner. The Provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou were still in the hands of the Mongols, under the man who called himself the Prince of Liang.

'I can't remember his Mongol name,' declared Trinket. 'Something like Gululaluhu. He was a nephew of the last Mongol Emperor, anyway, and he refused to surrender.'

The Prince's actual name, which Trinket had genuinely

forgotten, was Basalawarmi. But Whiskers knew no better. Trinket warmed to his task:

'So the broth of the Great Founder was kindled, and he sent an army of six hundred thousand men—infantry and cavalry— under the command of Old Duke Mu. They reached the borders of Yunnan, where they found the Mongol troops waiting for them, under their commander, a man named Delmek, a great giant of a man a hundred feet tall, with a head the size of a bean—'

'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 diundering 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 Old Duke Mu's troops were so terrified they fell off their horses and tumbled into the river and were drowned. The Old Duke foresaw a catastrophe if this continued; he had visions of his entire army falling into the river, and so he racked his brains for a stratagem.'

Trinket's conversation was normally a mishmash of uncouth urchin-like street language, liberally spiced with references to basic bodily functions. But somehow in retelling the story of Old Duke Mu both his manner and his language had been completely transformed into a passable imitation of the storyteller—complete with the occasional garbled proverb. On he went:

The Old Duke 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, took aim, and sent it whizzing straight through the air at his target. Old Duke 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 arrow homing in on him, and only just managed to duck his head out of the way in time. As he did so he heard a ghastly cry from the warriors drawn up behind

him. Turning, he beheld not

one, but ten of his finest commanders struck through the heart. The Duke's arrow had gone straight through the chest of the first, out of his back and into the second, and so on, through ten men.'

'Impossible!' cried Whiskers, shaking his head in utter disbelief. 'Even the best archer in the world could do no such thing!'

'Old Duke Mu,' pronounced Trinket solemnly, 'was better than the best 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 flowering rage when he saw how his men had been sent to their deaths, and decided to return like for like. He drew his great bow and sent one of his arrows winging towards Old Duke Mu. "Splendid!" cried the Duke, 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 a brilliant ruse suggested itself to the Old Duke. "Watch me!" he shouted. "Third goose from the end, left eye!" And as he said this he sent an arrow whizzing through the sky towards the flock of geese. Delmek marvelled secretly to himself: "To hit the bird at all would be extraordinary! To strike it in the eye would be nothing short of a miracle!" He gazed up into the sky, and at that precise instant Old Duke 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 perfect feint! Call East, Strike West! Oldest trick in the book!'

'It seems, however, that Delmek was not fated to die, ' went on Trinket. The first arrow caught him in his left eye, sending him flying to the ground on his back, and 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 became known as "the day Old Duke 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. Old Duke 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 Old Duke Mu's brilliant mind thought of a new plan at once. 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 wasn't going to credit Whiskers with any knowledge.) 'It was four others. The four , ' mentioned stayed with the Duke.'

'Oh,' nodded Whiskers. 'I see.'

'So, Old Duke Mu now gave orders for the troops still with him to start creating a great hullabaloo by way of a diversion. A fleet of little boats and rafts was to be got ready and launched, and one thousand men and a certain number of horses were to make as if they were preparing for a crossing. The Mongols fell for this completely and let loose another great volley of arrows. Old Duke 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 speared that day!'

'Come on!' cried Whiskers. 'Fish maybe; but prawns? They're much too small.

And turtles and crabs are too well protected by their shells.'

'If you don't believe me,' insisted Trinket, 'try it out. Go to the market, buy a turtle, a crab, and a prawn, string them up and shoot 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, 'Old Duke Mu's troops fished eighteen enormous, dead, whiskered turtles out of the river, cooked them up and ate them—'

'You little rascal!' laughed Whiskers. 'You won't leave me alone, will you! Go on: how did the Old Duke cross the river?'

'Well: he repeated this trick several times, sounding the drums, and making a great show of crossing, until the Mongol archers had fired off the last of their arrows. Then he heard what he was waiting for—a great blast on the horn coming from behind the Mongol lines. He knew that his special force had crossed 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 their little fleet across with all their might, and went into the attack. The Mongols could hear the enemy troops bearing down on them from the rear, their arrows were used up, their commander had been struck down, their morale was collapsing. When Old Duke Mu rode forward at the head of his men, they simply panicked and fled in every direction. The Old Duke 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: "It's not me you want! I'm just Whisk—" But the Old Duke 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 to the four commanders at his side. 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 too much hairy Tartar meat the turtles grew hairs themselves and turned into a new breed known as the Whiskered Turtle . . .'

Poor Whiskers had a shrewd idea that Trinket was making fun of him again. He

humphed but lacked the confidence 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,' continued Trinket, 'Old Duke Mu pressed on towards the Mongol Prince's 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.

'Old Duke Mu,' Trinket went on, 'was a merciful man. He wanted to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. So he declared a three-day truce, to give the enemy a chance to surrender.'

'And Heaven rewarded him and his heirs!' commented Whiskers sententiously, slapping his thigh.

'Anyway,' continued Trinket, impatiently, 'that very evening the Old Duke was sitting in his tent reading the Spring and Autumn Annals by lamplight—'

'I thought it was General Guan Yu in the Three Kingdoms who did that?' interposed Whiskers, dimly recognizing Trinket's source.

'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 erudition (there being no such thing as the Summer and Winter Annals).

'Anyway,' Trinket went on, 'as he sat there, the Old Duke felt the need to relieve his 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 roaring, and it certainly wasn't a horse whinnying. As he heard it, the Old Duke had a deep premonition about the sound ..."

Well?' asked Whiskers, enthralled. 'What was it, making the sound?'

'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. The Old Duke, when he heard it, immediately abandoned all thought of relieving himself, and returned the chamberpot carefully to the table.'

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, 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 set, while those who caught none were to be court-martialled. The General 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 Old Duke's plan, and not divulged to a soul. His generals simply obeyed his orders implicitly. Any questions and the Old Duke 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 Old Duke 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, Old Duke Mu handed the second arrow to General Bo (that's the ancestor of the man you were so impressed with just now) and ordered him to take twenty thousand troops and 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 Old Duke 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 really be 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 Old Duke's specifications. He 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. He pulled me to 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-demons are pouring out of it—hundreds of them!" The Old Duke let out a great peal of laughter. "What do you mean, long-nosed cow-demons! Go back and bring me some better intelligence than that!" Off went the scout once more.'

'What are long-nosed cow-demons?' asked Whiskers.

'I didn't think you'd have heard of them, ' 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 agree?'

Whiskers nodded his head and gave a sort of grunt in agreement, struggling to put together the picture.

'Well, the Old Duke muttered to himself what an ignorant fool the scout was; the sort to mistake a camel for a horse with a humpback, or an elephant for a cow-demon 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 . . .'

This was just the reaction the Yangzhou storytellers hoped for when they recounted this old chestnut. Trinket had spun the yarn out most effectively.

'So Old Duke Mu marshalled his troops. They saw a cloud of dust rise 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 feeling nothing from 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 before. At the sight of them they simply panicked and started whimpering and moaning pathetically 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!' he muttered gravely.

'But Old Duke 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: 'Release the mice!' Ten thousand of the little creatures were let loose all at once, the ground was literally thick with them, a river of mice, rushing straight towards the elephants. You see, elephants are not the least bit afraid of lions or bears or tigers or panthers, but they 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 terror 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 falling headlong into the great trench that had been dug that night. Then it was that Old Duke 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 stopped to explain to the incredulous Whiskers that the Ming artillery had been equipped with pyrotechnic cannon and mortars, and had been put on the alert the previous evening. This deafening display of theirs shattered whatever remnant of courage the elephants had left. Trinket then went on with the story.

The Mongol army was now crushed to a bloody pulp beneath their own terrified, stampeding beasts. Old Duke Mu gave the order to advance, and with a great cry the Ming army followed the elephants back into the city. The Mongol Prince, Gululaluhu,' as Trinket insisted on calling him, 'was on the city ramparts with his favourite concubine, drinking himself silly, waiting for news

of the destruction of the Ming army. Imagine his horror when he saw the very creatures he had so confidently unleashed crashing their way back into his city. "Gu-lu-wa-ba-tu\ Wu-li-vcu!" 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 halfway down. "Lord save me!" he cried. "I'm neither up nor

down!"

'How come he was suddenly speaking Chinese?'

'He wasn't,' answered Trinket, a little curdy. 'But I knew you wouldn't understand, so I translated it for you . . . Meanwhile Old Duke Mu rode in at the head of his men, and one of the first things he saw was this funny old chap 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 gone and pissed himself, and then pooped in his pants

Whiskers laughed heartily.

Trinket, you tell a rattling good yarn! Old Duke 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 fallen to the Elephant Rocket Brigade, and no mistake!

'Of course they would,' declared Trinket emphatically. 'And just as he had to rely on his Mouse Militia, so I had to rely on my Volley of Lime . . . Great minds think alike, eh?'

Wo!' cried Whiskers, shaking his head vigorously. 'All's fair in war, but not in man-to-man combat: in the Brotherhood of River and Lake 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 also 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.

CHAPTER 2

In which Whiskers and Trinket reach Peking, and encounter a Queer Old Eunuch

Wrestlers and Eunuchs

A few days later the two travelling companions drew near to the walls of Peking. It was noon as they entered the city. Whiskers warned Trinket to be extremely careful: the Capital was alive with Government spies, and he must on no account betray their identity.

'I'm not giving anything away, ' protested Trinket. 'You're the one who needs to be careful. You're the one who you said you were looking for a fight with Oboi. Well go ahead—just knock on his door. . . '

Whiskers responded with a wry smile. The whole idea of challenging Oboi had been a wild impulse of the moment. The former Regent (as he knew only too well) would never waste his time taking on a run-of-the-mill outlaw like himself. Whiskers was not a bad fighter, in an average sort of way, but he was certainly no match for the Manchu Champion. He had felt obliged to go through the motions (if only so as not to lose face with Trinket, who had witnessed his earlier boasting) and had therefore pressed on to Peking. Now that they had arrived he thought he might as well show the lad the sights for a couple of weeks, eat, drink, and

generally have a good time. Then he would pack him off back to Yangzhou. Oboi would undoubtedly refuse the challenge—the important thing was that it should be that way round. Then Trinket would have no grounds for questioning his courage. And if, by some unforeseen chance, Oboi did want a fight, why then, by thunder, he'd give him one!

The two of them came to a little inn in the Western City, and Whiskers ordered wine and a light snack. They had just started drinking when an ill-assorted pair in strange garb walked into the room, one of them an older man in his sixties, the other a young fellow of twelve or thirteen. Trinket could not figure out at all what sort of people they were, but Whiskers knew at a glance that they were both Palace Eunuchs.

The older one was sallow faced, stooped, and was constantly coughing. He seemed a very sick man. The younger eunuch helped him to a table.

'Bring me some wine!' the old eunuch half wheezed, half squeaked.

The waiter leapt into action. Clearly this was a man to be obeyed.

The old eunuch now brought out a little package, opened it, fastidiously scooped a tiny quantity of its contents on to the nail of his little finger, and tipped it into his wine. He replaced the package in his inside pocket, lifted the wine to his lips, and drank it slowly down. A few seconds later his entire body suddenly went into uncontrollable spasms.

'What's the matter?' gasped the terrified waiter.

'Stand back!' snapped the young eunuch. 'And mind your own business!'

The waiter simpered and scraped, and backed smartly out of the way. But he kept a close eye on the two of them. The old eunuch was now leaning with both hands on the table, his teeth chattering loudly, his whole body twitching with ever increasing violence. Soon the table itself began to rock, and the chopsticks on it started falling to the ground.

Even the young eunuch seemed worried now.

'Goong-goong!' he cried. 'Take another dose!'

(Goong-goong was the term by which Court Eunuchs were addressed.)

He fumbled for the package inside his master's gown, extracted it, and was

about to open it when the old man wheezed:

'No . . . No more ...

He seemed extremely agitated. The young eunuch clutched the packet tightly in his hand, not daring to open it.

At this precise moment there were noisy footsteps at the door, and in came seven hulking great fellows in leather leggings, all of them stripped to the waist, their pigtailed coiled on top of their heads. Their bodies seemed to have been smeared all over with some sort of animal fat. Their skin glistened, and gave off a repulsive odour. They had rippling, sinewy torsos, and dark, hairy chests. Their hands were great fat paws, ending in chunky stumps of

fingers.

Wine!' they roared, seating themselves around two tables. 'Quickly! And bring us some roast beef and good plump chicken—

pronto!'

'Straight away!' panted the waiter, and set about frantically laying their table with cups and chopsticks. What would you like to eat, sirs?

'Are you deaf?' bellowed one of the men angrily. One of the others reached out a hand, grabbed the waiter by the scruff of the neck, and lifted him clean into the air. He kept him dangling there helplessly for a moment, squawking in terror, while the other men guffawed appreciatively. Then he sent him flying through the door. 'Yeooow!' cried the wretched waiter, as he landed with a thump on the ground.

The men roared with laughter again.

'See that!' Whiskers muttered under his breath to Trinket. 'Now that's a classic wrestling throw. Dump your opponent well clear, and that way he can't spring back up at you.' 'Can you do that sort of thing?' asked Trinket. 'It's not something I've ever learnt. Hard styles of kungfu like that are no use if you're up against a real fighter, someone who knows what he's doing.'

'Could you beat them?' Whiskers smiled.

Thugs like that are not even worth fighting!' 'You'd be one against seven,' said Trinket. They'd make mincemeat of you.'

They'd get nowhere near me!

'Hey! Big boys!' yelled Trinket all of a sudden. 'My friend here says he can take the seven of you on single-handed and give you a licking—'

'Stop it!' growled Whiskers. 'Stop stirring things up . . .'

But that was precisely what Trinket enjoyed doing most in the world! He didn't like the way they had treated the waiter, hurling him out of the door for no reason at all. So when Whiskers started boasting, he thought he'd make him teach them a lesson.

The seven turned as one man and glared at Whiskers and Trinket.

'What was that you said, tiny tot?'

'My friend here says you shouldn't have done that to the waiter. He says you're a bunch of cowards, and why don't you take him on if any of you've got the guts

One of them was already advancing towards Whiskers, glowering.

Turtle-spawn! Did you say that?'

Whiskers knew that these men were all trained Manchu wrestlers. He wasn't looking for trouble. But somehow he only had to set eyes on a Manchu to feel his blood boil. The man's taunt was the last straw. He picked up a jug of wine and hurled it across the room, straight at his face. The man put out his hand, but the sheer intensity of Whiskers' throw sent the jug crashing with such force into his forearm, that he went howling away in pain. One of his comrades ran forward and this time Whiskers delivered a well-placed kick in the midriff. Manchu wrestlers seldom use their legs and the man was unable to dodge in time, and was sent flying through the air.

With renewed cries of 'Lousy turtle-spawn!' the remaining five Manchus now surged forward. Whiskers moved like a flash, using a dazzling variety of grapples, holds, and punches, landing first elbow and then fist, and in a matter of moments he had four of them flat on the floor. The fifth (and last) Manchu turned and caught Whiskers' fist on his shoulder; then he turned again, lunged, and seized Whiskers by the back. He lifted him up, spun him round, and was about to dash him head first on to the stone steps, when Whiskers locked his legs, uttered a couple of fearsome cries, and let loose with both feet, kicking with all his might at the man's chest. The Manchu gasped, blood spurted from his mouth, and his hands fell limp at his sides.

As he tumbled to the ground, Whiskers planted both feet firmly on his chest. Then he swivelled and with both fists lunged diagonally at the wine-jug victim, thumping him hard in the back, and noisily smashing in several of his ribs. Whirlwind in the

Willows Wdb Uic imiii^ ^. „——

and began hauling himself painfully up. Whiskers grabbed hold of Trinket: 'You little brat! You certainly know how to stir up trouble!

Let's get out of here!'

The two of them headed for the door. They had hardly taken two strides when they saw the old eunuch standing hunched up in the doorway. Whiskers gave him a little push on his right arm, intending to shove him out of the way, but his hand had no sooner touched the old eunuch's shoulder than Whiskers' whole body reverberated with a violent shock, the uncontrollable force of which sent him staggering back several paces. His left side collided sharply with a table, which toppled over at once, and the sheer momentum of his fall brought Trinket crashing down with him.

'Ow!' yelled the boy. That hurt!'

Whiskers summoned all of his strength and managed to haul himself upright. His whole body was still tingling, as if he'd been badly scalded. He couldn't believe it. The old eunuch was just standing there, hunched up and coughing, for all the world as if

nothing had happened.

Whiskers knew he was up against a being of truly extraordinary powers, a practitioner perhaps of some black art. No ordinary opponent, however transcendent his prowess in the Martial Arts, could ever have made that feeble little push of his rebound in Whiskers' face with such prodigious force. There were similar techniques in the standard Schools, but they all involved equal degrees of thrust. None of them could transform a little push into the force of an earthquake! Whiskers turned around as fast as he could, grabbed the howling Trinket and headed for the rear of the inn.

He had taken no more than three steps when he heard a cough and suddenly there was the old eunuch again, standing right in front of him. Desperately Whiskers blundered on, trying his utmost to force his way through. He feinted throwing himself at his opponent, but in fact he threw himself backwards through the air. As he landed he felt a light pressure on his back, spun round

with reversed left fist to strike back, only to find himself punching thin air and stumbling heavily forwards, on top of the prostrate bodies of two of his earlier opponents.

Luckily they were both rather bulky individuals, since Whiskers landed on them with a resounding thud. The human

mattress cushioned his fall, and saved him from major injury. The two men had broken their legs and were incapable of standing, but their arms were intact, and they were able to get a firm hold on him. Whiskers tried to fight back, but found that he had lost all the strength in both arms and legs: a vital point in his back had been blocked, effectively paralysing him.

He lay there on his belly, unable to see what was going on above him. He just heard the old eunuch coughing away, and wheezing petulantly at his young attendant:

'Another gram and I'd have been done for . . .'

More coughing.

'Silly child!'

'I'm sorry, Goong-goong! I'll know better next time!'

'What next time?' grunted the old eunuch. 'I may not live that long . . .'

More coughing.

'Who's this man with the whiskers, Goong-goong?' asked the younger eunuch. 'Looks like some sort of oudaw to me . . .'

The old eunuch questioned the Manchus:

'Which Prince's household are you lot from?'

'We're from Prince Zheng's, Goong-goong,' replied one of them. 'We're most grateful to you, sir, for stopping this brigand from getting away. We'd have looked pretty foolish otherwise.'

The old eunuch humphed.

'Just a matter of luck . . .'

More coughing.

'No need to make a big fuss. Just have him and his young friend sent along to the Imperial Catering Department, and tell them to lock them both up. Say it's by order of Hai Dafu.'

The men chorused their obedience. The eunuch turned to his attendant:

'Well? What are you waiting for? Call for a sedan chair. Do you expect me to walk in this state?'

'Straight away, Goong-goong!'

The boy rushed off, and Hai Goong-goong leant over the table, still coughing.

Trinket, meanwhile, seeing Whiskers held fast, decided to try and escape while he still could. He slid along the wall, sneaked out into the back courtyard of the inn, and was just congratulating himself on having escaped unnoticed when the old eunuch, with one flick of a finger, sent a chopstick flying through the air. It

embedded itself in Trinket's right thigh. The boy lost all sensation in his right leg, and slumped to the ground, cursing:

'A pox on you, you filthy turtle!'

(He would have said a lot more, but one of the men was glowering at him in a decidedly unfriendly fashion.)

Presently a sedan chair was carried into the inn and the young eunuch attendant arrived to help his master into it. The sedan was carried out again, with the attendant following behind

it.

Four of the seven Manchu wrestlers had only been slightly

wounded, and these now bound Whiskers and Trinket securely. As they tightened the rope around Whiskers, they kept punching and kicking him. At first Trinket let off a storm of abuse at them for so maltreating his friend, but a good box on the ears soon taught him to hold his tongue. Two more chairs were sent for, the prisoners were blindfolded and gagged, bundled aboard, and carried out. This was only the second time that Trinket had ever ridden in a sedan, the first being when he was seven years old and his mother had taken him to burn incense in a temple. He tried to derive some comfort from the

situation.

'It's a fucking age since I had such a comfy ride! Good of these boys to show old Trink a little respect!'

But when he reflected on the true nature of the journey, and that he might in fact be accompanying Whiskers to the execution-ground, he began shivering with fear.

It was pitch-black in the sedan, and the journey seemed to last for ever. From time to time the bearers would stop, and when they were challenged to state their business one of them would reply:

To the Imperial Catering Department. Orders of Hai Goong-goong.'

Trinket had no idea what sort of a place the Imperial Catering Department might be, but clearly this eunuch Hai Dafu was a person of great influence. The mere mention of his name seemed to open gate upon gate. Once the curtain of the sedan was parted and a voice cried out, 'Why, it's only a kid!'

'And you're only a tadpole!' thought Trinket, and would have said so, had he not been rather efficiently gagged.

On they went, and Trinket was just starting to doze off when the sedan was deposited on the ground and one of the bearers called out: 'Prisoners for Hai Goong-goong!'

'He's resting, ' replied a childish voice. 'Just put them in there.'

Trinket recognized the voice as that of the young attendant they had seen at the inn.

'We'll be on our way now, ' said the bearer. 'We'll give His Highness Prince Zheng a report of what happened, and I'm sure he'll be sending someone round to thank Hai Goong-goong.'

'Very well. Give His Highness my master's best regards.'

After that, Whiskers and Trinket were dragged out of their chairs and bundled into a room.

Whiskers, Trinket, and Hai Qoong-goong

The bearers' footsteps died into the distance. In its place the two prisoners

heard the sound of the old eunuch coughing, and Trinket could smell the pungent fumes of some herbal decoction bubbling away.

'Looks like the old bugger's going to snuff it any day now!' he thought to himself. 'Why couldn't it have been yesterday! Now he's got us and he's most likely going to send us off as an advance party to Hell!'

It was deathly quiet apart from the occasional burst of coughing from the old eunuch. Trinket's hands and feet were still bound, and his fingers and toes were quite numb. It was becoming most uncomfortable, and to make matters worse it seemed as though their captor had utterly forgotten about them.

After what felt like an eternity, the old eunuch could be heard, speaking very softly:

'Laurel?'

'So that's your name, you puny little brat!' thought Trinket.

'Goong-goong!' replied the boy.

'Untie the prisoners. I want to question them, '

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

Trinket heard the sound of something ripping, and guessed it to be Whiskers' ropes being cut. Then his own hands and feet were set free, and his blindfold was removed. He blinked and looked around him. They were in a large room, sparsely furnished: a table, a chair, and on the table a teapot and a cup. The old eunuch was sitting slumped on the chair. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes half

closed. It was already dark, and candles had been lit in two brass candle-holders on the wall, casting a flickering light on his sallow

face.

Laurel took the gag from Whiskers' mouth, then began to

remove Trinket's.

The boy can stay gagged for a while longer!' ordered the old

eunuch. 'He only ever talks filth.'

Trinket's hands were free, but he did not dare remove the gag himself. The unexpressed abuse that now silted up in his mouth was of a degree of filth unimaginable even to the old

eunuch.

'Bring in a chair for him,' ordered Old Hai, and Laurel went to the next room to fetch a chair for Whiskers, who sat down on it. Trinket gathered that he did not qualify for a seat, and squatted unceremoniously on the ground.

Tell me something of yourself, ' began the old eunuch, addressing Whiskers almost politely. 'Your name, and who your teachers were. I was quite impressed by some of your moves. Not bad. Certainly not part of our Northern tradition, '

'My name is Mao, Whiskers Mao, also known as Eighteen. I come from Taizhou, in the north of Zhejiang Province, and I studied in the Five Tigers School of swordsmanship, ' Hai nodded.

'I have heard of you, sir. In your time I understand that you have caused quite a bit of trouble around Yangzhou, what with fights and brawls, and escaping from prison, and killing guards, and one thing and another . . . ' 'You could say so, '

Whiskers had to acknowledge the superiority of this wheezing, consumptive old half-man after the extraordinary demonstration of powers he had witnessed. He was reluctant to challenge him

openly.

'And what are you doing up here in the Capital, if I may ask?'

continued Hai.

'I'm your prisoner, so why not just do whatever it is you want to do with me and get it over and done with?' replied Whiskers. 'Kill me, chop me up; I'm a man, I can take it. But don't expect me to name names. If you think I'm going to sing for you, you've made

a serious mistake, '

Old Hai smiled a barely perceptible smile.

'Dearie me no! Everyone knows what a fearless fellow you

are! I wouldn't dream of trying to force you to, as you put it, "sing" for me! I'd simply heard that you were one of Satrap Wu's closest and most trusted confidants and thought—'

Whiskers cut him short angrily:

'Me, mix with that dog? Are you trying to insult me, are you doubting my honour?'

The old eunuch coughed several times, and then an inscrutable smile stole across his face.

The Satrap has given invaluable service to the Manchu cause, and my Master sets great store by him. If you were one of the Satrap's confidants, I'm sure we could see our way to letting you off lightly—for his sake.'

'Well I ain't!' bellowed Whiskers. 'I've had no truck with the dirty scum, and I don't want any favours from him now. If you want to kill me, go ahead. But don't dishonour my ancestors by linking my family name with that traitor!'

Trinket had grown up at a time in China's history when the common people in every street remembered only too clearly Satrap Wu's role in betraying their country to the Manchus. They referred to him by a variety of names—none of them complimentary: traitor to the Ming Imperial House, lackey of the Manchu invaders, scum, rogue, knave, running dog—he knew them all.

This old boy seems prepared to let us off if only Whiskers will just say he's one of the Satrap's men,' he thought to himself. 'But Whiskers is too proud and stubborn to do it. Pride's all very well, but it won't save our necks. No hero knowingly puts his head in a noose, as they say. I can't see why we don't just make something up, tell a whopper, pretend that we're trusted servants of the Satrap, or whatever you like, any old story, so long as it gets us out of here! Then we'll have all the time in the world to curse the Satrap and eighteen generations of his ancestors, all the way back to eternity!'

He was getting a bit of feeling back in his hands and feet now, and held a sleeve in front of his face while he removed the gag from his mouth. The old eunuch was too busy studying Whiskers to notice Trinket's manoeuvres.

'Well, I must have been wrong. I took you for one of the Satrap's men, on a mission to the Capital.'

'I'm done for anyway,' thought Whiskers to himself. 'Here I am, a prisoner in

the Capital, at the very feet of the Tartar Emperor—I'm finished! I might as well go out with a bang. At least

then I'll be famous for something when I die! Death is a small price to pay for my honour!

As he reached the end of this brief train of thought, he saw Trinket staring at him fit to burst, frantically trying to attract his attention.

'Very well then,' announced Whiskers loudly, ignoring (or misinterpreting) his young friend's agitation, 'I'll tell you the real reason I'm here! I've heard all manner of tales among the kungfu Brothers in the South, about this Oboi fellow, the so-called Manchu Champion—how he can knock a cow cold with his bare fists, take on tigers and panthers single-handed, and so on and so forth. Well, I for one don't believe a word of it! And I've come here to prove it, to challenge him to single combat!'

The old eunuch gasped.

'Fight Lord Oboi? You must be out of your mind! He is one of the great powers of the land; he is second only to the Emperor and the Empress Dowager! Why, you could live here in the Capital for ten years and still not have the tiniest chance of setting eyes on him, let alone fighting with him!'

Whiskers reflected a moment. This old eunuch, whom he had originally suspected of dabbling in magic, was clearly a master of some highly advanced and esoteric School of Martial Arts. The paralysis he had so effortlessly inflicted, by merely touching a vital point on Whiskers' back, was proof enough of this. His own strength was only now gradually returning. The old eunuch, to judge from his manner and his accent, was himself almost certainly a Manchu. If he, Whiskers, was incapable of defeating this wheezing, consumptive gelding, what chance had he of ever beating the Manchu Champion? His spirit had been so strong and defiant back at Victory Hill, when the odds had been so heavily against him and he'd taken on the Manchu guards. But somehow now, when confronted with this pathetic wreck of a eunuch, his courage utterly failed him. He heaved a deep sigh.

'Well,' asked Hai, 'are you still planning to fight Lord Oboi?'

Tell me,' asked Whiskers, 'is he as good a fighter as you are, sir?'

Hai smiled a strange little smile:

'Lord Oboi is a mighty General and a great Minister of State. He is a man of

untold wealth and rank. I am but a poor, worthless wretch. He is as high above me as the sky is above the earth. There can be no comparison.'

He had spoken of rank and wealth; but he had cunningly avoided any reference to Oboi's ability as a fighter.

'If he was even half as good as you, ' said Whiskers, 'I shouldn't stand a chance against him.'

'You do yourself an injustice, ' said Hai, still smiling. Tell me, how would you compare my own ability with that of Helmsman Chen?'

Whiskers started.

'You . . . you . . . what do you mean?'

'I'm asking about your leader, Helmsman Chen. I've heard he practises some very advanced and rare styles of fighting, such as the Blood-Curdling Snatch. Unfortunately I have never had the honour of meeting him.'

'Nor have I, ' said Whiskers. 'I am not a Triad member myself. I have heard that he is a very skilful fighter—but exactly what style he uses, I do not know.'

Hai sighed.

'I could tell that you were a man of true spirit, my friend! What a shame it is that you are not serving the Emperor's cause. A man like you could so easily become a Governor, or a General. Instead of which you join ranks with rebels like the Triads . . . '

The old eunuch shook his head, and continued:

These people will come to no good. Take my advice: step back before it is too late. Leave the Triads, '

'I... I'm not. . . one of them, ' stammered Whiskers. Then suddenly he raised his voice. 'But that doesn't mean I'm against them! I would like to join their ranks one day; it's just that until now I've had no one to sponsor me. There's a saying among the Brothers of River and Lake:

Who's never yet met Chenjinnan Can't call himself a proper man.

Why, I believe you must have heard it too, sir. As for myself, I'm a Chinese to the last drop of my blood, and though I may not be a Triad member, their

battle cry is mine! Death to the Tartars! Long live the Ming! Do you really think I'd serve the Tartars and turn traitor myself? Kill me, and stop wasting everyone's time! My crimes are great, I deserve to die. My one regret will be that I never lived to see the Helmsman with my own eyes!

'I can understand why you Chinese should resent the Manchu conquest, ' said the eunuch. 'I even respect you for it. And because

you're a man of spirit, I'm going to spare your life. I'll give you a chance to see your Helmsman before you die! And the sooner the better. You can tell him Hai Dafu would like to meet him. I'd like to learn his Blood-Curdling Snatch, and see if it really is as deadly as they say. Tell him to come to Peking as soon as he can. There may not be much life left in this old body. If he does not come soon, I may never see him.

Who's never yet met Chmjinnan Can't call himself a proper man.

Ha ha! Is this Helmsman of yours really such a hero? Is he really so deeply revered by your Brotherhood of River and Lake?

Whiskers was so completely taken aback by this offer of freedom that he stood up and remained there for a moment rooted to the spot.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' snapped the old eunuch. 'Don't you want to go?'

'Yes!' said Whiskers finally, taking Trinket by the hand. He wanted to utter some final words of defiance but couldn't think what to say.

The old eunuch sighed:

'Have your long years as an outlaw taught you so little? Are you going away without offering me anything at all?'

Whiskers sensed what was coming, and gnashed his teeth:

'My apologies. Quite right of you to point it out. Hey, young man, ' he said, turning to Laurel, 'lend me your knife a moment will you, and I will cut off my left hand for your master.'

He pointed to the dagger at the young eunuch's side. It was about eight inches long. Laurel had used it to cut through their bonds.

'I'm afraid that won't be enough, ' said Old Hai. Whiskers went grey in the face:

'You want my right hand too?'

Hai nodded.

'Yes—I want both of your hands. And, I had thought of asking you for both eyes . . .' He coughed. Then I thought you'd probably want to see Helmsman Chen properly. So I've decided to let you keep the right one. But I must ask you for the left.'

Whiskers retreated a couple of paces and let go of Trinket. He raised his left hand menacingly, high in the air, palm upwards, with his right hand at an angle to it: this was the stance known as Rhinoceros Gazing at the Moon.

'So you want to blind me in one eye!' he thought to himself. 'You want to cut off both my hands and leave me a useless cripple. I may as well die fighting!'

Old Hai wasn't even looking at him. He just went on coughing, and his cough became more and more violent until he was gasping for breath, and his usually sallow face was red and swollen.

Take another dose, Goong-goong!' cried little Laurel.

Old Hai shook his head, and carried on coughing. Finally he stood up and gripped his neck with his left hand. He seemed to be in extreme pain.

'This is my chance!' thought Whiskers, and seizing Trinket by the hand again he made a dash for the door.

Old Hai grasped the edge of the table between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, snapped off a piece of wood, and flicked it through the air. Whiskers was in mid-stride when the missile struck him on the right thigh, at the vital point known as Crouching Rabbit. The leg went dead instantly and crumpled up beneath him. There was another crack of breaking wood, and another missile flew through the air, striking his other leg on the corresponding point. As Whiskers crashed to the ground, dragging Trinket with him, another fit of coughing racked the old eunuch's body.

A Drug, a Dagger, and a Qetaway

'Just half a dose!' begged little Laurel. 'Half a dose won't do any harm.'

'All right. But just... a little . . . Too much and I'm done for.'

'Yes, Goong-goong!' Laurel extracted the little package from his master's inside pocket and hurried into the inner room to fetch a cup of wine. He scooped up a small amount of the drug on his fingernail.

'Too . . . much . . . ' gasped Old Hai.

'Yes, Goong-goong,' said Laurel, tipping a fraction back into the package and watching his old master for a sign of approval. Old Hai nodded, before bending over double and coughing loudly again. All of a sudden he shot forward, collapsed on all fours, and began writhing on the ground.

Little Laurel rushed to his side in a state of great distress.

'Goong-goong! Goong-goong!' he cried. 'What's the matter?'

'I'm . . • boiling!' gasped the old eunuch. 'Help . . . me . . . into the tub ... so I can . . . cool down . . .'

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

Laurel heaved him up and the two of them stumbled together into the inner room. Soon came the sound of a big splash.

Trinket was observing all of this intently. He crept stealthily to his feet and tiptoed to the table. Using the nail of his little finger he tipped three more doses of the old eunuch's drug into the wine, then two more for good measure. He folded the little package up carefully and then deliberately opened it again, thereby removing all trace of his actions. From the inner room he heard Laurel's voice:

'Is that better now, Goong-goong? You shouldn't stay in for too long.'

'I'm so ... hot... I feel as if I'm on fire!' wheezed the old eunuch.

Trinket spotted the little dagger on the table. He took it, went back to where Whiskers still lay immobilized on the floor, and crouched down beside him.

Presendy there was the sound of more splashing, and Old Hai soon reappeared through the doorway, dripping, and leaning heavily on Laurel. He was still coughing. Laurel picked up the cup and held it to his master's lips but Old Hai's coughing simply would not stop. Trinket's heart was in his mouth.

'It would be ... much better if I could ... manage without ...' panted Old Hai.

'Yes, Goong-goong!' said little Laurel, placing the cup back on the table. He folded the package up carefully, and put it back in the old eunuch's pocket. Soon afterwards Hai was seized by another violent fit of coughing and pointed to the cup. Laurel picked it up again and held it to his lips. Old Hai drank it down in one gulp.

Whiskers gasped involuntarily. Hai looked at him:

'If you think . . . you're getting out of here alive . . .'

There was a sudden crash, and the chair collapsed under the eunuch, who threw himself on to the table with such prodigious force that both he and the table went crashing to the floor.

'Goong-goong! Goong-goong!' cried the distraught Laurel, rushing forward and turning his back for one crucial moment on Whiskers and Trinket. In that instant Trinket sprang nimbly forward, raised the dagger, and drove it with all his might into the young eunuch's back. Little Laurel gave a scarcely audible groan and sank dead to the ground, beside the writhing body of his master.

Trinket raised the dagger: a second time, and held it poised above the old eunuch's back. Hai suddenly looked up and croaked:

'Lau . . . Laurel. . . Something's wrong with my medicine!'

Trinket froze with terror. Hai managed to sit up and turn around, and took hold of Trinket's left wrist:

'Laurel,' he gasped, 'are you sure . . . you didn't make a mistake?'

'Quite sure,' mumbled Trinket. His left wrist was held in a vice-like grip, and a shock of-pain went searing through him. He drew back his right hand, that still held the dagger.

'Go . . . and light the candles . . .'

 croaked the old eunuch. 'It's pitch-black in here ... I can't see a thing . . .'

That was odd, thought Trinket to himself. The candles were still burning brightly. Or had the old man been blinded . . .

The candles are alight, Goong-goong,' he mumbled. 'Can't you see?'

Trinket was Laurel's age, but there was no way he could imitate the boy's Bannerman Pekinese accent: hence the mumbling, in an attempt to fool the old

eunuch.

'I can't see anything . . .' gasped Hai. 'Of course the candles aren't lit! Hurry up ... do as I say!'

He loosened his grip on Trinket's wrist.

'Yes, Goong-goong!' Trinket hurried over to the wall and tinkered noisily with the brass fittings on the candle-holder.

There! They're lit now!'

'Nonsense!' gasped Hai. 'Why won't you do as I say, for pity's sake!'

As he was speaking he twitched convulsively and crashed to the floor again.

Trinket gestured to Whiskers to make his escape. Whiskers beckoned to Trinket to come with him, and the boy made a move towards the door.

'Laurel. . .' he heard the old man groan. 'Where are you?'

'Here, Goong-goong!' replied Trinket.

He waved Whiskers away with his left hand, the implication being that he would stay and deal with the old eunuch on his own.

Whiskers tried to heave himself up, but his legs were still immobilized from the old eunuch's earlier move: no amount of rubbing could bring them back to life.

'I'll have to crawl out!' he thought to himself. The boy's smart

enough, he'll probably be all right. He's got a better chance on his own anyway.'

He waved to Trinket, and began crawling out on all fours.

A Corpse, a Chamber-pot, a Suit of Clothes, an Unusual Powder, and Pus

The old eunuch's groans came in waves. Trinket was afraid that if he ran for it now, Hai might discover that Laurel was dead and sound the alarm—in which case both he and Whiskers would certainly be caught.

This is all my fault!' he reflected. 'Old Whiskers can hardly move, and it's going to take him an age to get away. The longer I can hold out here the better. The important thing is that the Old Turtle should think that I'm Laurel. He's in

such a state he probably can't tell anything. I'll just wait for him to pass out, then finish him off, and disappear.'

Presently he heard a gong striking a long way off. It was the watchman sounding the first watch of the night. One of the guttering candles suddenly flared up, and Trinket caught sight of Laurel's corpse lying in a heap on the ground to his left. Then the candle went out.

'I really have killed the boy!' he thought to himself in terror. 'His ghost will probably come after me for vengeance!'

Then another thought occurred to him.

'If I wait till dawn it'll be much harder to get away. I'd better try and escape now, while it's still dark.'

But Old Hai was still groaning and conscious. He lay there on his back, and Trinket knew he would never have the guts to stab him from the front. At the slightest touch of steel the old eunuch would surely spring into action, and one devastating blow from him would be enough to spill the entire contents of Trinket's skull on to the floor. A few more minutes passed, and the other candle went out.

It was now pitch-dark. Trinket knew that Laurel's body was there. It was inches away. He could reach out and touch it. He was terrified and desperate to escape. But whenever he made even the slightest move, Hai would groan:

'Laurel. . . Are you still there?'

And Trinket had to reply: 'Yes, Goong-goong, I'm here!'

An hour or so went by, and Trinket had managed to half crawl half tiptoe a little towards the door, when Old Hai croaked again:

'Laurel, where are you going?'

'I... need to piss . . .'

'Why not do it in the other room?'

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

Trinket went in the direction of the inner room, which he had never been in

before. He took a couple of steps into it and his kneecap collided noisily with the edge of a table.

'Laurel!' cried Old Hai feebly from the other room. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing . . .'

Trinket felt about on the table and his hands encountered tinder and flint. He struck a light and lit a paper spill. There were a dozen candles on the table. He lit one and stuck it in a candle-holder.

He was now able to see the interior of the inner room, which contained two beds, one large one, which he imagined to be Hai's, and one smaller one, which must have been Laurel's. There were a couple of trunks, a table, and a cupboard, but little else. To his right stood a large tub, and the floor all round it was wet with spilled water. Trinket was just sizing up the window as an escape route when the old eunuch called again:

'Why don't you get on with it and have your piss?'

'Why does he keep on calling me?' thought Trinket in some alarm. 'Perhaps he's noticed my voice and is getting suspicious? What business is it of his if I piss or not?'

'Just starting!' he called back, and reached under the smaller bed for a chamber-pot. As he began filling it, he continued to scrutinize the window. It was securely fastened. All the joints were pasted over, probably to shut out the slightest draught, and to keep the cold from getting to old Coughguts, thought Trinket. Anyway, opening it would be bound to make a dreadful racket. Old Hai would be sure to hear, and he'd never get away in time.

His eyes roamed the inner room for any other form of exit, but there wasn't even a hole big enough for a dog or a cat. As for the outer room, he'd never be able to get out of that without arousing Hai's suspicion. Then he caught sight of a new suit of clothes lying at the foot of Laurel's bed, and had a sudden brainwave. In a trice he had stripped off his own clothes and was clad in the young eunuch's finery.

'Laurel! What're you doing?' called Old Hai yet again.

'Coming! Coming!'

He made his way back into the outer room, still doing up the buttons with one hand, and removing Laurel's hat from the corpse and putting it on his own

head.

The candles have gone out. I'll light some more.'

He went into the inner room again and came back with two freshly lit candles. Hai heaved a long sigh:

'Are the candles really alight?'

'Yes,' replied Trinket. 'Surely you can see them, can't you?' Hai was silent for a moment. Then he coughed again and said:

'I knew I shouldn't have had any more medicine. But the coughing was so ... It hurt so much . . . The stuff builds up inside me ... and now it seems to have done something to my eyes . . .'

'The old codger doesn't even know it was me!' gloated Trinket, enormously relieved.

'Laurel. . .' The old man spoke again. 'How have I treated you all this time?'

Trinket, needless to say, had not the faintest idea.

'Very well, Goong-goong!' he answered hastily, none the less.

'Ah ... It seems I'm blind now . . . You're the only person I've got left. . . You wouldn't ever leave me, would you?' 'Of course not!'

'Do you mean it?'

'Of course I do!' insisted Trinket without the least hesitation, and with the most convincing sincerity. The old eunuch was sure to be greatly touched.

'Goong-goong,' he went on, 'you know I'll stay with you. I'd never leave you alone. Don't you worry: your eyes will be better in a day or two.'

Hai sighed:

Til never see again! Never!'

After a moment's silence he continued:

'Did that big fellow with the whiskers get away?'

'Yes!'

'And did you kill his boy?'

Trinket's heart was thumping as he replied:

'Yes, I did! What are we going to do with the body?'

Old Hai seemed to brood deeply for a moment. Then:

'It'd be very awkward if they found a corpse in our room. People would ask questions ... Go and fetch my medicine chest.'

'Yes, Goong-goong!' piped Trinket.

He went into the other room again, but nowhere could he see a medicine chest. He opened the cupboard and searched every drawer.

'What are you up to in there?' snapped Old Hai. 'Who told you you could rummage in my drawers?'

Trinket's heart missed a beat. 'So those drawers are out of bounds,' he thought quickly.

'I was looking for the medicine chest. I don't know where you put it.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' cried the old eunuch petulantly. 'Can't you even find the medicine chest

Trinket improvised frantically:

'But I've just killed someone ... I feel funny, I'm all shaky and afraid . . . And now you tell me you're blind . . . Oh Goong-goong, I just can't seem to do anything right at the moment

He let out a great wail. He was terrified that his failure to locate the medicine chest would give him away. Wailing was one thing he could always fall back on with conviction.

'Silly boy! Killing's nothing! Nothing! The medicine chest is inside one of the big trunks.'

'Yes, Goong-goong!' sobbed Trinket, most pathetically. 'I'm just so scared . . .'

He took a quick look at the two trunks. They were both of them padlocked, and he had no idea where to find the keys. Fortunately, the first padlock simply opened when he tugged at it. It had not been properly closed. 'I'm in luck!' he whispered to himself. 'If I'd had to ask where the keys were, heaven help me! The Old Turtle would certainly have tumbled to it then.'

He removed the padlock and opened the trunk. It contained mostly clothes, but on the left side he spotted a medicine chest of the sort used by peripatetic doctors. He took it out and went back to the other room.

'Sprinkle some of the Decomposing Powder on the corpse!' ordered Hai.

'Yes, Goong-goong.' Trinket opened the little drawers of the medicine chest one by one, and found them to be full of tiny porcelain bottles of different shapes and colours. Which of them contained this strange-sounding powder he had not the least idea.

'Which bottle is it?' he asked.

'What's the matter with you today, you idiotic boy?' grumbled Old Hai. 'Have you quite lost your senses?'

'I . . .' Trinket hesitated. 'I'm just so scared. Goong-goong, do you think you'll be able to use your eyes again?'

He sounded most passionately concerned for the old eunuch's sight. Hai seemed touched; he stretched out his hand and patted the boy gently on the head.

'It's the little triangular bottle, the blue one with white spots. Be careful: the powder is very precious. You only need to use the tiniest amount.'

'Yes, Goong-goong.'

He took out the little bottle Hai had described, removed the stopper, found a piece of white paper in the chest, and tipped a tiny amount of the powder on to it. This he then sprinkled over Laurel's corpse.

Minutes went by, and nothing happened.

'What's the matter?' asked Old Hai.

'Nothing seems to be happening,' replied Trinket.

'Did you sprinkle it on his blood?'

'Oh! I forgot!'

He tipped out some more of the powder and this time sprinkled it directly on the wound.

There's really something queer about you today,' grumbled the old eunuch. 'You even speak quite differently.'

As he said this Laurel's body started to make a sizzling sound, and to give off steam. A yellowish pus-like fluid started oozing from the knife-wound, the steam grew denser, the flow of yellow fluid more abundant. It gave off a bitter, acrid smell; the wound began to enlarge and suppurate, and the flesh all round it to show visible signs of decomposition. The yellow pus made the flesh steam on contact, and then gradually the flesh itself—and even the clothes he was wearing—liquefied.

Trinket watched all this in dumbstruck amazement. He dropped his own clothes (the ones he had just discarded) on top of the corpse, and, noticing that his own sandals were broken at the toe, he pulled off Laurel's, slipped them on, and added his own cast-offs to the decomposing pile.

The whole process took about two hours. By the end of that time, Laurel, his clothes, and Trinket's sandals and socks, were all gone, and all that was left was a puddle of pus.

'If only the Old Turtle had passed out!' thought Trinket to

himself. Then I could have chucked him on too. And that would have been the last anyone would have seen of him

But Old Hai was still alive and coughing, and showing no signs of losing consciousness.

The Dice are Loaded

First light began to glimmer through the paper panes of the window. Trinket pondered his situation:

'Now I'm all dolled up in these clothes, I can just stroll out and no one will even know who I really am ... It'll be a walkover!'

His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by Old Hai:

'Laurel, tell me, it's dawn isn't it?'

'Yes, Goong-goong.'

'Fetch some water and mop the floor. There's a nasty smell in here.' Trinket scooped a few gourdfuls of water from the tub in the inner room, and washed the pus from the floor.

'After breakfast you can go and play dice with the others,' said the old eunuch. Try and win something for a change!'

Trinket was somewhat taken aback by this, and diought for a moment the old man must be having him on.

'Play dice? I don't think I should. I oughtn't to go skipping off and leave you, not when you're blind—'

'It's not skipping off, silly boy!' snapped the old eunuch. 'All these months I've been trying to teach you, and all you've done is lose me hundreds of taels of silver. Don't forget the cause, what it's all for\ Don't go against me now!'

Trinket had no idea what this was all about, and mumbled back:

'I never . . . meant to go against you, Goong-goong. I was only thinking of your health. You're so weak, and coughing so badly. If I go and ... do this, there'll be no one left to take care of you.'

'You seem to have forgotten: do this and you will be doing something of the utmost importance. Go, try your hand again. See if you can throw.'

Throw . . . Throw what?' blurted Trinket.

'Bring me the dice!' barked the old eunuch angrily. 'And stop making feeble excuses! You're just hopeless. All this time to practise and still you talk like a loser!'

At the words 'Bring me the dice!' Trinket's eyes lit up. In Yangzhou his favourite pastime, apart from listening to the storyteller, had always been watching the gambling. Though he was only a boy, in the dens of Yangzhou he was already considered a mean hand at dice. There was only one slight problem: where were the dice he was now supposed to fetch?

'My mind's gone a complete blank, Goong-goong. I can't remember anything. I

can't think where I put the dice.'

'Useless creature!' growled Hai. 'You're just scared of playing. And why, for goodness' sake? It's not even your money. Go on, they're in the big trunk, where they always are.'

'I suppose so, Goong-goong.'

Trinket trotted off into the inner room, and after rooting around in the open trunk he finally came across a little brocade box with a porcelain bowl inside it containing six dice. It was like seeing an old friend! He couldn't help letting out a little cry of glee. And then, when he held them in his hand, he let out another little cry: for these were not just any old friends, these were very special, very intimate old friends. The minute they were in the palm of his hand he knew they were loaded—filled with mercury, and specially 'weighted'. They were indeed the seasoned cheater's bosom buddies.

He returned to Hai with bowl and dice.

'Are you sure you want me to go and play? Are you sure you'll be all right here on your own?'

'Stop talking so much, and let's see what you're good for,' said Old Hai. 'I give you ten tries to throw me a Sky.'

In those days, gamblers used either four or six dice. With six dice, you had to throw four of a kind, and if the remaining two dice were Sixes the resultant combination was known as a Sky; two Ones made an Earth.

'What an insult!' thought Trinket to himself. Ten tries to throw a Sky—with loaded dice!

But the dice he'd been used to were loaded with lead. Mercury was a lot harder to control. His first five throws produced nothing. On the sixth throw he had two Sixes, three Threes, and a Four: it only needed that Four to be a Three, and he'd have a Sky. A deft little piece of finger-play on the part of Trinket, and hey presto! Four became Three, and there was his Sky! He clapped his hands and announced triumphantly:

There! A perfect Sky!'

'Don't think you can fool me boy, just because I can't see! Bring the dice here and let me feel them!'

He felt inside the bowl, and sure enough there were four Threes and two Sixes.

'You're in luck today! Now—throw me a Plum Blossom!'

Trinket took the dice and was about to throw again, when a thought suddenly occurred to him. It was evident by now that Laurel had not been much of a success as a gambler. If he, Trinket, now displayed his real skill it would start to look fishy. The Old Turtle might get suspicious. So he deliberately muffed it, seven or eight times in a row. He threw again, and gave a convincing sigh of frustration.

'What did you get?' asked Hai.

'It's a . . .'

Before he could answer, Hai reached out and felt inside the bowl. Four Twos, a Four, and a Five (the couple forming therefore nine).

'Pretty damn close!' commented Hai. 'And not a bad score. Try again.'

Trinket had another seventeen or eighteen throws, and finally threw a Long Three, which is only one below a Plum Blossom. After checking the dice with his fingers, Hai showed signs of satisfaction with his pupil:

'You seem to have made some progress. Off you go now, try your luck. Take fifty taels of silver with you.'

Trinket had already seen a dozen or so big ingots of silver in the trunk. Now, although gambling was of all things his favourite pastime, he'd never had the money for the real thing; and besides, in Yangzhou he'd had such a bad reputation for cheating that no one would have played with him for high stakes, except perhaps someone from out of town. Consequently, he could hardly believe his present luck. Not only was he going gambling, but he had fifty taels to stake, which was a bigger sum than he'd ever imagined in his wildest dreams! And he had a set of 'old buddies' to throw! He'd exchanged the darkest gates of Hell for a vision of Paradise! Escape was now forgotten. For this he would gladly give his very life! Mind you, he had no idea who he was supposed to play with, or where he was supposed to go. Finding that out was going to be his next problem. He couldn't ask Old Hai straight out, or he'd give everything away.

First he went to the trunk and took out two ingots, each

weighing twenty-five taels. He was still wresding with the problem of how to wheedle more information inconspicuously out of Old Hai, when he heard a

voice calling outside: 'Laurel! Laurel!'

Donkeys

Trinket was on his way out to the ante-room to see who it was, when the old eunuch muttered after him:

They've come for you. You'd better go now.'

Trinket was only too glad to be taken off: but just as he was hurrying out, he experienced a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. These gamblers won't be blind!' he thought to himself. They'll know straightaway that I'm not Laurel! And tien what?'

'Come on, Laurel!' called the voice from outside. There's something I want to tell you!'

'Coming!'

Trinket went back to the inner room, found a length of white cotton, and bandaged it round his head, just leaving two holes, one for his eyes and one for his mouth.

'I'll be off then!' he called to the old eunuch, and hurried on out. Outside the door he found a man waiting for him (he looked about thirty-odd years old). The man took one look at the bandage, and enquired, sotto voce:

'What on earth have you been doing to yourself?'

'I lost a pile of money, and Old Hai beat me black and blue!'

The man chuckled to himself, clearly not in the least surprised by the story.

'Going to have another shot? Try to get it back?' he asked under his breath.

Trinket took him by the sleeve and drew him aside.

'Don't let Goong-goong hear,' he whispered. 'Of course I'm game for another shot!'

The man gave the thumbs up.

That's the lad! Plucky fellow! Let's go!'

They set off together. The man had a small head and a tapering forehead. After a minute or so he turned to Trinket and said:

The Wen brothers and Pingwei are already there. Let's hope you have better luck today, eh?

'If I don't win today, I'm ... finished!' muttered Trinket.

They went down one corridor after another, along covered walkways, through courtyards planted with flowers.

'Boy!' thought Trinket as they went along, 'whoever owns this place must be rolling! This is a bloody mansion!'

Brightly painted flying eaves, gaily decorated rafters and columns—all around him he saw splendour such as he had never encountered in his entire life.

'We always thought ours was one of the smartest joints in Yangzhou—but it's not a patch on this! Wouldn't this just make a fantastic whore-house! But it's so big! Where'd you find enough whores to fill it?'

At last they came to a side-entrance, and walked through two further rooms. His companion knocked on a door, three times, then twice, then three times again. The door creaked open, and as the unmistakable rattle of dice greeted his ears, Trinket experienced a thrill of pleasure. There were five or six men already congregated in the room, totally absorbed in their game.

One of them, a fellow of twenty or so, asked:

'What's little Laurel been up to then?'

Trinket's companion laughed.

'Lost some money, and got a hiding from Old Hai!'

The other man sniggered. Trinket peered over the intervening shoulders, and saw that people were placing their bets. Some were laying a tael, some half. They were using bamboo chips. He took out one of his ingots and bought a handful of half-tael chips, fifty in all.

'Hey, Laurel!' called out one of the men. 'How much did you steal today? Going to lose it all?'

'Shut up!' hissed Trinket. That's a lousy thing to say!'

He had been going to let fly one of his barrages of turtle-abuse, but reckoned there might be a serious danger of his accent giving him away, and decided to play it cool and listen to them talking instead.

The man who'd come to fetch him was about to place his bet. He hesitated, and one of the others called out:

'Wu, old friend, go on, the bank's having a rotten run of luck. Have a go!'

'I will!' cried Wu, and deposited two taels' worth of chips on the table. 'What about you, Laurel?'

'I'd better be careful,' thought Trinket. 'I mustn't win too much, or lose too much—or bet too much either!'

He put down half a tael's worth. No one seemed to pay too much attention.

The banker was a fat fellow, whom everybody called Ping. Ping picked up the dice and gave them a good shake, shouting out:

'Last bets!'

He threw the dice into the bowl. Trinket was watching him very carefully, and breathed a sigh of relief: The man's a donkey!'

In Trinket's eyes, any gambler who didn't cheat was a donkey. Ping had thrown an Ox Head—not a particularly distinguished combination. The others threw one after the other, and each time Trinket breathed silently to himself: 'Another donkey!'

That made seven donkeys altogether. Some won, some lost. Old Wu threw an Eight Spot, and lost.

Trinket had the old eunuch's mercury-loaded dice—his 'buddies'—in his pocket. His plan was to let the game continue for a while, and then to switch dice, win a pile of money, then switch back. Quite apart from the difficulty involved in throwing loaded dice, there was also the actual business of switching. This had to be done when no one was looking, and normally required a conjurer's sleight of hand and a well engineered diversion—a stool kicked over, a tea-cup spilt. The real experts were able to circumvent all of this by keeping the six loaded dice up their sleeve, grasping the regular dice with their fingers, letting the loaded dice drop from the sleeve into the bowl, and discreetly transferring the regulars into the palm of the left hand before spiriting them back into their

pocket. Needless to say Trinket was not in this class.

Lead and mercury are both heavy, and both enable the player to 'steer' the dice. Unlike lead, mercury is constantly moving, which makes it a lot harder to handle. But the trouble with lead is that it is easily detected. And because it is easy to use, it can be a liability if it falls into an opponent's hands. Mercury requires a degree of training and skill that is way beyond the common cheat. Trinket was an 'intermediate' with lead, but with mercury he was just a beginner. Still, even if he only pulled it off a couple of times in ten, over a long session he would be sure to win heavily. Of course, the real expert, the ultimate cheat, has no need of either lead or mercury. He can simply throw for whatever combination he wants and get it every time. Such wizards are one in a million, and Trinket had never encountered one—or if he had, had failed to detect him!

Trinket foresaw little trouble against these donkeys. He could afford to play it slow. He'd changed one ingot for chips, and kept

the other to hand, with the intention of using it as a distraction later. Since Laurel had clearly been a poor player, he thought it more prudent to start off by losing. With his very first throw he lost heavily.

He went on playing, losing some, winning some, and as time went by he found himself down five taels. He never bet more than five mace at a time. The others meanwhile were placing higher and higher stakes. Eventually the banker Ping pushed Trinket's measly little chips back across the table at him and announced that from then on he would insist on a minimum of one tael per bet. The banker threw the combination known as Man, and made a clean sweep of all the others. Trinket, riled at having had his five mace stake rejected, now resolved to teach the banker a lesson.

'All right, my little fatty!' he thought to himself. 'You've asked for it!'

He took the dice in his right hand, and with his left elbow edged the ingot off the table. It landed with a thud on his foot. 'Ow! That hurt!' he yelled, and started jumping up and down. The others laughed heartily, and watched him as he bent down to retrieve the lump of silver from the ground. Trinket meanwhile had switched dice with the greatest of ease. He threw and out they came—four Threes and two Ones. It was an Earth, which beat Man.

'Damn it!' groaned Ping. 'Your luck's in today, you little brat!'

'Steady on!' thought Trinket to himself, not a little alarmed. 'I'd better not overdo it, or they'll soon know I'm not Laurel.'

With the next throw he made sure to lose a tael. The stakes continued to rise, some betting two, some three taels, so Trinket put on two and won two; with the next throw he lost one tael.

By noon his winnings amounted to over twenty taels, but he'd managed to achieve this by small, almost imperceptible steps, and without attracting too much attention. His original companion, Wu, on the other hand, had lost every one of the thirty taels he had brought with him, and was looking extremely down in the dumps.

This is not my day!' he exclaimed, with a despairing gesture. 'I'm quitting.'

Now Trinket may have been a compulsive cheat, but towards a fellow gambler and friend he was the soul of generosity. Normally he had always been the butt of abuse, people had ganged up on him, and poured scorn on him. But if a fellow gambler was ever cleaned out, he'd always offer to lend him whatever he had, and this had several times won him undying gratitude and respect.

Indeed, this had been his only way of showing the finer qualities of chivalry and heroism of which he was capable. It was immaterial to him if the recipient of his generosity ever paid him back. (The money was never, strictly speaking, his own in the first place.) On this occasion, observing Wu's discomfiture and impending departure, he immediately grabbed a fistful of chips, about seventeen or eighteen taels worth, and stuffed them into his hand.

'Go on, have another go! You can pay me back when you've won!'

Wu was ecstatic. In his circle, gamblers never ever lent money. In the first place they reckoned they'd never get it back. And in the second place, it was thought to be inauspicious. Trinket's generosity gave Wu's spirits a huge boost. He patted his saviour enthusiastically on the shoulder.

'You're a real friend, boy!'

The banker, Fat Ping, was having a run of luck, and the last thing he wanted was to lose a customer, so he too was full of praise for Trinket, 'Laurel's act of altruism.

'Seems you've turned over a new leaf, eh, Laurie!' he exclaimed. 'Got used to you being such a skinflint!'

They carried on playing, and Trinket won seven or eight taels. Suddenly their

game was interrupted by a voice shouting: 'Lunch-time! Play adjourned until tomorrow!' At the mention of lunch, everyone stopped and hurriedly cashed in their chips. Trinket hadn't time to switch the dice back, but he reckoned these donkeys would never notice anyway.

He left the room with Wu, quietly wondering to himself where they would go for lunch. Wu had lost practically all of the money he had lent him.

'Til have to pay you back tomorrow, boy!' 'Don't you worry,' replied Trinket. 'What's a few taels between friends!' Wu laughed:

That's very generous of you! You'd better hurry on back. Old Hai Goong-goong will be waiting to have his lunch with you.'

'Yes, I'd better be off!' Trinket nodded, thinking to himself: 'Well, that may be what I'm supposed to do—go back there and eat with Old Turtle-face! But if I don't make a break for it now, I never

will!'

He saw Wu heading off through a hallway, and reflected on the almost infinite number of hallways, gardens, and corridors there

seemed to be in this enormous mansion. But where the hell was the front door?!

He went stumbling off, and kept nearly colliding with other people wearing the same outfit as his. But he hadn't the courage to ask any of them the way to the main entrance.

Patisserie Pekinoise

He kept on going and going, but there seemed no end to the mansion. Soon he began to panic. 'Perhaps I'd better go back to Turtle-head's place after all. . . ' But even that course of action now posed insuperable problems. He was well and truly lost, wandering aimlessly from one strange room to another. Many of the halls and doorways had great inscriptions hanging in them or above them, which might have helped, had he been able to read them; since he couldn't, he didn't even bother looking at them closely.

Gradually he became aware that he was not bumping into people any more. The corridors were wellnigh deserted. His stomach had by now begun to feel extremely empty and was rumbling noisily. He made his way through a moon-shaped doorway, and saw a room off to the left, with the door ajar. He

walked towards it, and as he did so, the aroma of food came wafting out and set his mouth watering. He pushed the door lightly open and poked his head inside.

There he saw a table laden with a dozen plates of the most delicious-looking cakes and snacks, and not a soul in the room. He tiptoed in, took a piece of layered cake, and began to nibble it. 'Yum-yum!' he muttered softly to himself: layers of sponge alternating with layers of honey and lard, flavoured with cassia. It was light and sweet. Yangzhou was famous for its cakes, and the whorehouses always liked to serve their customers with the best and most mouth-watering varieties of patisserie. Trinket had often managed to get in a preliminary 'tasting', despite the combined (and irate) efforts of the madam and her various lackeys. But this cake was something else! This was clearly in another class altogether.

They certainly know how to make layered cake!' he said to himself. Til bet I've stumbled into the number one whore-house in all of Peking!

He finished the piece of cake, and since there was still no sign of anyone coming, he crept over and popped a little steamed dumpling in his mouth. He was a crafty little scavenger, and knew

he had to take one here, one there, to avoid being detected. After the dumpling, a piece of mung-bean cake. Each time he remembered to rearrange the plate carefully afterwards.

He was just enjoying the cake, when he heard the sound of cloth boots outside the door. Flip-plop—someone was coming! Quickly grabbing a pancake stuffed with minced meat, he looked around him for somewhere to hide: the room was bare, save for a few strange cut-outs leaning up against the wall (human shapes cut out of oxhide), and a number of sacks hanging from a beam, which looked as if they were filled with grain or sand. Otherwise there was just the table, which was spread with a table-cloth. In desperation, Trinket darted under it.

Further Adventures of Trinket in the Capital

A Sparring Partner

Plip>-f>lop\ The boots reached the door, and came on into the room. Trinket peeped out from behind the table-cloth. From the size of his footwear, the new arrival seemed to be a boy like himself. He heaved a sigh of relief, and put the pancake in his mouth. He didn't dare to take a bite out of it, but softened it with his saliva, and then swallowed it silently down.

Meanwhile he could hear noisy munching coming from the table above him. The new boy was clearly tucking in.

'Why, he's just another scavenger like me!' thought Trinket to himself. 'I'll jump out and scare him off, then I can carry on eating to my heart's content.'

His thoughts ran on:

'What a fool I was just now! I should have stuffed a whole plateful in my pocket and bugged off! This isn't like home. They wouldn't miss a little thing like that, or expect me to pay for it!'

All of a sudden there was a series of noisy thumps. The new scavenger had started hitting something. His curiosity aroused, Trinket poked his head out from under the table. What he saw was a boy of fourteen or fifteen, in a short gown, punching at one of the bags that hung from the beam. After a while, the boy moved across and started attacking one of the oxhide cut-outs. He struck

the figure first on the chest with one fist, then reached forward with both hands and grappled it by the waist, forcing it to the ground. It was very much the same sort of technique as the one used by the Manchu wrestlers in the inn the previous day. Trinket chuckled to himself and darted out from beneath the table.

'Why fight a dummy!' he cried. 'Why not try me?'

The other boy's first reaction was one of alarm, at the sight of this strange apparition with its head swathed in bandages. But alarm quickly turned to delight when he realized that he had found a sparring partner.

'Very well!' he replied. 'On guard!'

Trinket sprang forward and seized the boy's arms, intending to give him a sharp twist, but the boy turned smartly, and hooked him with his right foot, sending Trinket crashing to the floor.

'You're hopeless!' he jeered. 'You obviously don't know the first thing about wrestling!'

'Who says I don't!' protested Trinket, leaping to his feet again and reaching for the boy's left leg. The boy made a grab for his back, but this time Trinket dodged in time and the boy seized a handful of air. Trinket recalled Whiskers' fight with the seven wrestlers at the inn, and shot out a quick left that caught the boy hard, fair and square, on the lower cheek.

The boy stood there stunned for a few seconds, and a momentary look of anger came into his eyes.

'You're hopeless!' cried Trinket with a grin. 'You obviously don't know the first thing about wrestling.'

The boy said nothing, but feinted with his left fist. Trinket fell for it and dodged, and as he did so, the boy's elbow came crashing across into his midriff and winded him completely. He crumpled up and fell to the ground in excruciating pain. The boy now came at Trinket from behind, slipped both hands under his arms and laced his hands together around his throat, throttling him, and pressing him harder and harder down on to the ground. Trinket kicked frantically with his right foot, but then the boy loosed his hands and gave him a terrific shove which sent him rolling across the room like a puppy chasing its own tail.

Trinket was furious. He came tumbling back, wrapped both arms round the boy's legs, and tugged at him with all his might. The boy crashed down right on top of him. He was quite a bit bigger than Trinket, and had soon succeeded in throttling him again and pinning him to the ground. Trinket began to choke, thrashed

out with his feet to extricate himself, and finally managed to wriggle on top of the boy and hold him down. He was too light to maintain the upper hand for long, however, and soon the boy was back on top of him again.

Ever a crafty fighter, Trinket now let go of the boy's legs, got behind him, and landed him a good kick on the backside. The boy quickly grabbed his right leg and tugged at it, sending Trinket crashing down on his back. The boy leapt astride him, pinned his head to the floor, and cried:

'Well! Surrender?'

Trinket had meanwhile managed to hook his left foot round the boy's waist, and started to rub it up and down the small of his back. The boy, it transpired, was extremely ticklish, and he couldn't help giggling, and loosened his grasp. Trinket seized his chance, leapt up, and pinned his opponent down by the throat. The boy now used a standard wrestling ploy, gripping Trinket by the back of the neck and pulling him to the ground with considerable force. Trinket went out like a light.

When he regained consciousness, he found that he was temporarily immobilized. The boy burst out laughing.

'Well? Had enough? Give in?'

But Trinket was not finished yet. He eventually succeeded in jumping up and landing a head-butt right in the boy's midriff. The boy groaned and staggered back a few steps. Trinket lunged after him, the boy leant a little to one side, put out a leg, and brought him tumbling to the floor. Trinket reached out frantically as he fell, clutching at the boy's legs, and the two of them went down together. They struggled for a while, each one gaining the upper hand for a moment, then going under, ringing the changes more than a dozen times, until finally they were in a complete deadlock, panting and staring fixedly at each other. And then suddenly, at exactly the same moment, they both burst out laughing. There was something about the clinch they were in that struck them both as terribly funny. Slowly they let go.

The boy reached out a hand and began removing the bandages from Trinket's face.

'What did you want to wrap your face up for?'

Trinket was about to snatch the bandages back, when he reflected that the boy had already seen most of his face and that it would achieve nothing.

'I didn't want anyone to recognize me taking the cake.'

'I see,' said the boy, chuckling and standing up. 'So you make a habit of coming here and taking food, do you?'

'No, I don't,' said Trinket. As he rose to his feet, he stole a closer glance at his opponent: there was something at once impressive and attractive about the boy's features, a clearness of brow, a noble look in the eyes, an expression in the face, that drew Trinket towards him.

'What's your name?' asked the boy.

'Laurel,' replied Trinket. 'And yours?'

After a moment's hesitation the boy replied:

'Mine's . . . People call me Misty. Which of the Goong-goongs do you work for?'

'I'm with Hai Goong-goong.'

Misty nodded, and used Trinket's bandages to mop the sweat from his brow.

He helped himself to a cake. Trinket was not going to be outdone. If this young fellow could continue calmly scavenging, so could he. He popped another slice of layer cake nonchalantly into his mouth.

'I can see you've never done any wrestling,' laughed Misty. 'But you're a quick mover all the same! You managed to get away that time. A few more goes and I'd have had you, though—'

'Is that right?' protested Trinket. 'Come on then: let's see—'

'At you!'

The two of them set to again.

Misty clearly knew a few wrestling moves, and was the older and stronger of the two. But Trinket had the benefit of years of experience in the streets of Yangzhou, where he'd had to deal with all manner of bullies and thugs, big and small, and in this respect he was definitely Misty's superior. But for one reason or another (partly Whiskers' lecture, partly because this was, after all, only 'play-fighting' and not in deadly earnest) he didn't avail himself of a single one of the dubious tricks at which he excelled: the finger-twist, the pigtail-pull, the throat-bite, the eye-poke, the ear-yank, the grip-o'-the-balls. As a result he eventually came off the loser again, with Misty sitting on his back, and no hope of throwing him off.

'Surrender?'

'Never!'

Misty burst out laughing and jumped up.

Trinket went for him again, but this time Misty shook his head.

'No more for today! Tomorrow, if you like. But I don't see the point: you'll never be able to beat me!'

Trinket was not having this. He pulled a piece of silver from his pocket, about three taels' worth:

Tomorrow we fight for money! You'd better bring three taels yourself!'

Misty seemed somewhat taken aback by this but then concurred.

'All right. We fight for money. I'll bring my stake. See you here at noon tomorrow.'

'Live or die! Excellent kungfu! My word is my wand!' cried Trinket, and Misty burst out laughing.

'It certainly is!'

And with that he left the room.

Trinket helped himself to a big handful of cakes and stuffed them inside his jacket. Then he too left the room.

As he went, he found himself thinking of Whiskers' heroic stand at Victory Hill: now there was a man! Whiskers had pledged his word to fight, and nothing could have stood between him and the fulfilment of that pledge, not the walls of his prison cell, not even his own wounds. How many times Trinket had sat listening to the storytellers' tales, and how many times he'd dreamed of one day being a hero himself—Trinket the Brave Man and True! Now, Ke'd said he would fight, and there could be no going back! He had pledged his word! And if he was to be a man of his word, he would have to forget about escape—at least for the time being. He would have to go back to the old eunuch that evening. He therefore decided to retrace his steps to the room where they had been gambling earlier in the day—and from there he took a direction opposite to the one he had taken earlier (which had led him deeper and deeper into the mansion), followed two covered walkways, vaguely remembered one or two shrubs he had passed by in the courtyards on the way, and somehow, by hook or by crook, navigated his way back to the old eunuch's quarters.

Trinket is Asked to Steal a Sutra

As he drew near the entrance, he heard the old fellow coughing.

'Goong-goong? Are you feeling any better?'

'Better my arse!' muttered the eunuch. 'Get a move on, will you!'

Trinket hurried over to him. Old Hai was sitting at a table (the broken one had been replaced).

'How much did you win?'

'I won a dozen taels,' replied Trinket. 'But I—'

'You what?' snapped the eunuch.

'I lent them to Wu.'

In actual fact he'd won twenty and lent twelve to Wu: the remaining eight he wished to hang on to.

Old Hai scowled at him.

'What do you want to go lending money to that Wu fellow for? He doesn't even work in the Upper Library, dammit! You could at least have lent to one of the Wen brothers!'

Trinket didn't follow this at all.

'But they didn't ask me for a loan.'

Then you should have found a way to offer one. Have you forgotten everything I ever told you?'

'It's just that. . . what with killing that boy yesterday, I can't seem to think straight, it must have gone clean out of my mind. I ought to have lent the money to one of the Wen brothers, that's right, I remember now, you told me.'

Old Hai humphed.

'What's so alarming about killing? I suppose you're only a child though, you've never done it before. Now, about the book— I hope you haven't forgotten.'

The book?'

Old Hai humphed again.

'Have you forgotten everything?'

'Goong-goong, I... I've got this terrible headache . . . and I'm so worried about your cough ... I just can't keep my mind on anything!'

'Very well. Come over here!'

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

Trinket walked a few steps closer.

'I'm going to repeat it for you once more. Forget this time, and I shall kill you

'Yes, Goong-goong!' piped Trinket, thinking to himself, 'Just say it once, and I'll never forget it, not in a hundred years!'

'Listen: you're to win money from the Wen brothers. Then you're to lend them money, the more the better. Then, after a few days you're to ask them to take you to the Upper Library. They'll have to say yes, if they owe you money. If they try to fob you off,

you tell them that I'll report them to the Chief Librarian; I'll tell him they refuse to pay their debts, and ask him to wait for His Majesty to—'

'His Majesty?'

'What?'

'Oh . . . nothing.'

'If they ask you why you want to go to the Upper Library, you say that you're longing for a glimpse of His Majesty, so you just want a chance to perform some little errand there. Of course the Wen brothers won't let you see His Majesty; when they take you, His Majesty won't even be in the Upper Library. That's when you find a way to steal the book . . .'

Something was beginning to fall into place in Trinket's mind, with all these references to 'His Majesty'.

'Could this be the Palace, the Forbidden City itself!' he thought silently to himself. 'Have I been wrong all this time, about it being the number one whore-house in Peking? Aiyeehl Of course! That must be it! These people are all eunuchs working for the Emperor. . .'

As a boy, Trinket had heard people talk about the Emperor, the Empress, Princes and Princesses, Palace Ladies, Palace Eunuchs, but he hadn't the faintest idea what these grand beings actually looked like. All he knew was that the Emperor wore a Dragon Robe. In Yangzhou he'd seen all sorts of plays, but the eunuchs on stage were never dressed anything like Old Hai, or his new gambling friend Wu. And the stage eunuchs always held those long horsehair fly-whisks, and kept waving them around in the air. And anyway, he had never understood a word of what they were singing.

So this was what real Palace Eunuchs were like!

'Cripes!' he cried silently to himself. That means I've become a little Palace Eunuch myself! I've lost my balls!

'Did you take in what I said just now?' growled Old Hai.

'Yes, Goong-goong, yes! I've got to go to His Majesty's Upper Library!'

'And why have you got to go? To play?'

To steal a book.'

'Which book?'

'I... I... can't remember.'

Til tell you once more. And this time, don't forget\ It's a Sutra, called the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. It's very old. There are several

copies of it. Just bring them all to me. Got it? Now—what's it called?'

The Sutra in Forty-Two Sections.'

- Trinket sounded very pleased with himself.

- 'What are you so happy about?' snapped the old eunuch. 'I'm just happy about. . . about remembering it the minute

you mentioned it again.'

In actual fact, when Old Hai had spoken of stealing a book, Trinket's heart had sunk. The 'stealing' part was no problem; it was the 'book' part that presented what seemed at first like an insurmountable obstacle. The trouble was that Trinket could barely read. He couldn't decipher more than a word or two, let alone book titles. Then he heard the eunuch say that the book was the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections, and his heart leapt: what the word Sutra looked like he had not the foggiest notion, but numbers were something he could read. So the second part of the title was a walk-over! Wasn't that sufficient reason to be pleased?

'Now,' went on Old Hai, 'if you go stealing books from the Upper Library, you've got to be very smart, very careful. If anyone spots you, you're as good as dead. A hundred times over.'

'I know,' said Trinket. He suddenly thought of something, and added: 'If I did

get caught, I'd never dream of dragging you into it, Goong-goong!

Old Hai heaved a strangely unconcerned sigh.

'Drag me in or drag me out, it's all the same to me . . .' He had another coughing fit, and went on: 'You've done quite well today. At least you've won something. What did the others think? Were they suspicious?'

Trinket chortled.

'Oh no, why should they be?'

He was about to boast, but thought better of it.

'Well then, don't sit around doing nothing. Eat your lunch, and if you've no jobs to do, go and practise with the dice!'

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

Trinket walked across to the dining-table, where bowls and chopsticks had been laid, four dishes and a soup, all untouched.

'Goong-goong, aren't you eating? Let me serve you!'

'I'm not hungry. You go ahead.'

Trinket was delighted, and without bothering to fill his bowl with rice, he attacked a dish of stewed meat. The food was cold, but he was hungry, and to him it was indescribably delicious.

'I wonder where they get the food from? Oh well, I'd better not ask too many questions, just keep my eyes open and pick things up one at a time. If this really is the Forbidden City, then old Wu and the Wen brothers and little Misty must all of them be eunuchs. I wonder what the actual Emperor and Empress look like? I must try and get a look. Then one day when I'm back at home, ha ha! I can tell people who I've seen. Just imagine the look on their faces!'

'I wonder if Whiskers got out safe? They didn't say anything about someone getting caught when we were gambling . . . Most probably he got away all right.'

When he had finished eating, he went through the motions of practising with the dice so as not to arouse the old eunuch's suspicions, throwing them noisily across the table. After a while his eyelids began to feel heavy. He hadn't slept all night. In minutes he was sound asleep.

Foolproof Moves

He slept till evening, when a junior eunuch brought in their supper.

Trinket waited on Old Hai as he ate a bowl of rice, and then helped him to bed. Afterwards he went to lie down on the smaller bed, thinking to himself:

Tomorrow, whatever else happens, I must win my fight with Misty!

He lay there, trying to remember Whiskers' fight with the wrestlers in the tavern. He wished he could remember the details more clearly.

'If only I'd taken old Whiskers up on his offer! With him as my teacher I could have learnt a thing or two on the way up here, and then I could have put Misty in his place—even though he is stronger than I am. If he gets me on the ground again tomorrow, I'll die of shame! Little White Dragon—forget it! I'd never dare show my face among the Brothers!'

Suddenly a thought occurred to him.

The wrestlers were no match for Whiskers; but Whiskers was no match for Old Turtle-head—why don't I get him to teach me a few moves?'

He asked the old eunuch at once:

'Goong-goong, if you want me to go stealing books from the Upper Library, there's just one problem.'

1

'What's that?'

'Well, after today's game, I met this . . . little eunuch, who stood in my way and asked me to give him some of my winnings. I wouldn't, so we ended up fighting. That's why I was so late for lunch.'

'He beat you, presumably.'

'He was bigger than me, and stronger. He says I've got to fight with him every day, until I can beat him. Then he'll let me off.'

'What was the little fellow's name? Which part of the Palace was he from?'

'He's called Misty. I don't know where he's from.'

'You must have been acting too pleased with yourself after your win—that's probably what annoyed him.'

'I won't let him get away with it! I'm going to fight him tomorrow! But I just wonder if I can beat him.'

Old Hai humphed.

'You want to wangle some moves out of me, don't you? The answer's no, so it's no use trying.'

'Clever Old Turtle-head!' thought Trinket, silently cursing to himself.

This little fellow Misty,' he began again, out loud, 'he wasn't such a good fighter really. I wouldn't need to learn much to beat him. I don't need you to teach me, either. I had him on the ground today, it's just that he was too strong for me: he managed to buck me off. Tomorrow I'll get a proper grip on him. That should fix the little bugger!'

He had been trying so hard all day to keep his language clean.

'If you want to stop him bucking you, that's easy!' said Old Hai.

'I didn't think it would be hard. I just get him in a good shoulder grip, then—'

That's no good! Bucking comes from the lower back. You have to knee him on the vital point in the small of his back. Come over here and I'll show you.'

Trinket hopped out of bed and was at Old Hai's bedside in a trice. The old eunuch felt around in the small of his back and pressed lightly. Trinket felt his whole body go limp.

'Can you remember that?'

'Yes, I'll try it out tomorrow. Let's hope it works.'

'Works? Of course it will work. It's absolutely foolproof!'

Old Hai reached out his hand and pressed lightly on either

side of Trinket's neck. Trinket let out a gasp of pain. He had a choking sensation in his chest, and could hardly breathe.

'Get him on these two points,' said Hai, 'and he'll have no strength to fight with.'

Trinket was pleased as punch.

'Well, that's it then! Tomorrow, I win!'

Trinket went back to bed, and fell asleep dreaming of Misty surrendering to the Little White Dragon!

Live or Die!

Wu came to fetch him again the following morning. It was the Wen brothers' turn to be bankers. Trinket had soon managed to win over twenty taels off them. It was a bad day for the bank altogether. In less than an hour they had to pay out fifty taels, which was all they had. Trinket lent them another twenty, and by the end of the day's play that was all gone too.

All Trinket could think about was his appointment with Misty. As soon as the gambling was over, he hurried to the 'cake room'. The table was piled high again with good things to eat, and this time Trinket tucked in with a vengeance. Then he heard the flip-ploy of cloth boots again. He ducked under the table, just in case it turned out to be someone other than Misty.

'Laurel! Laurel!'

It was Misty's voice calling from the doorway.

Trinket sprang out, and with a big grin on his face, called back:

'Live or die!'

'I live, you die!' laughed Misty, striding into the room. Trinket noticed at once that he was wearing a completely new outfit, and couldn't help feeling jealous.

'Huh!' he muttered to himself. 'Just you wait! You won't be so pleased when I've made a big rip in that smart gown of yours!'

He let out a great war cry and threw himself straight into the attack.

'Excellent kungfu!' cried his opponent, grappling him with both arms, and delivering a swinging kick with his left foot. Trinket lost his balance, tottered and fell, bringing Misty down with him.

As Trinket rolled and spun round, he managed to pin Misty face down on the floor. He remembered Old Hai's little demonstration, and felt for the vital point in the small of Misty's back. But he had never done this sort of thing before, and it was hard to find

the point at his very first attempt. Misty meanwhile had spun round, gripped Trinket's left arm, and twisted it back.

'Hey!' screamed Trinket, 'that's not fair! Twisting my arm like that!'

That's what wresling's all about!' laughed Misty. 'Who says it's not fair!'

Trinket took advantage of the fact that Misty was busy speaking and momentarily off his guard, to launch a counter-attack. He brought his head down with all his might on to Misty's back, shot his right hand under his armpit, and flung him up into the air as hard as he could. Misty went flying over his head and landed with a crash on the ground. He leapt to his feet again, crying:

'So you know the Bucking Antelope too!'

Trinket had never even heard of the Antelope. He'd just been improvising and thrashing around, and somehow or other had managed to outwit his opponent. He was pretty chuffed.

The Antelope is nothing!' he cried. 'I know plenty more, and they're a lot worse. You haven't seen anything yet!'

'Perfect!' cried Misty in delight. 'Go to!'

Trinket engaged in a quick moment's reflection:

'Misty has obviously had lessons—that's why he keeps getting the better of me. But that's no problem. All I have to do is watch his moves and copy them. He can throw me a few times— I'll soon get the hang of it.'

Misty started coming at him. Trinket lunged back, but it was a feint: Misty stepped aside, let Trinket surge on, and chopped him on the back with the side of his hand. Trinket was unable to rein himself in, and went crashing to the ground.

Misty gave a great cry of delight, leapt forwards, and planted himself astride Trinket's back.

'Surrender?'

'No! Never!' protested Trinket, but when he tried to straighten himself up and get to his feet, he felt a sudden numbness in the small of his back. Misty had beaten him to it! He had pressed on exactly the spot Old Hai had been trying to teach him the previous evening. After struggling futilely for a moment longer, he finally gave up.

'All right!' he cried. This time I surrender!'

Misty laughed and set him free. As Trinket got up, he suddenly shot out one of his feet. Misty toppled over, and Trinket punched him in the small of the back. Misty gave a cry of pain and

bent double. Trinket leapt on him from behind and gripped him tightly round the throat with both his hands. Misty lost consciousness for an instant, and fell flat on the ground. Trinket held on and demanded triumphantly:

'Surrender?'

Misty gave a little grunt. Then suddenly he drove his elbows hard into Trinket's ribs, and Trinket went reeling over on to the floor, screaming with pain, certain that he must have several broken bones. Misty spun round and sat astride his chest, once more the victor, though this time a winded and exhausted one, panting for breath.

'Do . . . you . . . give in?'

'Give in my arse!' panted Trinket back. The answer's no! A hundred times no! You were lucky just now, that's all!'

Then get up ... and fight!'

Trinket stretched and heaved with all his might (what little of it he had left), but his opponent was still astride his aching ribs, and his efforts were to no avail. After several more minutes of futile struggle, he surrendered yet again.

Misty rose to his feet. His arms were sore and limp with exhaustion. Trinket staggered to his feet and took a few tottering steps across the room.

Tomorrow . . . tomorrow I'll take you on again . . . and I'll beat you for sure!'

Misty laughed.

'If we fight a hundred times, you'll. . . you'll always lose! If you've got the guts, come again tomorrow!'

'You're probably the one who's not got the guts! I'm not afraid. Live or die! My word is my wand!'

They had both been quite carried away by the fighting, and neither of them had mentioned the money, or the bet they had laid. Or to be strictly accurate, Misty didn't mention it, and since he didn't, Trinket was more than happy to pretend to have forgotten. If he had emerged the victor, it would have been a very different story.

Trinket Takes a Lesson in Kungfu

Trinket returned to report to the old eunuch.

'Goong-goong, those moves of yours were a load of rubbish.'

Old Hai gave a little grunt.

'You mean you lost again, you good-for-nothing!'

'At least if I'd used my own moves,' replied Trinket, 'I might have won once or twice. Your moves are crap! He knew them all already!'

Old Hai looked puzzled.

'You mean he knew them too? Show me what he did.'

'But the old boy's blind,' Trinket mused to himself. 'What's the use of my showing him? He won't be able to see.'

Then a thought suddenly occurred to him:

'How can I be sure he's really blind, and not just pretending? Why don't I try him out. . .'

He went through the motions of a backward thrust with both elbows.

That's how he hit me. Every bone in my body was sore.'

The old eunuch sighed.

'It's no use saying "That's how." I can't see a thing.'

He rose shakily to his feet.

'Now—do what he did.'

Trinket was secretly delighted:

'So the Old Devil really is blind!'

He turned his back on him, and slowly stuck his elbows out
in his direction.

'That's how he hit me.'

As his elbows were about to make contact with Old Hai's

chest, he stopped. Hai humphed. That's the Armpit Mallet Strike. Nothing very
unusual about

that.'

Then there was this one,' Trinket went on.

He took the old eunuch's left hand, and placed it on his own
right shoulder.

Then he threw me, and I went flying over his head.'

This was in fact what he had done to Misty—but he decided to swap roles, and
test out Old Hai.

That's the Bucking Antelope.'

'Oh, so you know that one too!' commented Trinket. He then took Old Hai's
arms and bent them both slowly backwards.

'Aha!' said Hai. That is the third part of the move known as Breaking the
Branch of the Plum Tree. What else did he do?'

'If all of his moves have fancy names, surely mine must have too? Well, I went for him, and he dodged to one side, and then he managed to get behind me and give me a push, and I just—'

'Where?' interrupted Hai. 'Where did he push you?'

'How can I remember where he pushed me—I just passed out and saw stars.'

Try and think, ' said Hai. 'Did he push you here?'

He reached out and pressed behind Trinket's left shoulder.

'No. It wasn't there, ' said Trinket.

'Here?' asked Hai, pressing this time behind his right shoulder.

'No.'

Hai tried six or seven different places, but to all of them Trinket replied 'No'. Then Hai reached down to the small of his back, just below his ribcage, and pressed very lightly on the right-hand side.

'Here?'

Trinket started, and stumbled forwards a few steps. He remembered instantly.

That's it! That's exactly where he pressed. Goong-goong, how did you know?'

Hai said nothing, but stood there lost in silent thought.

'You say he knew both the moves I taught you—are you sure you're speaking the truth? You're not making it up?'

'Of course I'm not making it up!' protested Trinket. 'Honour bright! And then he came down here on my chest and I couldn't breathe! I had to surrender to that one: that's called the—'

Old Hai was not prepared to listen to Trinket's fancy names for different ways of surrendering. He stretched out his hand:

'Where did he crush your chest?'

Trinket took his hand and held it against the exact spot where Misty had so successfully immobilized him. Hai gasped.

That is the vital point known as the Purple Palace. This young opponent of yours has clearly studied with a High Master!

That's no big deal, ' quipped Trinket. 'I know a thing or two about a thing or two. When there's grass on the hill, there'll be burnt kindling . . .' (He was very flustered, and got his Ancient Chinese Proverb about 'kindling to burn' a bit tangled up.) 'Your Trink— um, Laurie may have lost today, but tomorrow he'll win for sure!'

Old Hai went back to his chair and sat there counting his fingers, his eyes closed in thought. After a long silence he said:

'It's no surprise to me that he should be able to use moves from the Lesser Catch-Can School—but that chest press on your House of Will vital point is a classic move from the Soft Hand

School in the Wudang tradition. And he followed it up with two more Wudang moves—one on the Knotted Sinew point, one on the Purple Palace. So we have a Wudang Master lurking in our midst, right here in the Palace! Well, well. . . This young Misty that you fought with—how old would you say he was?'

'Quite a bit older than me, ' replied Trinket.

'How much older?'

'Oh, a lot.'

'What do you mean, "a lot"? A year or two is a lot, eight or nine years is a lot. If he was eight or nine years older than you, why were you wasting your time fighting with him in the first place?'

'All right, he was just a year or two older than me, ' conceded Trinket. 'But a lot taller.'

Trinket thought that defeat at the hands of a taller (and slightly older) adversary was at least honourable. Of course, if he had not wanted to learn some new moves from the old eunuch he would never have admitted to his defeat in the first place. He would have come home in triumph!

'So this fellow is fourteen or fifteen years old, ' mumbled Hai to himself. 'Hm—how long did you fight before you conceded victory?'

'Oh, five or six hours.'

Hai scowled. <

'Don't talk such rubbish!' he snapped. 'How long was it?'

'Well. . . Maybe not quite two hours—but longer than one.'

Hai gave a little snort.

'Just give me straight answers to my questions. This young man has clearly studied the Martial Arts, and you haven't, so there's no shame in it. In kungfu, it doesn't matter how often you lose, so long as you win in the end. If you win that last fight, and your opponent never dares to take you on again—then you're a Brave Man and True!'

'Yes!' cried Trinket. 'Like the great founder of the Han dynasty. A hundred times he fought, and a hundred times he was defeated. But in that last battle he got the better of the King of Chu—who hung himself by the banks of the Black River.'

'Fell on his sword! Get the story right, please, ' the old eunuch scolded him.

'Oh it's all the same—anyway, he lost and did himself in.'

Trust you to have the last word. Now, tell me, how many times did you lose to Misty today?'

'Oh, I don't know: once or twice, two or three times.'

'You mean four, don't you?'

'I only really lost twice. The other two times he cheated. They don't count.'

'How long did each fight last?'

'I wasn't exactly timing them,' replied Trinket cheekily. 'Sometimes as long as a crap; sometimes as long as a piss.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well, when I take a crap it takes a while; but when I take a leak it's all over in a few seconds

A faint smile crossed the old eunuch's face.

'It's a coarse kind of comparison,' he muttered to himself, 'but in a way it makes sense.'

He brooded for a while, and then said to Trinket:

'You can tell from the length of time it took this Misty fellow to get the better of you, that he's a novice. It's just that you know even less than he does. I'll teach you some moves from the Greater Catch-Can. If you remember them properly, you can try them out on him tomorrow.' ;•.... Trinket was delighted.

'It'll be the Greater versus the Lesser! I'll be bound to win!'

'Don't count on it. Both Catch-Cans have their strong points. All depends on the skill of the fighter. There are eighteen forms of the Greater Catch-Can, and each form has seven or eight variations. That's a great deal to remember. I'll teach you one or two forms to start with.'

Old Hai rose to his feet and adopted a fighting posture. After a brief demonstration he announced:

That move is known as Stork Preening Feathers. Now you must practise it thoroughly. Step by step. Then try it with me.'

Trinket had memorized it at first glance. He practised it seven or eight times and reckoned he had it down to perfection.

'I've mastered that one!' he exclaimed.

From where he sat in his chair, Old Hai shot out his left arm and gripped Trinket by the shoulder. Trinket tried to parry with his hand, but was much too slow, and the old eunuch held him fast.

'Mastered it, eh?' croaked Old Hai. 'Practise it again.'

Trinket practised it several more times on his own, and then tried it again with Old Hai, who shot out his left arm and followed the exact same sequence of moves as before. This time Trinket was prepared, but try as he might, when he parried he was still far too

slow, and the old eunuch had him once more by the shoulder. Old Hai humphed: 'Clot!'

Turtle!' thought Trinket to himself. He went on practising, but when on the

third try he found himself outclassed yet again, he began to feel a sense of helpless despair.

'You could practise for three years and still not learn how to parry that snatch of mine,' said Old Hai. 'You have to counter with a sideways cut across my wrist. That's called defence through attack.'

'So that's it!' exclaimed Trinket. That's easy as anything! Why didn't you tell me before?'

Old Hai tried another snatch and this time Trinket did as he had been instructed and cut across the line of Hai's attack with the edge of his right palm. But Old Hai, instead of pulling in his exposed hand, adjusted the angle slightly and dealt the boy a resounding box on the ears. Trinket flew into a temper and tried to pay him back, but Old Hai, with a deft flip of his left hand, caught him by the wrist and threw him tumbling across the floor. 'Clot! Remember that one?'

Trinket's shoulder had crashed into the wall. Luckily Old Hai had not put much force into the throw, or the bones in his shoulder would have been smashed to pieces.

Turtle!' was on the very tip of Trinket's tongue, but he just managed to swallow his rage.

Those two moves will come in very handy tomorrow,' he thought to himself, 'when I fight with Misty. One of those and he'll be finished!'

He clambered to his feet, mentally rehearsing to himself Old Hai's moves, and presented himself for another bout with his master.

A dozen or so bouts later, he began to grow accustomed to the extraordinary speed of the old eunuch's handwork, and was even able to extricate himself from the shoulder snatch—but somehow he never managed to get away without a box on the ears. Old Hai did not subject him every time to the complete tumble-across-the-floor, but contented himself with a carefully placed, and devastatingly effective, flick of the side of his hand. Trinket did not try to counter it, and Old Hai spared him the humiliation of being thrown across the room.

Trinket was by now thoroughly dejected.

'Goong-goong, ' he asked, 'how can I ever get clear of that flick of yours?'

Old Hai gave an inscrutable little smile.

'If I want to box you on the ears, you'll never get away—not if you practise for ten years. But you'll be a match for your friend Misty. Now, let us practise the second move.'

He rose to his feet and demonstrated the second move for Trinket—the part of the Greater Catch-Can sequence known as Monkey Picking Fruit. Then they did it together, move by move.

Trinket was incurably lazy by nature, and had never been interested in the idea of learning kungfu properly. But he was very keen to win, and desperately wanted to learn a few tricks with which to bring Misty to his knees! So despite himself, he became a model student. And Old Hai was strangely long-suffering with him. They practised all through the afternoon. The old eunuch sat in his chair, moving his arms effortlessly through the air, and applying very little actual force—but though the blows were light, they were delivered with unerring accuracy. That night, when Trinket lay down to sleep, his body was a mass of aches and pains. He must have been 'touched' between four and five hundred times. He lay there inwardly cursing the old eunuch:

'Nasty Old Devil! Just you wait! Tomorrow, when I've beaten Misty, I'll never, never, ever be your student again, however many hundreds of times you kowtow and beg me by knocking your nasty old turtle-head on the ground!'

Stork and Monkey

The next day, after his morning gambling session, Trinket went off to fight with Misty. He found his young sparring partner sporting another brand new outfit.

'Where does the little blighter think he's off to every day,' he wondered silently, 'with all his fancy clothes? On a brothel crawl?'

In a sudden fit of jealousy he reached out and tore at the boy's gown. There was a loud ripping sound, and one of the seams came apart. But in that one moment he forgot ever, 'tiling he had just learned. Misty landed him a punch right in the midriff, making him howl with pain. Misty also seized the opportunity to jab his fingers into Trinket's left thigh. Trinket sank to the ground, his left leg numb with pain, whereupon Misty pushed him from the back and he

fell flat on his face. Misty now leapt astride his back and applied pressure to the vital point known as House of Will. Trinket surrendered.

He stood up and tried to collect his thoughts. He saw Misty come hurrying towards him again and decided it was the right moment to try Stork Preening Feathers. He cut across the line of Misty's wrist. Misty pulled back his hand smartly, and was aiming a clenched fist, but Trinket forestalled his next move and gripped his wrist, twisting it, while at the same time driving his left elbow sharply into the small of his opponent's back. Misty let out a great cry of pain. He knew that this round was Trinket's.

This was Trinket's first victory over Misty. He was beside himself. He had already taken two lives: the Captain at Victory Hill, and young Laurel. But those had both been the result of trickery. In terms of actual fighting he had a virtually unbroken record as a loser—unless one counted the times he had bullied little eight- or nine-year-olds. He might have got the upper hand once or twice in the occasional scrap—but that had always been through some cheap trick or other: biting, or throwing sand, or slicing off bits of his opponents' feet from under the table. Today was his first bona fide victory. Needless to say it went straight to his head, and he lost the next round.

In the fourth round Trinket concentrated hard. He decided to try out Monkey Picking Fruit. They got into a long clinch which neither seemed able to break. Then they both ran out of steam and ended up in a huddle on the ground, both panting for breath. They agreed to call it a tie.

Misty seemed to be enjoying himself enormously. He laughed.

Today you've . . . you've really improved! It's really fun fighting you! Who's been giving you lessons?'

Trinket was still out of breath.

'I've . . . I've always known those moves, it's just that I didn't want to use them on you the other day. Tomorrow I've got some . . . some new ones to try out. They're even better. But maybe you're too scared.'

Misty laughed out loud.

'Of course not! Just you be careful you don't end up doing that favourite trick of yours—you know, the one where you yell "I surrender!".'

'You're the one who'll end up doing that\'

The Archer

Trinket went back feeling extremely full of himself.

'Goong-goong!' he called out. 'I tried your Greater Catch-Can! I gave his wrist a good twist, then I thumped him on the back with my elbow like this—and he surrendered, just like that\'

'How many rounds did you fight today?' asked Old Hai.

'Four,' replied Trinket. 'We won two each. I should have won three, but I was a bit too careless in the third.'

'I am unconvinced,' commented the old eunuch. 'If you fought four rounds, then I'd guess you only won one at the very most.'

Trinket gave a short laugh.

'All right, I lost the first round. But I won the second—honour bright! May Heaven strike me dead if I tell a lie! The third round was—well, let's say he didn't exactly lose . . . And then in the last round we both got puffed and agreed to fight again tomorrow.'

'Now, tell me exactly what happened,' said Hai. 'I want a truthful blow-by-blow account.'

Trinket had a good memory, but he really knew next to nothing about Martial Arts, and there was no way he could describe all of the moves. The best he could do was to give an account of his own winning move in the third round—the one he'd been so pleased with himself about. But Hai wanted everything. Trinket tried to improvise, and somehow, by answering Hai's questions, which jolted his own memory, he managed in the end to give a reasonably accurate and detailed account of Misty's winning moves.

'You must have eyes that see a thousand leagues, Goong-goong!' exclaimed Trinket. 'How else could you know so clearly what Misty's moves were?'

Old Hai bowed his head in deep thought, and muttered to himself:

This really must be the teaching of a High Master of the Wudang School!

Trinket seemed delighted:

'You mean my friend Misty is a High Master? If he and I are just about an equal match, then I must be . . . Ha ha . . .'

Old Hai gave a snort of disapproval.

'Stuff and nonsense! Don't go giving yourself airs! I never said he was a Master. I was talking of his teacher.'

'So what School do you belong to, then?' asked Trinket

innocently. 'Whichever it is, our School is the best in the world! It's far more deadly than the Wudang School!'

His bragging was based on utter ignorance.

'I belong to the Shaolin School,' replied Hai.

'Terrific!' exclaimed Trinket. 'Shaolin versus Wudang: it's got to be a walk-over! They'll run away from us with their tails between their legs!'

Old Hai humphed:

'You're no disciple of mine, and you don't belong to the Shaolin School! How dare you talk of us?'

'I didn't say I belonged,' said Trinket sheepishly. 'But I am studying the Shaolin style, right?'

'Yes. This Misty is using standard Wudang Catch-Can techniques, so we have to use the standard Shaolin Catch-Can against him.'

That's what I meant!' cried Trinket. 'So if I lose, I'm not only disgracing myself, I'm disgracing the glorious Shaolin tradition!'

In actual fact he knew nothing whatsoever about the Shaolin School or its glorious tradition, but now that he was a part of it, it had to be something special.

'When I taught you those moves yesterday,' went on Hai, 'my intention was to scare this young fellow, to get him out of the way, so that you could get that book for me from the Upper Library. But what you have told me changes everything. If he is part of the Wudang Lineage, then I shall have to teach you all eighteen forms of the Greater Catch-Can. Do you know the Archer?'

That's where you bend the bow and pull the arrow, right?'

Old Hai scowled.

The first rule in kungfu is to be truthful. If you don't know something then say so. In the Martial Arts the deadliest sin is pride. Now listen. You bend the knee of the forward leg like a bow: that's the Bow. You stretch the back leg out at an angle like an arrow: that's the Arrow. The two together make the Archer.'

As he spoke he demonstrated, and Trinket copied.

That's easy! I could do that hundreds of times!

'I don't need you to do it hundreds of times—just once. Now, into position, and unless I give the order, you're not to make the slightest move.'

He pressed down on Trinket's legs, so that his front leg was more bent, his back leg straighten

This is easy!' exclaimed Trinket.

But as the minutes went by, his legs began to go numb.

'Isn't that enough yet?'

'Not by a long way!'

'But what's the point of my staying all strung out in this weird position?' protested Trinket. This isn't going to help me beat Misty!'

'If you can once master the Archer,' said Hai, somewhat sententiously, 'then no one will ever be able to topple you over. That's how useful it is!'

Trinket was not impressed.

'But even if I do get knocked over, I can always bounce back, can't I?'

Hai was deep in thought, and nodded his head slowly. When Trinket saw him nod, he straightened up at once and started slapping his legs.

'Who said you could stand up?' roared the old eunuch. The Archer again—at once!'

'I need to piss!' cried Trinket.

Well you can't!' Hai barked back at him.

'I need to crap!'

'Permission not granted!'

Then I'll just have to do it here on the floor!'

Old Hai heaved a sigh, and reluctantly gave him permission to go. Once safely there, Trinket proceeded to flex his legs and make himself feel more comfortable.

Trinket was a bright sort of lad, but not the type to follow instructions to the letter, or learn something thoroughly according to the rules. Old Hai soon had to relax his high standards, and content himself with teaching Trinket one or two grappling moves and snatches. When they practised, since the moves involved a lot of bending and turning and crouching and squatting, the old eunuch did not always join in himself, but called out the directions one by one and felt with his hands to make sure Trinket was doing them properly.

Tamardy!

The next day Trinket went to fight with Misty again. He was confident that this time, with his newly acquired technique, he would win every bout. But somehow everything he tried fell flat. Each one of his wonderful new moves met with a new (and equally wonderful) riposte, and he ended up losing the first two rounds.

Shocked and angry, he fought the third with extra determination, catching Misty's left hand in a tight grip and bending it back in such a way that Misty was unable to move and had to surrender.

Trinket was pleased as punch. But then he lost the fourth, ending up with Misty astride his neck, squeezing with his legs, all but throttling him. He surrendered, got up, and yelled:

'Tamardy! What the hell do you think you're—'

'What was that?' cried Misty with a frown. What was that you just said?' The word Trinket had used was one of the commonest (and most explicit) forms of abuse to be heard on the streets of Yangzhou—or indeed of any city in China, the tendency to insult the virtue of an adversary's mother being more or less universal. Misty, however, had never heard the word used before, and sounded very shocked. Trinket was at once on his guard.

'Oops!' he thought to himself. This is the Forbidden City— "not quite the place for that kind of language. Whiskers warned me not to give myself away!'

Quickly he improvised. 'I was just saying that my move wasn't hard enough.'
'Oh.'

'Phew!' Trinket breathed a sigh of relief. That was a close one. This little turtle obviously spends all his time locked up in the Forbidden City . . .'

Well,' said Misty, 'are you coming back for more tomorrow?'

'Of course I am! Hey, Misty, there's something I want to ask you. And I want you to promise to tell me the truth.'

'Ask away.'

'Your kungfu teacher—he's a High Master of the Wudang School, isn't he?'

'How on earth did you know that?' exclaimed Misty.

'I could tell from your style.'

'You mean you know my style? Go on then, tell me the names of the moves.'

'Of course I know it. It's the Lesser Catch-Can Wudang School, famous among the Brothers of River and Lake. But it can never beat the Greater Catch-Can of our Shaolin School!'

Misty roared with laughter.

'Aren't you ashamed to brag like that? Who won today?'

Short Cuts

When Trinket arrived back at his quarters, he sighed.

'Goong-goong, the more I practise my kungfu, the more he practises his. But his teacher seems to teach him things that really work.'

'You obviously lost all four bouts today!' exclaimed the old eunuch. 'Instead of looking at your own faults, you have to lay the blame elsewhere.'

Trinket gave a little snort:

'Who says I lost all four? I always win one or two, or three . . . Today I asked him if his teacher really was a High Master of the Wudang School.'

'And what did he say?'

The eunuch could not conceal his interest.

'He asked me how I knew. That's as good as saying yes.'

'I thought so all along,' mumbled Old Hai to himself. 'So it is the Wudang School.'

He seemed quite lost in thought and stared abstractedly across the room as if he was trying to unravel some difficult puzzle.

'Come, ' he finally said, after a long silence. 'Let's study some tripping techniques.'

And so every day Trinket studied with Old Hai. And every day he sparred with Misty. Whenever he encountered a difficult part in some new move, he faked his way through it, and the old eunuch was lenient with him, taking short cuts, omitting a lot of the fundamental techniques in favour of the more useful moves that would enable his student to dodge, to escape, to gain the advantage by whatever means. But when Trinket went off to fight with Misty, however many moves he had up his sleeve, Misty always seemed to have the appropriate riposte, and still Trinket lost seven or eight times out of ten.

Trinket makes a Deal

The days went by. Every morning Trinket went gambling with the eunuchs—Wu, Fat Ping, and the two Wen brothers. At first he kept his face wrapped in the white muslin bandage, but gradually with every day he revealed a little bit more of his features. His gambling companions could see that he was quite different from Laurel, but somehow they came to accept him as he was. First, the excitement of the game somewhat blurred their memories of the original Laurel. Secondly, Trinket was forever lending them money and he was therefore a most welcome friend (whoever he was). Thirdly, because he only revealed himself gradually, in stages, the edge was

taken off their surprise. What with one thing and another, no awkward questions were asked. When the gambling was over, he would go and have a few bouts with Misty. And after lunch he practised kungfu.

The Catch-Can techniques grew harder. Trinket was by nature doubly indolent: he didn't like taxing his memory, and he didn't like practising. Luckily for him, Old Hai was not a hard taskmaster, and allowed him to proceed at his own

natural pace.

Soon he had been in the Forbidden City a full two months— and the time seemed to have sped by. Every day he was given money to gamble with, and though his was not exactly a life of unfettered ease and liberty, he was happy enough. His chief regret, the one thing he lamented, was that he could not indulge in his low-life habits, such as his love of filthy expressions and abuse, or his yen for the odd bit of chicken-stealing or dog-baiting. Sometimes he thought of escaping from the Palace—but then he reflected on the fact that he knew precisely no one in Peking, and fear got the better of him. So he let the days slip by.

His daily bouts with Misty had engendered a genuine feeling of friendship between the two boys. Trinket often came off the worst, but he was able to console himself with nearly always winning at the gambling table. For both boys their daily bouts became something of an addiction: if they missed a day they became positively unwell. Trinket's skill as a fighter made slow but steady progress, while Misty remained constant. Trinket would occasionally win.

Over the two-month period, the Wen brothers became indebted to Trinket to the tune of two hundred taels of silver. One day, as they were gambling, the two brothers shot each other a meaningful glance, and one of them, Wen Youdao, said to Trinket:

'Laurel, dear friend, there's a matter we'd like to discuss with you. Could we step outside a moment?'

'Of course. Do you want to borrow some more money? Go ahead.'

'Much obliged!'

The two brothers went outside and Trinket followed them into the next room.

'My dear Laurel,' said Wen Youdao, 'what a rare thing it is indeed, to find someone so young and so extraordinarily generous!'

This was music to Trinket's ears.

'Come on! We're friends. What's mine is yours for the

borrowing; what's yours is mine. Friends needn't worry about piddling little things like that.'

Over the past couple of months he had managed to pick up quite a passable

Peking turn of phrase, and his occasional lapses (little tell-tale bursts of Yangzhou slang) went largely unnoticed.

'Our luck has been just terrible these last two months,' went on Wen Youdao. 'We owe you a substantial sum. You may make light of it, but it worries us.'

'Our debt is growing all the time, ' put in his brother. 'And while your luck at the tables keeps going up, ours keeps going down. At this rate we'll not be able to pay you back for ages. It's making our lives a misery just thinking about it!'

'But I'm not asking you for any of it!' replied Trinket with a gracious smile. 'And I insist that you never bring the subject up again!'

Wen Youfang sighed:

'If it was only you! Why, to tell the truth, if we only owed money to you, we could let a hundred years go by and not feel under any pressure— isn't that true?'

Why, yes!' laughed Trinket. 'I suppose it is! Or two hundred! Or three, come to that!'

Two or three?' queried Wen Youfang. 'We'll all be dead and gone by then . . .'

At this point in the conversation he turned and gave his brother a look. Youdao gave a little nod, and Youfang continued:

'But you see, the trouble is, we know that your master is a very difficult person to deal with—'

'You mean Old Hai Goong-goong?'

'Precisely,' replied Wen Youfang. 'You may not want the money back. But sooner or later Old Hai is going to come after us. And one flick of his little finger will be enough to do for us! We have to think of a way, something we can do, to pay the money back!'

'Here it comes!' Trinket thought to himself. 'That Old Turtle Hai is a canny old bugger! All these weeks I've been thinking about nothing but practising kungfu and fighting with Misty, and I'd forgotten all about getting that book from the Upper Library for Old Hai. But wait a minute. I'll let them do the talking first.'

He humphed, in a non-committal sort of way.

The only way we can think of,' said Wen Youfang, 'is to beg you to be most especially generous and charitable, and agree to

write off this debt and not to mention a word of it to Old Hai Goong-goong. Then whenever we win anything, we'll give it to you. We'll pay you back—every penny of it!

'Bloody hell you will!' thought Trinket to himself. 'What do you putrid turtles take me for? What kind of donkey do you think I am? Do you think a couple of turtle-heads like you will ever win anything off me?'

While these far from charitable thoughts were running through his mind, a troubled expression crossed his face.

The trouble is,' he began, 'I've already told Old Hai. He says the money has to be repaid—but he's willing to let it go for a day or two.'

The Wen brothers exchanged a glance. They looked extremely disconcerted by this piece of information. Clearly they were terrified of Old Hai.

'In that case,' said Wen Youdao, 'would you be able to help us out, Laurel old friend! Whenever you win, give your winnings to Hai Goong-goong and say. . . say it's in repayment of our debt?'

They've got a bloody nerve!' thought Trinket to himself. What do they take me for? A three-year-old?'

What he said was:

That could work, I suppose . . . though I'd be losing out rather

The Wen brothers thought they detected a more co-operative note, and instantly began beaming with pleasure and pumping their hands.

'Most dreadfully obliged! So very kind of you!'

'Never, in our entire lifetimes, will we forget this kindness of yours, dear friend!' gushed Wen Youfang.

'But if I do this for you,' countered Trinket, 'there's something I want the two of you to do for me in return.'

'Of course! Of course!' they chanted in unison. 'Consider it done!'

'All the time I've been in service here,' Trinket went on, 'I have never had so much as a peep at His Majesty's face. Since the two of you wait on him in the Upper Library, I thought you might take me with you and let me have a little tiny look

The Wen brothers exchanged a rapid (and very awkward) glance. Wen Youdao scratched his head several times.

Well. . . that might be ... a wee bit. . . ' began Wen Youfang.

He repeated the 'a wee bit' seven or eight times, and then fell silent.

'I don't want to actually talk to him or anything,' explained Trinket. 'I'd just like to hang out in the Upper Library for a few minutes, long enough to see the Imperial Visage, you know—what a blessing that would be! Of course, if it's impossible to arrange for such a blessing to come my way, I won't hold it against you—'

'It's not at all impossible, actually,' said Wen Youdao hurriedly. 'I'll come and fetch you between three and five this afternoon and take you to the Upper Library. His Majesty goes there regularly at that time to practise calligraphy and write verses. You may very likely have a chance to see him then. At other times he is busy elsewhere in one of the Halls of State, and it's almost impossible to get anywhere near him.'

As he said this he inclined his head to one side and gave his brother a little wink. Trinket could see all of this quite clearly.

'Putrid turtles!' he thought angrily to himself. 'Lousy rotten pigs! The minute I said I wanted to see the Emperor they looked ugly as hell. All this stuff about this afternoon is a load of crap— that's probably the one time in the day I'll be bound not to see him! So when will I? And anyway, supposing I did,' his thoughts rambled on, 'and supposing he spoke to me, what the hell would I say? I'd only put my foot in it and give myself away, and then he'd have my whole clan put to death or something dreadful like that—have Mum dragged all the way up from Yangzhou and cut her head off!

'But I'd better give it a try. I don't even know if all this kungfu the old eunuch's been teaching me is the real thing. It doesn't seem to work against Misty. If I can get hold of that book he wants so badly—the Thirty-Two Sections Thing or whatever it's called—that should make the Old Turtle happy. Then at least he might teach me some kungfu that really works.'

He proceeded to pump his hands in gratitude to the Wen brothers:

'If a humble servant like me goes and dies without having set eyes on the Blessed Face, when I get down in the nether world, old King Yama will curse me for a stinking old turtle!'

After his bout with Misty, he returned to his quarters and chatted with Old Hai as usual about the way the fight had gone. He made no mention of the fact that the Wen brothers had agreed to sneak him into the Upper Library. His plan was to lay hands on the Sutra and give the Old Turtle a big surprise!

The Upper Library

The early afternoon drew to an end and, true to their word, the Wen brothers arrived to collect Trinket. Wen Youfang whistled quietly outside, and Trinket managed to slide softly out without Old Hai noticing. The brothers gestured silently and set off in a westerly direction. After his previous experience, Trinket made sure this time to make a mental note of all the walkways and corridors they went down, and of the countless doorways and rooms they went through. This time, he wanted to be able to find his way back.

The distance from his quarters to the Upper Library was much greater than the distance to the gambling room. They seemed to walk for a good quarter of an hour. And then Wen Youfang whispered:

'Here we are! This is the Upper Library! Be extra careful now!'

'Message received!' Trinket whispered back.

They guided him round the back of a large courtyard, and sneaked in through a little side-door. They then made their way through two miniature gardens and into a large room.

The entire room was lined with bookshelves, and every shelf was stacked with books. There must have been tens of thousands of them. Trinket gasped and muttered silently to himself:

'Hot-piece tamardy! Where on earth am I going to find the Old Turtle's Sutra in amongst this lot?' Trinket had grown up in a very different world from this. In his home town, he had never set eyes on a library of any sort. Probably his idea of a library would have been a dozen or so books in a room somewhere. Finding the Sutra from among a dozen books might have been a feasible proposition . . . but here\ He looked around him at the sea of books, and his eyes started swimming. He was seized with a sense of panic, and his first instinct was to run for it.

'His Majesty will arrive in a moment,' said Wen Youdao, sotto voce. This is where he will sit, at this table here. This is where he will do his reading and writing.'

Trinket stared at the massive rosewood table, inlaid with gold and jade.

That stuff's all real!' he thought to himself. 'All that gold and jade! All those precious stones! If I could somehow pick it all off, I'd get a fortune for it at the jewellers!'

There was a threadbound volume lying open on the table, and to its left all of the paraphernalia of the traditional scholar had been

neatly set out: inkstone, calligraphy brush, brush-stand. The chair was spread with a brocade cover, embroidered with a dragon in gold thread. Trinket was utterly overawed and his heart was racing.

'Mother's!' he exclaimed silently to himself. 'Look at the classy stuff this Emperor's got! The lucky turtle!'

To the right of the table stood an antique bronze tripod, and delicate curls of sandalwood incense-smoke drifted out through the perforated mouth of the animal-shaped cover.

'You hide behind this bookcase,' Wen Youdao instructed Trinket. 'When His Majesty comes in, you can have a peep. And that's it. When His Majesty is studying, no one must make a sound. You mustn't cough or sneeze. If you do, you may offend His Majesty, and he may very well have you taken out by the guards and executed!'

'I know, I know,' said Trinket. 'I'm not allowed to cough, I'm not allowed to sneeze, I'm not allowed to fart!'

Wen Youdao frowned.

'Laurel Goong-goong my friend, the Upper Library is a very special sort of place. You really mustn't say anything rude or silly in here.'

Trinket shot out his tongue and was silent.

One of the Wen brothers took a fly-whisk, the other a duster, and they went around the room busily dusting and whisking. There was actually not a speck of dust in the whole place, but that was not going to prevent them from

conscientiously executing their duties. Then they polished every surface with a piece of white cloth, until it was as spotless and shining as a mirror.

'Laurel,' said Wen Youdao, when this elaborate cleansing ritual was finally completed, 'it rather seems as if His Majesty may not be coming today after all. In a moment or two the Captain of the Guard will be here on his round of inspection, and if he sets eyes on you, we'll be in big trouble.'

'You two go back on your own,' said Trinket. 'I want to stay here a little longer.'

'Out of the question!' piped both Wen brothers simultaneously.

'According to Palace regulations,' said Wen Youdao, 'there mustn't be the slightest deviation from the normal roster of attendance on His Majesty. There are literally thousands of eunuchs and Palace ladies-in-waiting, and they can't all just go barging in whenever they feel like seeing him!'

'Don't misunderstand us,' put in Wen Youfang. 'We want to help you, Laurel old friend. But even we are only allowed in the Upper Library for half an hour each day. We have to leave the minute we've done the cleaning. We can't stay any longer ourselves. Honestly! If we did, and the Captain of the Guard found out, we'd be lucky to get away with a jail sentence and a flogging! Quite probably we'd have our family property confiscated and all our relatives put to death!'

Trinket shot his tongue out again. : 'That seems a bit stiff!'

This concerns the Emperor's own person and security,' observed Wen Youfang, with an emphatic stamp of the foot. 'It's no laughing matter. If you still want to see His Majesty, we'll come back tomorrow and try our luck again.'

'Very well,' said Trinket. 'We'd best be off then.'

The Wen brothers had clearly feared the worst. Somewhat relieved, they marched him firmly out of the room, each of them with a hand on one shoulder. As they went, Trinket suddenly remarked:

'You've probably never set eyes on the Emperor yourselves, have you?'

Wen Youfang stared at him aghast:

'How . . . how . . . did you—'

But before he could say the word 'know', his brother butted in with:

'Of course we have! Why, he comes to the Library every day to study. We see him all the time.'

'Oh yes!' thought Trinket to himself. 'As if His Majesty would want to be there with you two turtles rushing around, dusting and whisking!'

'Laurel old friend,' Wen Youdao went on, 'it really is dashed decent of you to help us with the money thing, and we'll definitely find a way of saying thank you. But as for actually seeing His Majesty, that's something that—well, it sort of lies in the laps of the gods, if you know what I mean. A man has to be sort of blessed with it, it comes as a divine reward, you know, for past virtue: it's not something you can just ask for. . .'

They had already left the Upper Library courtyard well behind them.

'Oh well, ' said Trinket, 'let's try again in a few days' time!'

'Yes let's!' chorused the Wen brothers eagerly.

And they parted ways.

Trinket hurried away down one long pathway after another. Then he darted behind a door, and waited till he was sure the Wen brothers would be well out of sight before stealing out from behind the door and retracing his steps to the Upper Library. He reached the side-door of the Library courtyard and gave it a push, only to find that it had been barred from the inside. Trinket was rather taken aback:

Tunny they should have locked up already. . . Maybe the Wens were speaking the truth and the Guard really has come on a tour of inspection. I wonder if they've been and gone yet?'

He pressed his ear to the door and listened. Hearing no sound from within, he put his eye to a crack in the door and looked into the courtyard. He could see no sign of anyone there. He reached for his boot and pulled out a little dagger—it was the one he had killed Laurel with. The Forbidden City was clearly a very dangerous place and he had resolved to keep the dagger with him at all times from that day forth. Very carefully he inserted the blade between the two leaves of the door, and began to prise the bar lightly but firmly upwards. Having opened the door a couple of inches, he reached through the crack and took hold of the door-bar; he slid it out (taking care not to let it fall or make a sound) and opened the door. He slipped through, barred the door again behind him, and having ascertained that all was quiet in the courtyard he crept

stealthily across it and poked his head into the Upper Library itself. Luck was with him. The room was empty. In he went.

Once more he stood before the inlaid rosewood table and gazed at the brocade cover draped over the chair, with its dragon embroidered in gold thread. Suddenly he had an irresistible impulse.

'Oh mother's! If the Emperor can sit on this dragon seat, why shouldn't old Trink!'

One stride and he was there, sitting on the chair.

At first his heart pounded with excitement. But then he thought to himself:

This chair isn't even particularly comfortable. Being Emperor isn't so very special after all.'

He did not stay seated for long but was soon scanning the bookshelves for the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. There were literally thousands of books stacked on top of each other. And he could decipher hardly a single one of the tides. He looked desperately for

the number Four, but of the tides that contained it, none had a Ten or a Two to make up the requisite total. (They were in fact all editions of the famous Four Books of Confucianism—The Annotated Four Books, The Four Books Expounded, etc.) He searched again and located a tide that began with a Ten and a Three—Thirteen (it was an edition of the Thirteen Classics)—and experienced a momentary thrill before he realized that it was not what he was looking for.

He was beginning to grow despondent, when suddenly he heard the familiar plip-plop of boots coming from outside the entrance at the other end of the Upper Library. There was a creak as the door opened, and then the clearly discernible sound of footsteps resumed. Trinket could still see nothing, as a large screen obscured the doorway, but he muttered silently to himself:

'Help! It seems that today is the day old Trink has his whole family executed!'

He could not possibly reach the barred doorway through which he had entered, so he squeezed against the wall behind one of the bookcases. He could hear two men walking around the Upper Library, dusting the bookshelves with fly-whisks.

In a little while somebody else came in, and the two 'cleaners' departed. The

new arrival began strolling up and down the Library.

That's done it!' thought Trinket. That's bound to be the Captain of the Guard come to inspect. They must have spotted me coming in by the back entrance.'

He broke out in a cold sweat.

The Imperial Guardian

The feet continued to stroll up and down the room. Then a voice was heard from outside, calling:

'Your Majesty! The Imperial Guardian Lord Oboi requests an urgent audience and is waiting outside!'

The man in the Upper Library cleared his throat. Trinket's heart missed a beat:

'So this is the Emperor, and the one outside is Lord Oboi— the Regent, the one Whiskers wanted to fight! I must have a look at this so-called Manchu Champion! I'll really have something to tell Whiskers the next time I see him!'

Next came heavy footsteps from outside the door, and a man entered the room:

'Your servant, Majesty!'

This was followed by the sound of something (a head?) being knocked on the floor. Trinket's curiosity got the better of him. He poked his own head out from behind the bookcase and saw a huge hulk of a man down on all fours, performing the regulation kowtow. One quick glimpse was all he dared allow himself, for fear of being spotted by this giant, and the next instant he was skulking behind the bookcase again—but shifting his position a little, so as to be 'facing' Oboi through the shelves.

'Ha!' he thought to himself. 'You're kowtowing to me as well! Fancy that! The Manchu Champion down on all fours in front of old Trink!'

That will do!'

It was the Emperor who spoke.

Oboi rose to his feet.

'Majesty! The former Regent Suksaha is harbouring thoughts of treason. His memorial to the throne is wicked and rebellious— he must be severely

punished!

The Emperor cleared his throat again. It was not clear whether he agreed or not.

'Majesty!' Oboi began again. 'You have no sooner assumed the reins of government than this rascal presents a memorial begging leave to "proceed to the Late Emperor's Mausoleum and eke out his few remaining days there ..." His words are an insult to Your Majesty's honour! During Your Majesty's minority he was hale and hearty enough; now that you have assumed the full exercise of power he is suddenly at death's door! He is making a most serious accusation.'

The Emperor cleared his throat yet again. Oboi went on.

'I have consulted with other Princes of the Realm, and with the Princes of the Third Degree, and the Great Ministers, and all are in agreement that Suksaha is guilty of Twenty-Four Heinous Crimes, including treason and rebellion! According to our Statutes, both he and his eldest son, the Minister Chakdan, should be sentenced to the Lingering Death for these offences; his six other sons, his grandsons, and his two nephews should be decapitated; his relatives, including the Commander of the Vanguard Battalion Barhe, and Otu of the Imperial Guard, should also be executed.'

'Isn't that a bit excessive?' asked the Emperor.

The Emperor's voice is like a boy's,' thought Trinket to himself. 'In fact he sounds a bit like Misty—what a joke!'

'Majesty!' continued Oboi relentlessly. 'You are still young, and have little experience in affairs of state. Suksaha and I were instructed by His Late Majesty to serve as your Regents during your minority. Your full accession to power should be a cause of joy to us. And yet Suksaha submits this slanderous memorial! He is clearly harbouring some evil intention. I beg Your Majesty to authorize me to deal with this matter immediately. You should be firm and show your authority from the very outset of your reign. You should ensure that your ministers and subjects hold you in awe and fear. If you deal with this traitor too leniently, in days to come your other ministers will take advantage of your youth and their words and deeds will lack respect. Your own position as Monarch will be threatened

Trinket thought that Oboi's tone of voice sounded extremely arrogant. 'You're the one who's lacking in respect, you filthy old turtle!' he thought. 'Calling the Emperor young and inexperienced—as if he were some little boy! Could he be a

boy? That would be rather fun

The Emperor now addressed Oboi:

'What Suksaha has done is wrong. But he was once one of my Regents, just as you were. You were all the trusted Ministers of His Late Majesty. If at the very beginning of my reign I were to . . . put to death one of His Late Majesty's trusted Ministers, I fear His Late Majesty's departed spirit would not be pleased.'

Oboi laughed:

'Majesty, that is childish talk! His Late Majesty named Suksaha as a Regent in order that he might loyally and diligently serve Your Majesty. He should be true to his Late Sovereign's wishes, he should be willing to serve Your Majesty with his last breath, to lay down his life for Your Majesty! Instead of which his mind is filled with resentment and ambition, and he publicly slights Your Majesty. He puts his own preservation above the concerns of the State. It is he who has wronged the Late Emperor; how can Your Majesty talk of wronging this scoundrel? Ha ha!'

'What is it you find so funny, Imperial Guardian?' asked the Emperor. Oboi's face went pale.

'Nothing, Your Majesty. Nothing.'

He looked almost sheepish.

The Emperor was silent. Finally he spoke again:

'Perhaps execution is what Suksaha deserves. But if I put him to death, I would surely be causing offence to His Late Majesty's

spirit. If my subjects did not accuse me of wrongfully taking the man's life, then they would be bound to question my Father's judgement in raising Suksaha to a position of power. If the Court publishes the list of Suksaha's Twenty-Four Heinous Crimes, it will be plain for everyone to see that he was a rogue and a villain, and they will ask themselves how His Late Majesty came to appoint such a wicked person as Regent? And what of the other former Regents, they will say? What of Oboi, for instance? Would such a course of action be wise, do you think?'

'Allow me to comment, Majesty,' replied Oboi. 'Let the people think what they like—what does it matter to us? They will not dare open their mouths. No one

would ever dare breathe a word against His Late Majesty.'

'It is written in one of the ancient classics,' said the Emperor, 'that "the word of the people is more to be feared than the flooding of the rivers". It would not do at all to go around executing people left, right, and centre, and not allow anyone to speak what was on his mind.'

'One cannot pay attention to what is written in those Chinese classics. If the Chinese sages were so wise, how were we Manchus able to conquer their land? My advice to you, Majesty, is to put those Chinese books aside: the more Your Majesty reads them the more they addle Your Majesty's brain.'

The Emperor was silent.

'In the olden days,' Oboi went on, 'when I accompanied His Majesty Nurhachi and His Late Majesty on their various campaigns, we broke through the Pass and won many a hard-fought victory— and we knew not a single word of Chinese! We killed these southern tribes by the thousands! Conquering and ruling—these are things best done in our Manchu way!'

'It is true, Oboi, ' replied the Emperor, 'that you have rendered great service to the Dragon Throne. That is why my Late Father set such store by you and appointed you Regent.'

'All I desire is to serve Your Majesty with a loyal and diligent heart. That was my desire when your Father was alive, and his Father before him. Your Majesty, we Manchus believe in rewarding good and punishing evil. This Suksaha is a wicked traitor! He must be punished, and punished severely!'

'Wow!' thought Trinket to himself. 'Red-hot momma! You only have to open your mouth and I can tell that you're the one who's a wicked traitor.'

'What is it that makes you so determined to take Suksaha's life?'

'Me, Your Majesty?' protested Oboi. 'Are you implying that I have some personal motive in this?'

His voice rose, his tone became more strident and aggressive. After a short pause he continued, almost threateningly:

'I am asking this for the sake of the Manchu Throne! Your Majesty's ancestors fought bitterly to create the Empire; their grandchildren must not let it all come to nothing! Your Majesty, I find your insinuation hard to comprehend!'

Trinket was shocked by Oboi's menacing tone. He poked his head round the bookcase and saw a giant of a man striding towards the throne, the great jowls of his face twitching fiercely, his brows beetling, his fists clenched tightly before him.

There was a boyish cry, and a tall youth jumped down from the Dragon Throne. He turned his face, and Trinket let out a boyish—and utterly amazed—cry of his own.

The young Emperor, the Manchu Monarch, was none other than his friend and daily sparring partner—Misty!

CHAPTER 4

Trinket the Eunuch

A Loyal and Devoted Subject

If this Emperor he was looking at had been some sort of demon or monster, Trinket might have been able to control himself; but the shock of finding that it was none other than his friend Misty was so great that he could not help letting out a loud cry. He knew that no good would come of this discovery and turned to run; but even as he did so, the thought flashed through his mind that if he was no match for Misty, he was certainly no match for the mighty Manchu Champion. He stood no earthly chance of making a getaway. His gambler's instinct prompted a rapid change of plan: he would stay and brazen it out.

'Might as well go for bust,' he thought. 'It's worth a try.'

He darted out and planted himself right in front of the young Emperor.

'You!' he shouted at the giant. 'Oboi! What do you think you are playing at? How dare you be so rude to His Majesty? If you're thinking of doing him the least bit of harm, you'll have me to deal with first!'

As an old soldier who had earned the great power he wielded by his services on the battlefield, Oboi felt little respect for his inexperienced boy Emperor. And when this same inexperienced boy

Emperor suggested that it was personal ambition which had prompted him to ask for Suksaha's death, it had touched him on the raw—the more so because it was true—and in his rage his rough warrior's instinct had asserted itself and he had dared to clench his fists and argue with his young Master. But he had not been planning treason or any such thing, and when he saw this little eunuch

dart out from behind the bookcase and stand between himself and Emperor Kang Xi, openly challenging him with words of reproach, he was deeply shocked and reflected immediately on the inappropriateness of his own almost threatening behaviour. He hurriedly stepped back, crying:

'What an absurd accusation! I was merely reporting to His Majesty on a matter of state. I would never insult my Sovereign!'

He retreated another couple of steps and stood there with his hands hanging respectfully at his sides.

So Trinket's daily sparring partner was the Emperor Kang Xi, second in line of the great Manchu Monarchs to sit on the Chinese throne after his father Shun Zhi. Since Trinket had not recognized him on their first encounter, Kang Xi had been only too pleased to pass himself off as 'Misty', an invention no doubt inspired by his much grander real name Xuanye (which means roughly speaking Dark Effulgence). Like so many Manchus, the young Emperor was very fond of wrestling. But it takes a great deal of practice to become a good wrestler—plenty of real falls, real blows, real rough and tumble—and while the Emperor's guards were only too happy to teach him the rudiments, they were understandably reluctant to give him a real fight. Not one of them was willing to land a real blow on the Dragon head, or to twist the Imperial neck. If they absolutely had to engage him in hand-to-hand combat, they would fake it as best they could. But His Majesty's leg had only to come anywhere near and they would tumble to the ground; his hand had only to move vaguely in their direction and they were on the floor surrendering. If they absolutely had to strike back, their 'blows' would freeze on the slightest contact with his clothing. He was always urging them to 'fight properly', but none of them dared to do so. The most they could manage was to fake a little more convincingly. Even at chess, while his opponents might allow themselves a few winning moves during the game, they always made sure they lost at the very end.

(The last Empress Dowager of the Manchu dynasty, Ci Xi, who 'ruled' during the last half of the nineteenth century, is

reported to have been playing chess with one of her eunuchs one day, when the eunuch actually took one of her pieces. 'Majesty, I have captured one of your knights, ' he confessed. She flew into a towering rage at his insolence, and ordered him to be taken out and beaten until he died.)

It always disappointed Kang Xi intensely to see his guards, who seemed such good wrestlers when they were fighting amongst themselves, go all limp and helpless if he took one of them on himself. It was no better with the eunuchs. An Emperor was supposed to be able to have whatever he wanted in life—and

yet it seemed impossible to find anyone willing to give him a genuine fight. He often thought of leaving the Palace in disguise, of going out and finding a commoner to fight with. At least that way he could find out whether he was any good or not. But the reality of such an escapade was far too dangerous, and it had remained no more than a fantasy in the Imperial imagination.

The morning he had first encountered Trinket and the two of them had actually fought it out (Trinket losing despite his genuine exertions), Kang Xi had finally experienced the true joy of the fight! Their subsequent sparring matches brought the young Emperor untold delight, so much so that he became determined not to reveal his true identity to his newfound friend. He gave instructions that none of his personal eunuchs was to disturb them. He knew that if one of them revealed his true identity, Trinket would never fight him properly again.

There were over a thousand eunuchs in the Palace, and many of them had never set eyes on the Emperor. But they would have been obliged to learn the Court rules and regulations and would only have had to see the Dragon Robes to know who their wearer was. The only Palace Eunuch without this essential piece of knowledge was Trinket, the impostor. And from Kang Xi's point of view, this one eunuch was worth his weight in gold.

Kang Xi's skill as a fighter progressed, and Trinket managed to keep up with him, which inspired Kang Xi to practise still harder. He had a strong competitive instinct, and the better a fighter he became, the more pleasure he derived from it. As his pleasure increased, so did his feeling of friendship towards Trinket.

Kang Xi had known of Oboi's intentions towards Suksaha long before the former Regent set foot in the Upper Library that day. There had been enmity between the two Manchu noblemen ever since their two Banners had fallen out over the division of

territory (the Manchu conquerors were divided into eight Banners, and Oboi was chief of the Bordered Yellow Banner, while Suksaha headed the Plain White). Kang Xi knew that Oboi was motivated by personal spite, and he had therefore been reluctant to give his consent to Oboi's proposal—as a result of which Oboi had revealed himself as the fierce warrior he truly was. Kang Xi had been seriously shaken to see this fierce giant of a man come lumbering towards him across the Upper Library floor, sleeves rolled and fists clenched, as if he intended to threaten the Emperor's person. The Imperial Guards were all outside and out of range—and anyway, they were all Oboi's hand-picked men and not to be relied on. He was just beginning to sense the extremely precarious nature of his position when suddenly, out of the woodwork

(literally!) popped— of all people—his young friend Laurel. Kang Xi was delighted.

Together, ' he thought quickly to himself, 'the two of us can give this rascal Oboi a run for his money!'

But then Oboi retreated—and with him the immediate danger.

Trinket had leapt into the fray on the impulse of the moment. Once out in the open, he had no choice but to forge ahead—into the jaws of certain annihilation! Imagine his surprise (and joy) when the Manchu giant beat a retreat. It went straight to his head:

'It's for His Majesty to decide whether or not Suksaha should be put to death—not you! In fact, for your insolence, for daring to bare your fists and threaten His Majesty, I'd say you're the one who deserves the chop!'

Oboi broke out in a cold sweat at these words of Trinket's, and aware of the undeniably boorish nature of his recent behaviour, he turned to Kang Xi and said:

'Your Majesty, pay no heed to this foolish little eunuch. You know that I am one of your most devoted subjects, '

Kang Xi still stood in great awe of his former Regent. It was enough that Oboi was backing down. He had no desire to make things any harder for him than they already were.

'Laurel, ' he commanded, 'step aside.'

'Yes, Sire!'

Trinket bowed and moved away to one side of the table.

'Imperial Guardian Oboi, ' Kang Xi continued, 'I know you to be my devoted subject. You are a warrior, a man of action, and not used to the rules of civilized behaviour. I shall be lenient with you.'

Thank you, my Liege!' panted Oboi, hugely relieved.

'I shall act as you have suggested in this matter of Suksaha. You are after all my loyal subject, and he is a wicked traitor. It is our custom to reward loyalty and to punish evil.'

'Very wise, Majesty,' commented Oboi, looking positively smug. 'I shall always remain your most loyal and devoted servant!'

'Good, good. I shall instruct the Empress Dowager to reward you generously at tomorrow's audience.'

'Much obliged, Majesty.'

'Is there anything further?'

'Nothing, Majesty. Shall I take my leave?'

Kang Xi nodded and Oboi withdrew, his face by now wreathed in smiles.

The Secret is Out

Kang Xi waited until Oboi was gone, then leapt up from his chair:

'Laurel!' he said with a little laugh, 'So now you know my secret!'

'Majesty, I... I deserve to die! I hadn't the faintest idea you were the Emperor! It was very wrong of me—to fight with you like I did!'

Kang Xi sighed.

'Now that you do know, I suppose I'll never get a real fight out of you again. I'll never have any fun!'

Trinket smiled:

'If you promise not to take offence, I'll carry on fighting with you for real, just like I always do.'

'Excellent! Let's shake on it. For real, or not at all!'

He held out his hand. Trinket knew nothing of Court etiquette, and if he had known, he was the sort of person not to have cared a fig for it anyway—he grasped the Imperial hand and shook it, with a big grin on his face:

'From this day on: for real, or not at all!'

They squeezed each other's hands and laughed heartily together.

Since the moment of his birth, the Heir to the Manchu Throne had been

brought up in the consciousness that he was different and special, that his every cry or smile, his slightest movement, was being publicly watched over, and that he had not an ounce of freedom. His captivity was more total than that of a common

criminal, who could at least have the occasional informal conversation within the confines of prison, could at least stroll up and down his cell. The young Heir Apparent had always been constantly under surveillance—his tutors, his Court Eunuchs and maidservants v, 'atched over him in constant dread of the slightest mishap befalling his precious person. If he exhibited the tiniest degree of informality in his words or activities, he would be instantly admonished by the Imperial tutors—for fear that his father the Emperor might learn of this lapse and the Imperial wrath be kindled. If the young Heir Apparent conceived the notion of dispensing with some item of clothing, there was panic in the ranks, in case he should catch a chill. . .

(Such extreme confinement from infancy is sure to cramp the joie de vivre of any individual. Surely it must be this that has in part led to many of the hideous excesses perpetrated by tyrants down the ages. When a ruler finally reaches the age where he does have freedom, he has this enormous reservoir of pent-up energy waiting to be released. History's direst excesses are merely the most violent releases of that energy.)

Kang Xi had just recently embarked on that stage in his life when he could finally tell his eunuchs and maidservants to get out of his sight, to get lost and leave him alone. But in the presence of the Empress Dowager or his Ministers of State, he was still obliged to act the proper little Emperor. And even in front of the eunuchs and maids he felt obliged to keep up appearances. His true moments of relaxation were few and far between.

Every boy—whether Emperor or beggar—likes a bit of fun. This is only normal. In ordinary families children can romp around with their friends, they can fight or play to their hearts' content. This was not true for the young Emperor. In his case it required the most extraordinary stroke of luck for this to be possible. And that stroke of luck had been Trinket's unscheduled arrival on the scene. With Trinket Kang Xi could unwind, he could discard his Imperial persona and be himself; he could play and fight and scramble around. Never in his entire life had he known such unadulterated fun. Since meeting Trinket, his very dreams were of fighting and tumbling with his new friend.

He held Trinket by the hand, and said:

'In front of other people, you'll have to call me Your Majesty; but when we're on our own, I'd like you to carry on as before.'

'What a laugh!' cried Trinket. 'I'd never have dreamed you

•were the Emperor! I always thought the Emperor was some old fellow with a long white beard!'

Kang Xi mused to himself:

'My Father was just twenty-four years old when he died—he didn't have a long white beard. This boy doesn't seem to know anything!'

'Surely Old Hai Goong-goong must have told you something about me?' he said to Trinket.

Trinket shook his head.

'Never. He just taught me kungfu. Your Majesty, who teaches you kungfu?'

'Wait a minute—I thought we'd agreed to carry on as before? What's all this "Majesty" business?'

Trinket laughed.

'Sorry. This is all rather confusing.'

Kang Xi sighed.

'I knew it would be like this. I knew that as soon as you found out who I was that would be the end of fighting for real.'

'No it won't!' insisted Trinket. 'I shall treat you exactly the same as I always have—but I can see it's not going to be easy. Here goes then—hey Misty, go on, tell me, who teaches you?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you. What do you want to know for anyway?'

'I was just thinking. That Oboi was starting to look pretty nasty for a moment. Whoever your teacher is, he must be someone very special. Why don't we just get him to deal with old Oboi for us?'

Kang Xi smiled and shook his head.

'It wouldn't work. My teacher would never do anything like that.'

'It's a pity my teacher—Old Hai Goong-goong—is blind. Otherwise I'd have asked him. He could fix Oboi, no problem. I know what, why don't the two of us take him on together? He may be the Manchu Champion, but I bet we could get the better of him.'

'Brilliant! Brilliant!' cried Kang Xi, clearly delighted by this idea. But after a moment's thought he shook his head and said with a sigh:

'It wouldn't do at all for the Emperor to fight with one of his ministers.'

'If only you weren't the Emperor!' cried Trinket.

Kang Xi nodded. He really envied his little eunuch friend, who

could just do whatever he felt like doing—who could be so relaxed and easy even in the Palace. And then his thoughts returned to Oboi and his threatening behaviour, and he couldn't help still feeling a little afraid.

The Palace Guard is under his command, the Banner troops look up to him—if I issue a decree ordering his execution, he'll rise up against me and I'll be the one to be put to death! First I shall have to change the Palace Guard, and take away his military command—then strip him of his rank as Imperial Guardian, throw him out through the front gate of the Palace, and have his head chopped off! If only I could! That would be the day!

But a moment's reflection sufficed to tell him what a hopeless course of action that would be. If he changed the Guard, Oboi would know he was after him; and Oboi wielded enormous power. Oboi only had to move first, and Kang Xi would be finished. No, he had to bide his time in silence, wait for the perfect plan to present itself, and then act.

Kang Xi did not wish to share these ruminations with his

young friend.

'You'd better go back to Old Hai Goong-goong,' he said, 'and work hard at your kungfu. We'll meet again tomorrow for our usual bout. And not a word of what you saw today—to anyone!'

'Certainly not. Since there's no one else here, I'll just slip off— you don't mind if I drop the down-on-my-knees head-knocking stuff, do you?'

Kang Xi laughed and waved goodbye.

'Don't forget, tomorrow—same time, same place. Live or die!'

Punting the Boat Downstream

Trinket had not succeeded in laying hands on the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections—but he had discovered the secret identity of his daily sparring partner, and he left the Upper Library in a state of excitement bordering on delirium. Luckily Old Hai was blind in both eyes and unable to observe the change in his manner. He did however notice that the boy seemed especially talkative and wondered what had happened to put him in so cheerful a mood. Trinket was guarded in his answers to the old eunuch's questions.

The next day, when he went to have his usual bout with 'Misty', it was with every intention of fighting as usual. But somehow, now that he knew who his opponent was, while his

defensive moves were tighter than ever, his attacks were listless and half-hearted. It just seemed to happen that way. Kang Xi noticed at once, and moderated the intensity of his own attacking moves. It would be unfair to fight to win against an opponent who was handicapped in this way. They fought two short bouts, and Trinket lost both times.

Kang Xi sighed.

'Now that you know who I am, we'll never have a decent fight again!'

He sounded genuinely depressed.

'I know what you mean,' replied Trinket. 'I felt it today. There wasn't really any punch in it.'

Kang Xi's face suddenly lit up.

'I know,' he said, 'since we can't fight any more, I'll have to watch you fighting someone else. That'll be better than nothing. Come on, let's go and change. Then we'll go to the Dressing Rooms.'

'The what?' said Trinket. 'Is that where you store your robes?'

Kang Xi laughed.

'No! It's where the real professionals go to practise fighting and wrestling.'

Trinket clapped his hands excitedly:

'Excellent!'

So Kang Xi retired to one of his private chambers with Trinket, and the two of them got changed. Kang Xi, now in his formal robes, set off with an entourage of Eunuch Attendants—eight in front to clear the way, eight behind to bring up the rear—in the direction of the Imperial Dressing Rooms, where they proceeded to watch the wrestling. Kang Xi was now the Emperor again, and not laughing or chatting with Trinket any more.

The professional wrestlers redoubled their efforts when they saw who had come to watch. Kang Xi stood there for a while and then called one of the fattest of them over.

This young eunuch here,' he said, pointing to Trinket, 'has done a little wrestling. I'd like you to give him some extra instruction.'

Turning to Trinket he went on:

'I want you to learn from this gentleman.'

As he said this he winked with his left eye. Both of them had already had ample opportunity to observe that this man, despite his enormous size, was a clumsy fighter, and certainly no match for

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Trinket. Trinket and the fat man took the floor and after a few preliminary grapples Trinket tried a move on him known as Punting the Boat Downstream, intending to send him skidding across the room. But such was the man's sheer bulk that however hard Trinket pushed him, he did not budge an inch. The chief instructor turned his back on Trinket and gave the man a meaningful look. The fat man understood at once and faked a rather convincing stumble, followed by a total collapse that left him prostrate and immobile for quite some time. All the wrestlers and eunuchs present applauded enthusiastically.

Kang Xi was delighted and ordered one of his attendant eunuchs to reward Trinket with an ingot of silver.

'I'm a better fighter than Laurel,' he thought to himself. 'If he can put this fat man on the floor, so can I.'

He was itching to have a try. But knew that it would be beneath his dignity as the occupant of the Dragon Throne to step into a common wrestling ring, and

with a sigh he turned to one of the eunuchs and said:

'I want you to choose twelve of the younger eunuchs—I'd like them to be fourteen or fifteen years old—and tell them to come here every day and practise kungfu. The one that makes the fastest progress and can fight as well as young Laurel here, will receive a reward!'

The eunuch masked a smile as he obeyed his Master's order, thinking to himself that the boy Emperor was indulging another of his childish whims.

Merciful Quanyin of a Thousand Hands

Trinket returned to his quarters, and Old Hai asked him how his fight had gone. Trinket gave him a blow-by-blow account, inventing a host of details and describing a thrilling series of bouts. But the old eunuch was no fool, and saw through his story at once. 'What was the matter with your partner today, then? 111?' 'No!' protested Trinket. 'He just wasn't in a very good mood.' Old Hai humphed.

'Describe it to me again, every move, in detail.' Trinket knew he could never pull it off if he lied, and so he told the truth, starting from the beginning—but still without mentioning his opponent's identity.

Hai looked up at him and said very slowly:

'That's funny. You knew the move perfectly well. You could easily have sent him reeling, but instead you put your arm round him and conceded defeat. You did it on purpose, didn't you? Why?' Trinket gave a nervous little laugh.

'It wasn't exactly on purpose. It was just that he was being gentle so I felt I had to hold back. Now that we're such good friends, I can't really fight too hard.'

As he said this, and reflected that he was now a 'good friend' of the Emperor's, he could not help feeling extremely pleased with life, and with himself.

'So you're a good friend of his, are you?' commented Old Hai drily. 'Hm ... I don't think you were holding back, I think you were afraid to fight. I think. . . you've finally found out, haven't you?'

Trinket's heart missed a beat. 'Found out. . . Found out what?' His voice trembled.

'Did he tell you? Or did you guess?' asked Old Hai. 'Tell me what? I don't know what you're talking about,' protested Trinket.

'I want the truth!' growled Hai, who now clearly meant business. He coughed, before continuing:

'How did you find out who Misty really is?' He reached out and gripped Trinket fiercely by the left wrist. There was a cracking sound in his bones and a sharp pain seared through Trinket's hand. He thought it must be broken. 'I give in! I surrender!' he cried.

'How did you find out?' repeated Old Hai. He tightened his grip still further.

'Ow! Ow!' yelled Trinket. 'You're . . . you're cheating! I already said I surrender. Why won't you let go?' 'Why won't you answer my question?' 'All right. If you really do know who Misty is, I'll tell you the whole story. If you don't, you can squeeze me to death and I'll never tell!'

'Of course I know. He's the Emperor. I knew that when I first taught you those moves from me Greater Catch-Can.' Old Hai let go of Trinket's hand.

'So you knew all along!' exclaimed Trinket, greatly relieved.

'You really had me fooled. In that case, there's no harm telling you.'

He told him the whole story of his previous day's encounter

in the Upper Library with Kang Xi and Oboi, and of that morning's bout with the fat wrestler in the Dressing Room—relating his triumph with great gusto. Old Hai followed intently, interjecting questions at regular intervals.

'His Majesty told me not to tell you any of this,' concluded Trinket. 'If you let on that you know, we'll both be put to death.'

'But I thought His Majesty was your good friend,' commented Hai drily. 'He wouldn't put you to death—just me.'

'Just so long as you realize that,' said Trinket cockily.

Old Hai brooded for a moment.

Why would His Majesty want twelve young eunuchs to practise kungfu? Probably he's not getting enough fun out of fighting you and is looking for new sparring partners.'

He rose to his feet and paced several times round the room. Finally he added:

'Laurel, do you really want to win the young Emperor's favour?'

'Of course I do! He's my friend!'

Then listen very carefully to what I am about to say,' said the eunuch, with a sudden intensity. 'From today, if His Majesty ever talks in that way again—calls you his friend and so forth—you must absolutely refuse to go along with it. How could a nobody like you ever be the Emperor's friend? He's just a child, and says such things on a childish impulse. You must on no account take him seriously. Another word of such nonsense from you, and your head will be for the chop!'

Trinket had pretty much reached the same conclusion on his own, but this vehement warning of Old Hai's gave him a bit of a fright. He shot his tongue out in alarm:

'I promise I'll never talk like that again. Mind you, I shan't be able to stop my head talking when it hits the ground.'

Old Hai gave a little snort.

'Now—do you want to learn some advanced kungfu?'

'I'd love to, Goong-goong,' replied the delighted Trinket. 'It would be such a shame if your fighting skills were not handed down to a disciple.'

This world is full of wicked and treacherous people, ' replied Old Hai. There'd be little point in my teaching someone who'd turn against me!'

Trinket's heart missed another beat.

'I'm the one who blinded him in both eyes,' he thought to

himself. 'I wonder if he's beginning to suspect. This is getting very serious.'

He looked the old eunuch straight in the face. But it was a face that betrayed nothing. It was utterly impassive and devoid of emotion.

'Yes, Goong-goong, it would be hard to find an honest and trustworthy disciple—I'm probably the only one in this world. You know why I risked my life going to the Upper Library yesterday? To get hold of that Sutra for you. The trouble is, there are so many thousands of books in His Majesty's Upper Library, and I can't read very well, and—'

'What?' interjected Old Hai. 'Are you still having trouble with your reading?'

'Help!' thought Trinket quickly, his heart thumping. 'I've really put my foot in it now! I've no idea how good at reading the real Laurel was. Suppose he was a brilliant reader? Then I'm done for!'

'Well, I looked everywhere,' he ventured, 'and I just couldn't find that particular Sutra. But don't worry. Now I can go to the Upper Library any time, and sooner or later the book will just drop into my hand like a nice ripe plum.'

'So long as you don't forget!'

'How could I ever forget? After all you've done for me, Goong-goong, I must do something to pay you back, or I'll have lived for nothing!'

'Hm,' muttered Old Hai. 'If , ' don't pay you back, I'll have lived for nothing too!'

There was something chilling about the way he said this that sent a shiver down Trinket's spine. But when he stole another glance at the old eunuch's face, it was as inscrutable as ever.

'The wily Old Turtle!' thought Trinket to himself. 'He knew who Misty was all along, and never let on. I must tread very carefully. Supposing he knows who I am too, and that I'm the one who blinded him. He'll be sure to pay me back for that, or Heaven itself is blind.'

The two of them confronted each other silently. Trinket edged towards the door step by step; the slightest sign of a move from Old Hai and he would bolt for it, escape from the Palace and never come back.

But all he heard was:

'In future you are never to use Catch-Can techniques when

you spar with His Majesty. Some of them are dangerous. You could dislocate one of his limbs or break one of his bones.' 'Yes, Goong-goong!'

'From now on, I shall teach you a new style of kungfu, ' said Old Hai. 'It is called the Merciful Guanyin.' 'Why's it called that?' asked Trinket.

'After Guanyin the Goddess of Mercy, the Guanyin of a Thousand Hands.'

'Oh, I know, I've seen a statue of her. One hand's holding a bell, one's holding a basket—every hand's got something different in it. It's really good.'

'You must mean the one in the temple in Yangzhou?' 'Yangzhou?'

Trinket's heart leaped into his mouth. Old Hai must know all. The game was up. He bolted straight for the door and was about to run outside.

'The only statue of Guanyin of a Thousand Hands is in Yangzhou, and you've never been to Yangzhou, so how could you have seen it?'

'So there's only one and it's in Yangzhou,' Trinket was thinking frantically to himself. 'The old boy just about scared the piss out of me!'

'Of course I've never been to Yangzhou,' he replied. 'Where is Yangzhou anyway? I've only ever heard of the statue, I've never actually seen it. I was just bragging; I wanted to impress you, Goong-goong—only of course you knew too much and saw through it straightaway.'

'Cunning little rogue, aren't you!' said Old Hai with a sigh. 'Very hard to see through your little tricks.'

'Not hard at all!' protested Trinket disingenuously. 'If I ever do tell a lie, you're sure to see through it straightaway.' Old Hai humphed.

'Are you cold?' he asked. 'Why don't you wear more?' 'I'm not cold,' replied Trinket.

'Why are you shivering then? It sounds as if you're shivering.' There was a bit of a draught just then. It's better now.' 'Don't stand by the door then, if you're worried about the draught.'

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

Trinket retreated back into the room, but still he did not dare go too close to Old Hai.

This Merciful Guanyin kungfu I'm going to teach you is one of the Buddhist styles of Martial Arts. It is designed to control your opponent, not to kill or injure him. It is the most humane of all the styles of fighting.'

Then it's perfect for fighting with the Emperor!' said Trinket with delight.

'But it is particularly hard to learn,' continued Hai. There are a large number of

moves, and it's hard to remember them all. Come over here!'

'Yes, Goong-goong!'

He took several steps, and stopped a few feet from Old Hai.

'What's the matter—are you afraid I'm going to eat you?'

Trinket laughed nervously.

'I'm afraid you'd find my flesh rather sour!'

Suddenly Old Hai lunged out with his left. Trinket dodged to the right, but the next thing he knew he had taken two sharp blows on his back, and was down on his knees, incapable of further motion of any sort.

This is it!' he thought to himself in terror. 'Now he's going to kill me!'

That,' said Hai coolly, 'is the first move in the Merciful Guanyin style. It's called Buddha of the South Seas. Two vital points in your back have been closed. Closing points is an advanced form of kungfu—built on a solid foundation of Inner Force development. Don't imagine you can actually do this when you next fight the Emperor. Just remember the move, and go through the motions.'

Old Hai pressed the points on Trinket's back, and Trinket's hands and feet came back to life. He could move again. He tried to compose himself, and stood up.

'So the Old Turtle was just teaching me a move!' he thought to himself. 'He scared the wits out of me—in fact I'm not sure they've managed to find their way back in again yet!'

That day Old Hai only taught Trinket three new moves, and concluded his lesson by saying:

The first day is always especially hard. If you're a good student, I'll teach you some more later.'

Eight Trigrams of the Roving Dragon

The following day Trinket did not go gambling, but at midday he made his own way to the little room where he and Kang Xi had

had their sparring matches. This time he decided not to touch the cakes,

knowing that they had been specially prepared for the Emperor. He waited for over half an hour, and still Kang Xi had not come.

'I see,' he thought to himself. 'He's not enjoying fighting with me any more, so he's staying away.'

He made his way across to the Upper Library. The guards posted outside the Upper Library door had noted the special favour shown to Trinket the previous day, and knowing that he had now become the Emperor's favourite little eunuch they did nothing to prevent him from entering. He found Kang Xi busy kicking a leather stool. Again and again he kicked it, and seemed greatly exasperated. He kept crying out:

'Kick you to death! Kick you to death!'

Trinket wondered if this was some new form of Kick kungfu. He stood respectfully watching with his hands hanging at his side, while the Emperor continued kicking. When Kang Xi looked up and saw Trinket, a big grin spread across his face.

'I'm so bored! Come and have some fun with me!' he cried.

'Certainly,' Trinket replied. 'Listen to this. Old Hai Goong-goong has taught me a new kind of kungfu. It's called the Merciful Guanyin of a Thousand Hands. It's much better than that stuff I learned before, that Greater Catch-Can. He says that now I'm certain to beat you.'

To which Kang Xi replied:

'Come and show me! Come and show me what kind of kungfu it is!'

Trinket adopted the first position, and then sent both his hands flying through the air as he executed in rapid succession the three moves known as Buddha of the South Seas, Slivers of Gold and Jade, and Breath of Life. His hands moved with lightning speed, touching Kang Xi's back and shoulders, the left-hand side of his chest, his right thigh, his throat. This Merciful Guanyin style of kungfu (also known as the Thousand Hands style) was almost dance-like. It was quite extraordinary, quite unlike the Greater Catch-Can. Kang Xi was totally unprepared for it and failed to dodge a single one of Trinket's moves. But Trinket's touch had been very light and he had caused him no pain. In fact Trinket had no Inner Force whatsoever, and only a very small degree of outer, or muscular strength. So even if the contest had been a genuine one, he would not have caused his opponent any real damage. But the

mere fact that he had struck home five times in succession was enough to make Kang Xi cry out in astonishment.

'This style of kungfu is amazing! Come again tomorrow—I'll get my teacher to show me some moves to counter yours!' 'Excellent!' replied Trinket. 'Excellent!'

He returned to his quarters and recounted Kang Xi's words to Old Hai, who commented:

'I wonder what style of kungfu his teacher is going to be teaching him? Today I'm going to show you some moves in the Thousand Leaves style.'

So that day Trinket learnt another six moves. These were: Shadow in the Mirror, Moon in the Water, Drifting Clouds, Bouncing Bubbles, Brightness in the Dream, and Void after Enlightenment. These were all very subtle moves, full of feints and ploys. Old Hai merely wanted Trinket to remember the movements; he did not go into them at all deeply. As for whether Trinket was executing them correctly or not, in the first place Old Hai could not see, and in the second place he did not really mind. Trinket was only too happy with this:

'Be my sloppy teacher, and I'll be your sloppy student—the two of us can muddle our way through very nicely. Start getting too serious, and I'm afraid old Trink will simply be left behind.'

The following day when Trinket came to the Upper Library he saw that there were four new guards on duty outside the door. He was hesitating to go in when one of the guards called out with a big smile on his face:

'Aren't you Laurel Goong-goong? His Majesty has given instructions that you are to proceed straight into the Upper Library.' Trinket was taken aback by this and stood there for a moment thinking to himself:

'What's all this Laurel Goong-goong stuff?' Then he realized:

'Of course—Laurel Goong-goong—that's just me, old Trink.' So he smiled back, and nodded his head. 'You'd better go straight in,' replied the guard. 'His Majesty has already asked for you several times.'

As Trinket walked into the Upper Library, Kang Xi leapt up from his chair.

'You know those three moves you tried out on me yesterday?' he cried with a laugh. 'Well, my teacher has already shown me the countermoves. So let's get down to business.'

'Since your teacher's already taught you the countermoves,' said Trinket, 'you'll obviously be able to deal with them, so what's the point in even trying?'

To which Kang Xi replied:

'Of course we must try. You make your way quietly over to the room where we always have our fights. Don't let anyone else know. I'll be there in a moment.'

Trinket agreed to this and went on his way. Kang arrived shortly afterwards, and the two of them set to. Sure enough, Kang Xi's newly learned techniques were able to deal very promptly with Trinket's moves of the day before. He ended up by striking Trinket on the shoulder. Trinket was most impressed.

'What's all this new stuff called?' he asked.

This is called the Eight Trigrams of the Roving Dragon. My teacher says that your Merciful Guanyin kungfu has got far too "many different moves and that they are very hard to remember. This Roving Dragon style has only got sixty-four forms. But they are very complex, and they are certainly enough to deal with what you have learned.'

'Which of the two is the more effective?' asked Trinket.

'I asked my teacher that question,' replied Kang Xi. 'My teacher says that both of them belong to advanced Schools, and that it is hard to say which is the more effective. It depends on who's doing it, and on how good they are.'

'I learned six more moves yesterday too,' said Trinket. 'Want to try them out?'

He proceeded to demonstrate the six moves—although it must be admitted that he'd already quite forgotten the second and third, and did the fifth in quite the wrong way. None the less he succeeded in striking Kang Xi seven or eight times in a row, and the Emperor was most impressed.

'I'd better go and learn how to deal with these new ones at once,' he said.

Trinket went back to his quarters and told Old Hai all about his friend's new Roving Dragon kungfu. Old Hai nodded:

'Precisely,' he said. The only proper riposte to our Merciful Guanyin style in the Shaolin tradition is the Eight Trigrams of the Roving Dragon in the Wudang tradition. And his teacher was right: each School has its strong points, and whoever studies the hardest will be the better fighter. Now—drink up that bowl of soup. Your food will get cold.'

i in not navmg any soup today—it only makes me cough.'

'Very well, Master, ' said Trinket, and he sat down to drink his own.

For several months after this, Kang Xi and Trinket continued to learn more and more moves, and tried them out on each other every day. But they were no longer fighting for real, and somehow their contests had lost some of their gusto. The bouts started to resemble a civilized game of chess, rather than a real sparring match. Kang Xi knew only too well that his friend would never again dare to give him a proper kick up the bum, and he for his part felt reluctant to deal Trinket a crushing blow on the head. Trinket had only learnt all of this kungfu in order to keep the Emperor company. He was not particularly interested in it. He'd learn new moves, only to find that he'd forgotten the old ones. The two of them made very slow progress, and both began to find it boring. Then Kang Xi began missing days between bouts.

During this time, apart from their bouts together, Kang Xi would often take his friend with him to the Upper Library, to keep him company in his studies. The guards and eunuchs on duty in the Palace by now all knew that little Laurel, the eunuch from the Imperial Catering Department, was the Emperor's special favourite. They all addressed him as 'Laurel Goong-goong' when they met him, instead of 'Laurie junior', and were most respectful and affectionate towards him.

Trinket had not forgotten about the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections, and every time he went to the Upper Library he had a good look for it. He wanted to be able to carry out Old Hai's commission. But he just couldn't find the book anywhere, however hard he searched.

Oboi against the Odds

One day, after a bout, Kang Xi turned to his friend with an expression of unwonted seriousness, and said to him in a low voice:

'Laurie, tomorrow you and I have something very important to do. I'd like you to come to the Upper Library earlier than usual and wait for me.'

Trinket knew that the Emperor was a young man of few words, and did not press him with any questions.

Early the following day he went to the Upper Library. Kang Xi said to him softly:

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There's something important I want you to do for me. I'm not sure you have the courage for it.'

To which Trinket replied:

'You give me the order, and I'll find the courage!'

This is no ordinary matter, ' said Kang Xi. 'If it is not done properly, then you and I could both be risking our lives.'

Trinket was a little taken aback by this.

'I might be risking my life, ' he said, 'but you're the Emperor. Who would dare harm you? Besides, with you to protect me, how could I be afraid for my life?'

What he really meant was:

'If I should ever be in any danger, I hope you'll take care of me.'

Kang Xi replied:

This villain Oboi is abusing his power and taking more and more liberties. He is plotting treason. Today the two of us are going to lay hands on him. Are you game?'

Now Trinket had been in the Palace quite a while by now, and apart from his bouts with the Emperor and the time he spent in the Upper Library there was really very little fun to be had— especially since for the past few months Old Hai had forbidden him to gamble any more with the Wen brothers and he had only been able to sneak over for the occasional secret game. He was altogether bored: this talk of a new adventure fired him up.

'Sounds great!' he cried. 'Didn't I say that the two of us could deal with him? He may be the Manchu Champion, but we've learnt a lot of new moves, so why should we have anything to fear from him?'

Kang Xi shook his head.

'I am the Emperor. I can't make the first move. Oboi is in command of the Imperial Guard, and all of the guards in the Palace are his trusted men. If he suspects that I'm going to arrest him, he's sure to strike first. And if all of the guards rise up against us at once, then I'm afraid that you and I will not live to

tell the tale, and neither will the Empress Dowager. So you see this is extremely dangerous.'

Trinket struck his chest and said:

'In that case I will go and lie in wait for him outside the Palace and catch him unawares. I'll strike him dead with a dagger. That way, even if I fail, he'll not know that it's anything to do with you.'

This man is a superb fighter, ' said Kang XL 'And you are still young. You don't stand a chance against him. Besides, outside the

Palace he always goes around with a large number of guards. You'd never be able to get anywhere near him. And even if you did manage to stab him, you'd be killed by his guards. No, I have another plan.'

'Yes?' asked Trinket.

'We'll wait for him to come here and report to me, ' said Kang Xi. Til send for my twelve hand-picked young eunuchs to wait on me. When you see me drop my tea-cup, that's the signal: you jump on him and pin him down. At the same time I'll tell the eunuchs to bind his hands and feet. That way he'll have no chance to fight. And if you can't manage on your own, I shall just have to come to your aid myself.'

That's a first-rate plan!' cried Trinket. 'Have you got a dagger? We mustn't bungle this. If I don't manage to get hold of him properly, then I shall stab him to death.'

At first, after the killing of Laurel, Trinket had always kept his dagger stuck down the side of his boot. Later, when he discovered that Misty was in fact the Emperor, and they were constantly tumbling around together, he was afraid that the dagger might slip out of his boot; besides, it was strictly forbidden on pain of death to carry a knife in the Palace, with the exception of the guards who were on duty. For these reasons he had long since given up carrying the dagger around with him.

Kang Xi nodded in answer to Trinket's question, and opening one of the drawers in his desk, took out two golden-handled daggers and gave one to Trinket. The other he slipped into his own boot. Trinket did likewise, and as he felt the dagger against his leg, the blood raced in his veins. His whole body grew hot and his breath came fast.

'Come on!' he said. 'Let's do the fellow in!'

'I want you to go now and summon those twelve young eunuchs, ' said Kang Xi.

'Straight away!' replied Trinket, and off he went.

The twelve young eunuchs had already had a few months of practice in the Dressing Room, and although they were by no means kungfu adepts, they knew a few basic holds and throws. Kang Xi now addressed them:

'I know that all of you have been practising for several months. I hope you've made some progress? In a few minutes one of my Ministers is going to come in. He's one of the best fighters at Court and I want him to have a look at what you can do. The

minute you see me drop my tea-cup on the ground, I want you to jump on him. I want the twelve of you to take him unawares. I want you to pin him to the ground so that he can't move. You'll be generously rewarded afterwards.'

Kang Xi opened one of the drawers of his desk and took out twelve ingots of silver, each weighing fifty ounces.

'Overcome him, and each of you gets one of these, ' he said. 'Lose, and I'll have all of your heads off!'

These last words sounded rather serious, and the Emperor's face looked grim. All twelve eunuchs fell to their knees:

'Your Majesty, we promise to do the job to the very best of our ability, '

Kang Xi smiled.

'What do you mean, do the job? I'm just giving you a little test, making sure you're practising properly, and not becoming slack.'

Trinket was secretly impressed.

'He doesn't want to give anything away—in case any of them might think of betraying his secret plan to Oboi, '

The eunuchs rose to their feet, and Kang Xi took a book from his desk and began reading it. Trinket could hear him quietly reciting the text and turning the pages, without the slightest tremor in his voice, or the slightest shake in his hand. There he was, moments away from this great enterprise, calm as ever—whereas he, Trinket, was in a muck sweat.

Trink, old turtle, ' he said to himself, 'just look at yourself! And look at him! Face it, you were no match for Misty on the wrestling floor, and you're no match for him in a crisis either!'

His thoughts ran on:

'But then he is the Emperor! He's supposed to be a bit braver than me! If I were Emperor, I'd probably be even cooler than he is!'

But somewhere deep inside him he didn't really believe this to be true.

Several minutes went by, and then there was the sound of footsteps outside the door.

'His Honour the Imperial Guardian Oboi to see Your Majesty!' announced a guard.

'Let the Guardian enter!' replied Kang Xi, whereupon Oboi drew aside the door-curtain and entered the Upper Library. He fell to his knees, knocking his head on the ground in ceremonial kowtow. Kang Xi smiled.

'Guardian, you have come at a fortunate moment. These eunuchs have been practising their wrestling skills, and since you are the Manchu Champion, I should like you to teach them a thing or two.'

A little smile stole across Oboi's face.

'Since it is Your Majesty's wish I am happy to obey.'

Kang Xi smiled.

'Laurel, you can dismiss the guards on duty outside. Tell them that there's no need for them to come in unless they are summoned.'

As he said this Kang Xi chuckled and pulled a strange face at Oboi, who laughed a little apprehensively. Trinket went out to do Kang Xi's bidding.

'Guardian,' said Kang Xi in a low voice, 'you advised me the other day not to spend so much time reading Chinese books. I've been thinking about what you said and I think you're right. That's why I've decided to practise a little wrestling here in the Upper Library instead. I think it would be rather fun. But I don't think we should let other people hear what's going on. If the Empress Dowager were to know, she'd be nagging me for ever about my studies.'

Oboi seemed very pleased to hear this.

'Yes! Yes, Your Majesty! This is an extremely wise decision of Your Majesty's! As I said before, no good will ever come from reading all those Chinese books.'

. Meanwhile Trinket came back into the Upper Library, saying:

'The guards have all been dismissed, Your Majesty.'

Kang Xi smiled.

'Good! We can get on with things then, and have a bit of fun. Now then, eunuchs, I want you to form six pairs, and we'll see what you can do.'

The eunuchs rolled up their sleeves, tightened their sashes, and began wrestling in six pairs. Oboi stood there watching and chuckling to himself. He could see that the eunuchs were not particularly skilful, and shook his head with a knowing smile. Kang Xi lifted his cup to his lips and drank a mouthful of tea.

'Guardian, what do you think? Not bad for children?'

Oboi smiled.

'I suppose they'll do, Your Majesty

'But they wouldn't stand a chance against you, of course,' said Kang Xi. As he said this he leaned casually to one side, and

allowed his hand to slide and knock the cup from the table onto
the floor.

'Oh dear!' he cried. Oboi was taken aback.

'Majesty!' he began to say, when all of a sudden the twelve eunuchs pounced on him from behind. Soon they had his arms twisted behind his back and his body pinned to the ground. Kang Xi gave a loud laugh.

'Beware, Guardian!' he cried. Oboi was still under the illusion that the young Emperor was testing the eunuchs out, and he gave a slight smile. He wrenched his arms free, and sent four of the eunuchs flying through the air. He was still reluctant to show his full strength, and nervous of causing the eunuchs any

actual bodily harm. He kicked lightly with his left leg and threw a couple more to the ground. He laughed loudly. The remaining eunuchs remembered the Emperor's words about what would happen to them if they came out the losers, and they clung desperately to his legs. Trinket had meanwhile darted behind Oboi, and he now took aim at the giant's Greater Yang vital point and struck at it with all his might. Oboi had a sudden sensation of dizziness.

'These little geldings have a nerve!' he thought to himself. He swept his left arm outwards and sent three more of them crashing away into the room. He spun around. As he did so he took another knock from Trinket. Both times Trinket had caught him unawares, and both times he had managed to land a couple of sharp and well-placed blows. But there was no real strength in them. He had contacted highly sensitive spots, but to little effect. Oboi knew now that his ambusher was the Emperor's favourite eunuch, and had a sneaking feeling that things were not as innocent as he had been led to believe. But why would the Emperor let loose a pack of mere children against him? He raised his left fist and began to bring it down towards Trinket's right shoulder.

Trinket now used the move known as Void after Enlightenment. First he waved his left fist in front of Oboi's face, and Oboi duly lowered his head. Then there was a sharp crack as Trinket's foot landed on his chest. But it was Trinket who cried out. He felt as if he had made contact with a brick wall. His foot was in agony. Oboi was both surprised and angry to see young Laurel using serious moves against him. In the heat of the moment he ceased to concern himself with what the Emperor might or might not have been intending. First he must free himself from this swarm of

eunuchs. Then he could deal with Laurel. But somehow the eunuchs clung on, some wrapping their arms round his waist, others tugging at his legs; he had no sooner thrown one off, than another flung himself at him again. Kang Xi was clapping his hands and crying with glee:

'Guardian, you seem to be losing!'

Oboi had been just about to bring his fist down with a crack on Trinket's head when he heard the Emperor speak.

'So it's all for sport after all!' he thought to himself. 'Of course! As if these children could really think themselves a match for me!'

As this thought went through his mind he deflected his blow on to Trinket's right shoulder and withheld some of its force. It should be remembered how enormous Oboi's strength was. In past encounters with the Ming army, he had been known to pick up soldiers with his bare hands and hurl them around on

the battlefield. Trinket was a mere child, who barely knew the rudiments of kungfu, and even with this mob of little eunuchs to help him, he simply did not stand a chance. This one blow of Oboi's sent him straight down on to the floor. As he went down he managed to stick out his left elbow and dig it sharply into Oboi's midriff.

'Why,' sneered Oboi, 'you crafty little beggar!' and chopped lightly on Trinket's back as he tried to stand up. Trinket went down again with a crash. He stood up again, and this time he had a dagger in his hand. He spun round and leaped at Oboi. Oboi saw the blade glinting in Trinket's hand, and stared for a moment in disbelief.

'What?' he cried. 'What's this?'

Trinket laughed.

'You can fight bare-handed. Let's go!'

Tut down the knife!' cried Oboi. 'You know it's forbidden to carry knives in the Emperor's presence.'

Trinket laughed again.

'Fine! I'll put it down then.'

He stooped, as if to replace the dagger in his boot. As they were speaking, seven or eight of the young eunuchs had got a grip on Oboi. Trinket stumbled straight forward into Oboi, as if he had lost his footing, and as he did so he lunged with the knife, intending to stab him in the stomach. But Oboi was too quick for him. He pulled back, and the knife caught him in the leg. Roaring with fury, Oboi took three of the eunuchs with his bare hands and threw

them to the ground. Then he seized Trinket by the scruff of the neck.

Kang Xi could see that Trinket and the eunuchs were in serious trouble. He crept round behind Oboi, pulled out his own knife, and stabbed him in the back.

The instant Oboi felt the steel against his skin he flinched and drew in his back. This sent the dagger slightly off course, and it failed to do any serious harm. He threw Trinket down and whirled round, only to see that his new assailant was none other than the Emperor.

Oboi stared at Kang Xi, and Kang Xi leapt back a couple of steps. Oboi let out a great cry, as he finally realized the truth, that the Emperor was plotting to take his life. Flailing his fists in the air, he leapt into the attack. Kang Xi retreated. Oboi seized two of the eunuchs and knocked their heads together, smashing both of their skulls. At the same time he dealt another of the eunuchs a sharp punch in the chest, and kicked out with his right foot, sending four others tumbling back towards the wall, their sinews torn, their bones broken. Without so much as uttering a cry, they fell dead to the ground. Another eunuch still clung to Oboi's right leg, and Oboi began stamping on him. The eunuch's stomach burst open and his innards spilt on to the floor. In a matter of seconds Oboi had sent eight opponents to their deaths. The remaining four eunuchs just stood there staring in helpless terror.

Trinket now came at him again, dagger in hand. Oboi struck at him with his left fist. Trinket sensed that the blow coming at him had the force of a thunderbolt. He did not even have time to take a breath. He lunged at Oboi's arm with the dagger. Oboi dodged, and brought his fist down heavily on Trinket's left shoulder, sending him catapulting over the desk. He landed on the brazier that stood on the floor beyond the table, and the ashes went flying up into the air.

Kang Xi had been watching all of this in silence. Now he decided to try his Roving Dragon technique against Oboi. But Kang Xi was a novice in this style, whereas Oboi was a veteran and a ferocious fighter. Kang Xi managed to get home a couple of blows, but they seemed to have no effect. Oboi kicked out with his left foot and struck Kang Xi on the right leg, bringing him crashing down to the floor.

'Die one, die all!' bellowed Oboi, and as he did so he brought down both of his fists with a great thundering smash towards Kang

Xi's head. Luckily, in this instance Kang Xi's months of sparring with Trinket paid off. He dodged skilfully, escaped the oncoming blow, and rolled under the desk.

Oboi came after him, kicking the desk away with his left leg. He circled his right leg and was about to land a direct kick on Kang Xi's body, when a great cloud of ash exploded into the air and blew directly into his eyes. Oboi began howling and rubbing his eyes wildly with both hands. He continued to kick out frantically with his right foot, afraid that his enemy would use this occasion to counter-attack.

Trinket had watched the situation deteriorate rapidly. It was he who had grasped two handfuls of ash from the brazier and thrown them into Oboi's face.

The fine particles of ash worked their way quickly into Oboi's eyes. The next thing Oboi felt was a sharp pain in his left arm. Trinket had flung his dagger at the man's chest, but had missed his target. By now the Upper Library was in complete chaos, with chairs and tables lying higgledy-piggledy all over the floor. Trinket spotted one chair right behind Oboi—it was in fact Kang Xi's Dragon chair, and it was upright! He grabbed the brazier, leapt up on to the chair, took aim, and brought the full weight of the brazier smashing down on the back of Oboi's head.

This brazier was almost a thousand years old. It was an antique of the Tang dynasty, and weighed at least thirty catties. Blinded by the ash, Oboi was unable to see it coming, and it landed on his head with an almighty crash. He tottered and fell to the ground unconscious. The brazier lay shattered. Oboi's great head remained intact.

Kang Xi was ecstatic.

'Laurie!' he cried. 'You've saved us all!'

He fumbled about in the drawers of his desk and pulled out some lengths of leather and rope, which he had put there in advance. Then he and Trinket between them bound Oboi's hands and feet. Trinket was now in a cold sweat and trembling too violently to get a proper grip on the rope. He and Kang Xi looked at each other, speechless with joy and excitement.

Oboi soon came round and began shouting:

'I'm a loyal subject! I've done no wrong! This is a wicked plot against me! I'll never give in! I'll fight to the death!'

Traitor!' cried Trinket in return. 'Coming into the Emperor's Upper Library with a knife! You deserve to die a thousand times over!'

'I never brought a knife!' protested Oboi.

'No!' crowed Trinket. 'Not one, but two—the one in your back, and the one in your arm! Try denying that!'

Oboi was really in no state to argue with Trinket. What with the brazier, and the two knife wounds, he was in no state to do anything more than huff and puff and cry out in protest.

Kang Xi turned to the four eunuchs who were still alive, and said to them:

'You all saw it with your own eyes, didn't you? This traitor Oboi tried to take my life!'

The four eunuchs stood there ashen-faced, still greatly shaken by their recent brush with death. One of them managed to pipe:

'Yes! Yes!'

But the other three stood there in silence.

'You can go now,' ordered Kang Xi. 'I want you to send for Prince Kang and Songgotu. Tell them both to report to me immediately. Not a word of what has just taken place in this room! If any one of you breathes a word of it, I'll have his head off!'

The eunuchs retreated in obedience.

Oboi continued to cry out:

'Justice! Justice! The Emperor himself has tried to take the life of his loyal subject! The Lord above will be my witness! The Lord will not spare you!'

Kang Xi frowned.

'Laurie, find a way of stopping up this man's mouth!' he cried.

'Yes, I will,' said Trinket. He stepped forward and took hold of Oboi's nose with his left hand, pinching it between his fingers. Oboi immediately opened his mouth to take a breath, whereupon Trinket with his right hand drew the dagger from Oboi's arm and rammed the handle of it down his throat several times. Then he took a couple of handfuls of ash from the brazier and stuffed them down Oboi's throat. Oboi began choking noisily, and was only able to breathe with the greatest of difficulty. Then Trinket drew the other dagger from his shoulder and stuck both daggers into the top of Kang Xi's desk. He himself stood beside Oboi, watching over him, ready to plunge both daggers into him again at the slightest sign of any movement.

Kang Xi was enormously relieved to see that the situation was now under control. But as he looked at Oboi's great brawny body and his bloodstreaked face, he couldn't help experiencing a secret

shudder of fear. It really had been a very rash plan. He, and Laurel with his smattering of kungfu, had been foolish enough to think they could take on Oboi, with nothing more to help them than twelve young eunuchs! They had

discovered him to be every bit the Champion he was reputed to be. If it had not been for Laurel's little ruse, he himself might now be lying dead at Oboi's hands. And who knows, the villain might have gone on to harm the Empress Dowager. All the great Ministers of Court and the Palace Guard were Oboi's men. If Oboi had wished to set another infant Emperor on the throne, no one would have dared oppose him. This thought sent another shudder down Kang Xi's spine.

The Aftermath

After a little while Prince Kang and Songgotu arrived in answer to the Emperor's summons. When they entered the Upper Library and saw the tangled pile of dead bodies and blood, the two nobles were appalled. They fell to their knees at once and began performing the kowtow, crying:

'Health and long life to Your Majesty!'

'Lord Oboi,' replied Kang Xi, 'dared to rebel against me. He brought weapons with him into the Palace, wishing to harm my person. Luckily my ancestors have protected me, and the young eunuch Laurel and other young eunuchs defended me against this vicious attack. They have taken the man captive. I now call on you to advise me what best course of action to follow.'

Neither Prince Kang nor Songgotu had been on good terms with Oboi. In fact they had long been at the receiving end of his bullying. This sudden turn of events both surprised and pleased them. Having once more prayed for the Emperor's long life, they bewailed their own negligence that had led to this dire state of affairs, and thanked providence that the Emperor had been able to deal with the situation with such dispatch and nip the conspiracy in the bud.

Kang Xi spoke:

'I want no word of this attempt on my life to go beyond these walls. I don't want to alarm the Empress Dowager. Besides, if news of this were to get out, I would be mocked by the Chinese officials and by the common people. Oboi is a villain. Even without today's crime, he would have deserved severe punishment.'

Prince Kang and Songgotu knocked their heads on the ground.

'Yes, Sire! Yes, Sire!'

But secretly they were thinking to themselves: 'Oboi is a mighty warrior. He is the Manchu Champion. If he had really wished to assassinate the Emperor, how would a few eunuchs have been able to stop him? There must be more to

this than meets the eye.'

But they were only too pleased to be able to get hold of Oboi, and were not unduly anxious to enquire into the facts. Besides, the Emperor had given his orders. Who were they to question them?

'Your Majesty,' began Prince Kang. 'Many people are in league with this villain Oboi—they must all be rounded up at once, to forestall any further trouble. I request that His Excellency Songgotu remain here to protect Your Majesty. He must not leave you unattended for an instant. I shall proceed with the arrest of all of Oboi's associates. What does Your Majesty think of this?' Kang Xi nodded. 'Very good!'

Whereupon Prince Kang immediately withdrew. Songgotu now looked at Laurel, sizing him up carefully, and said:

'You have done very well indeed, young Goong-goong, in protecting the person of His Majesty today.'

'His Majesty was his own protector,' protested Trinket. 'Heaven has blessed him. He had no need of my paltry efforts.'

Kang Xi was indeed grateful to Laurel for not having divulged too many details of the recent 'operation'. His own act in stabbing Oboi in the back was hardly the sort of thing people would consider proper for an incumbent of the Dragon Throne.

'Why,' he thought to himself, 'today Laurel has proved himself to be a real treasure. He has saved my life! What a pity he is a eunuch. However high I may wish to promote him, I won't be allowed to. I suppose all I can do is to reward him with money.'

Prince Kang acted swiftly. He returned shortly afterwards to report that Oboi's close associates had all been arrested. Not one of the original Palace Guards had been kept on, they had all been sent off on duty outside the Forbidden City. He requested the Emperor to appoint a new Guard. Kang Xi was very pleased. 'You have done well,' he said.

By now there were several Princes of the First and Second Degree and prominent civil and military officials gathered in the

Upper Library. They were appalled at the terrible mess—dead eunuchs with their brains spilled on the floor and their guts bulging out of their stomachs—and cursed Oboi for a wicked villain. Shortly afterwards the

President of the Board of Punishments himself took charge of Oboi's detention and had him led away to the dungeons. The Princes and Ministers respectfully took their leave and withdrew to consult amongst themselves how best to deal with Oboi. Prince Kang communicated to them the Emperor's own instructions.

'His Majesty is a person of great benevolence and filial devotion. He does not wish to see many innocent people die as a result of this incident, nor does he wish to alarm the Empress Dowager unnecessarily. He has therefore decided not to make public Lord Oboi's wicked treason. He will only charge him with attempting to monopolize power and to intimidate others.'

The Princes and Ministers were unanimous in their praise of the Emperor's wisdom.

The attempted assassination of the Emperor was indeed a very serious offence, and for this Oboi would undoubtedly have had to pay the penalty of death by the Slow Process. In addition to this his entire clan, old and young, and all of his associates and their clans, would have been put to death. The whole thing would probably have involved several thousand people. However much Kang Xi disliked Oboi, he was not willing to go to these lengths, or to implicate so many others in the villain's downfall.

Kang Xi himself had not held the reins of power for very long and every one of his actions had until now been vetted by Oboi. All the officials at Court had always taken their orders from Oboi. Now that Oboi had been arrested Kang Xi noticed how quickly the Princes and Ministers changed their tune. For the first time he was tasting the true joy of being a ruler. He looked over towards Trinket and saw him sitting huddled quietly in a corner. The boy's silence had been most discreet, he thought to himself.

When the other Ministers had left, Songgotu spoke to Kang Xi:

'Majesty, we must restore order in the Upper Library. May I request that Your Majesty withdraws to your quarters to rest.'

Kang Xi nodded his head, and Prince Kang and Songgotu prepared to escort the Emperor to his personal quarters in the Palace. Trinket did not know whether he should go too. As he was hesitating, Kang Xi nodded to him and told him to follow.

The Empress Dowager

Prince Kang and Songgotu took their leave of the Emperor several hundred

paces before he reached his personal quarters, that inner sanctum where ordinary officials of the Court were not allowed, only the various Imperial consorts, eunuchs, and maids-in-waiting. Trinket went on in with Kang Xi. He had always imagined the Emperor's sleeping quarters to be a place of absolute luxury and splendour, gilded with gold and studded with precious stones, with so many lustrous pearls suspended on the walls that there would never be need of lamps at night. To his surprise he found it to be rather an ordinary room, apart from the bedding and coverlets, which were of yellow silk, embroidered with dragons and phoenixes. Trinket was greatly disappointed.

'Why,' he thought to himself, 'this place isn't even up to the standard of some of the top rooms at Mum's whore-house in Yangzhou!'

One of the ladies-in-waiting brought Kang Xi a bowl of ginseng soup and he drank it down and let out a long breath.

'Laurel,' he said, 'come with me and we'll go and speak with the Empress Dowager.'

At this time Kang Xi was still unmarried, and his sleeping quarters were not far from the Imperial residence of the Empress Dowager, the compound known as the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. When they reached the Empress Dowager's quarters, Kang Xi went on ahead, telling Trinket to wait for him outside the door. Trinket waited there a long time, and was beginning to feel bored.

'All that time I've spent practising Old Hai's kungfu,' he thought to himself, 'and Misty's put in a lot of effort too, and there we were today face to face with Oboi, and none of it was the slightest use. The only thing that worked was my trick with the incense brazier. What's the point of learning any more kungfu—it's all a waste of time! It's no fun either. Here I am in the Palace, pretending to be a eunuch, and knocking my head on the ground every time the Emperor goes by. It's just boring the pants off me! Now that he's got Oboi locked up, old Misty won't need me any more. Tomorrow I might as well run away and never come back.'

He was just wondering to himself how best to get out of the Palace, when a eunuch came up to him and said in a friendly tone:

'Laurel, Her Majesty the Empress Dowager commands me to bring you into her presence. You are to kowtow before her.'

Tamardy!' muttered Trinket silently to himself. "Damn! Hot

mother's! More head-knocking! If I had my way this old bag of an Empress

Dowager would be knocking her head for me!'

But what he said (and in a most respectful tone) was:

'Yes! At once!'

And off he went, following the eunuch.

They made their way through two courtyards and came to a doorway, where the eunuch announced:

'Your Majesty! Presenting Laurel!'

As he said this, he held up the door-curtain and pulled a face at Trinket.

Trinket walked in, There before him hung another blind, made entirely of strung pearls, shimmering lustrously in the half light. A lady-in-waiting lifted this aside and Trinket lowered his head and went on in. He squinted ahead of him and caught sight of a noble-looking lady of about thirty years of age, sitting on a chair, with Kang Xi standing at her side. This he assumed to be the Empress Dowager. He fell to his knees at once to kowtow.

The lady smiled and nodded her head.

'Arise!' she said graciously. Then, as Trinket rose to his feet, she went on:

'His Majesty tells me that today you have helped him to arrest the traitor Oboi, and that you have shown yourself to be a most devoted subject.

'Your Majesty,' said Trinket, 'I am the Emperor's most loyal servant. His word is my command. I am young and ignorant.'

Trinket had not been in the Forbidden City for more than a few months, but he had picked up quite a lot of the Court jargon, especially at his gambling sessions, where he had had ample opportunity to listen to his fellow eunuchs. The one thing that rulers seemed to like least, he had noticed, was when their subjects took the slightest credit for anything they had done. The rule seemed to be that the more you did the less credit you should appear to take. This kept the masters happy. Any sign of pride would certainly lead to an instant fall. It would undoubtedly bring about the termination of Imperial favour. The Empress Dowager certainly seemed very pleased with his remarks.

'You may be young,' she said, 'but you seem wise beyond your years.'

She turned to Kang Xi: 'My child, how should we reward this

She pondered a while.

'Tell me,' she said, 'in the Imperial Catering Department, you still have no rank—am I right? And Old Hai Dafu, I seem to recall, is a eunuch of the fifth rank. I am going to appoint you eunuch of the sixth rank, and I am going to promote you to the position of Senior Eunuch Attendant upon His Majesty.'

'Blimey!' thought Trinket silently to himself. 'What the hot-piece of tamardy mother's is all this about? Sixth, seventh, fifth—I dunno, it's all the same to me. All I know is I never really wanted to be a eunuch in the first place.'

But although he was thinking these thoughts his face was wreathed in smiles, and he fell to one knee again and knocked his head on the ground, saying:

'Your Majesty, I deeply appreciate this great favour. I thank you from the very bottom of my heart.'

'Or heart of my bottom . . .' his private thoughts ran on.

Now Court regulations stipulated that there should be no more than fourteen Eunuch Managers, eight Eunuch Assistant Managers, and a hundred and eighty-nine Senior Eunuchs. There was no limit on the number of ordinary eunuchs. At the beginning of the Manchu dynasty there had been over a thousand of these, but this had gradually swollen to over two thousand. Eunuchs entrusted with official positions ranged from fourth grade down to eighth grade in the official hierarchy, whereas ordinary eunuchs belonged to no grade at all. So in other words Trinket had been catapulted from being a eunuch with no grade whatsoever to being a senior eunuch of the sixth grade. Such a meteoric promotion was without precedent in the Palace.

The Empress Dowager nodded her head and said:

'Perform your duties diligently.'

'I will, Your Majesty, I will.'

Trinket rose to his feet again and began to withdraw backwards from the chamber. As the ladies-in-waiting lifted up the pearl-strung blind, he stole a quick last glance at the Empress Dowager. Her complexion was very pale, and her eyes glistened. There were lines on her forehead, as if her thoughts were troubled by grief, as if she was preoccupied with some secret matter of her own.

'She's the Empress Dowager,' thought Trinket to himself.

'What's she got to be unhappy about? Oh, I know, it must be because her old man's dead. Even an Empress Dowager needs an

old man.'

A Weird Old Fellow

Trinket returned to his quarters and related the dramatic events of the day to Old Hai, who seemed not the slightest bit surprised.

'I thought as much,' he commented in a matter-of-fact tone. 'It was bound to happen sooner or later. His Majesty has shown a great deal more patience than the Late Emperor.'

Trinket found this very strange.

'Goong-goong,' he asked, 'did you know about this beforehand?'

'How could I have known about it?' said Old Hai. 'I simply guessed. One thing I knew: the Emperor was learning those wrestling moves for a purpose. It wasn't just for fun. Then those junior eunuchs he had practising, and the Eight Trigrams of the Roving Dragon he started working on—there was clearly a purpose behind all of that. If the two of you had been able to combine his Roving Dragon and your Merciful Guanyin styles and put eight or nine years of practice into it, then you might possibly have been able to defeat Lord Oboi. But not after two or three months! Young people are like that—they go rushing in. Today's undertaking was highly dangerous.'

Trinket looked at Old Hai out of the corner of his eye. He was secretly brimming with admiration for the old boy.

The Old Turtle may be blind in both eyes, but he knows what's going on before it's even happened!

'Did His Majesty take you to meet the Empress Dowager?'

'Yes, he did.'

As he answered Trinket thought to himself:

'He knew about that too!'

'What did she give you for a reward?'

'Oh, nothing really,' said Trinket, embarrassed. 'She just. . . made me ... a sixth-grade eunuch.'

Old Hai laughed.

'Not bad! Just one grade below me. It took me thirteen years to get that far.'

Trinket was thinking to himself:

'I'll be gone in a few days. You taught me all that kungfu,

and all I've done for you is blind you in both eyes. I wish there was something I could do for you. I feel I owe you something. I meant to steal that book, but somehow up to now I haven't been able to.'

Even as he was thinking, Old Hai said:

'What you have done today will stand you in good stead. It will make it easier for you now to get into the Upper Library and—'

'Yes!' cried Trinket. 'I'll be able to get hold of that Sutra for you much more easily now! Goong-goong, you're having trouble with your eyes—if you can't really see properly, what do you want a Sutra for?'

'Ah!' said Old Hai, darkly. 'You can always read it to me . . . You can stay with me for the rest of my days and read to me from the Sutra ... I can listen—'

Suddenly as he was speaking he started coughing violently. Watching him all bent double and coughing, Trinket couldn't help feeling sorry for the old man.

'What a weird old fellow he is!' he thought to himself.

Previously he had always thought of him as the Old Turtle, but somehow he could not bring himself to think of him like that any more.

Old Hai did not stop coughing all evening. And all night long Trinket seemed to hear him wheezing, even in his dreams.

Oboi's Mansion: Sworn Brothers

The following day Trinket went to the Upper Library to wait upon the Emperor. He found a new contingent of guards on duty outside. Kang Xi arrived, and

Prince Kang and Songgotu came in to deliver their report. In consultation with the Princes of the Blood and with other senior Ministers of the Realm they had compiled a list of thirty serious crimes committed by Oboi. Kang Xi seemed rather taken aback by this.

Thirty? As many as that?

'Yes,' replied Prince Kang, 'his misdeeds were many and far-reaching. In fact there were more than thirty. But we were mindful of Your Majesty's desire to show clemency.'

'Very well,' said Kang Xi. 'So tell me, what were they?'

Prince Kang took out a sheet of paper and began to read from it. 'Item One: That the Duke Oboi did deceive his Sovereign and abuse his powers;

'Item Two: That he did enter into a conspiratorial association;

'Item Three: That he formed his own rebel clique;

'Item Four: That he amassed wealth to further his own ends;

'Item Five: That he falsified evidence;

'Item Six: That he promoted evil men such as Marsai, whose like the Late Emperor did not employ;

'Item Seven: That he was responsible for the death of Suksaha;

'Item Eight: That he was responsible for the death of Sonahai and others;

'Item Nine: That he sought to take land unlawfully and thereby to enrich his own Banner;

'Item Ten: That he did treat the Empress Dowager with a lack of respect.'

He continued reading through the list of charges, until he came to the final and thirtieth charge, which was that Oboi had caused another person's grave to be illegally moved, so as to improve the geomantic aspect of his own house.

'What a catalogue of crimes!' exclaimed Kang Xi. Tell me, what punishment have you proposed for him?'

To this Prince Kang replied:

'Oboi's crimes deserve nothing less than the supreme penalty of Lingering Death. But we have borne in mind Your Majesty's desire for leniency and so we are merely proposing that he be stripped of his office, and decapitated. Other members of his group, such as Ebilun, and Bambursan, and Asahe, should all be executed likewise.'

Kang Xi brooded for a moment.

'Oboi's crimes are serious ones,' he said. 'But he was a great Minister of State and served the Dragon Throne for many years. His life must be spared. He should be stripped of his rank and held in custody for the rest of his days. All of his family belongings are to be confiscated. As for his fellow conspirators, they should all be executed in accordance with your proposal.'

Prince Kang and Songgotu fell to their knees and kowtowed.

'You are a most wise and forgiving Sovereign, Your Majesty!' they cried. 'Wiser even than the great kings of old!'

That day there was much toing and froing at Court, settling the affairs of Oboi and his fellow conspirators. Detailed reports

were presented to Kang Xi of the struggle that had been going on for some time between the Bordered Yellow Banner and the Plain White Banner. Of this Trinket understood little. All he knew was that Oboi had been the head of the Bordered Yellow Banner whereas Suksaha had led the Plain White Banner, and that the two Banners had been contesting the allocation of prime land. Once Suksaha had been done to death by Oboi, a large amount of property and land belonging to the Plain White Banner had been transferred to the Bordered Yellow Banner. And now the Bannermen of the Plain White Banner were petitioning the Emperor to restore their original property.

'I leave you to sort this matter out amongst yourselves, and report to me about it afterwards. The Bordered Yellow Banner is one of the three Higher Banners, and even though Oboi has been found guilty, we must not allow this to drag every member of his Banner into disgrace. These things must be dealt with fairly.' His ministers kowtowed to him.

'Your Majesty, the Bordered Yellow Banner will undoubtedly appreciate your great wisdom.' Kang Xi nodded.

'You may leave now. I should like Songgotu to remain behind. I have further instructions for him.'

When the others had left, Kang Xi spoke to Songgotu: 'After the death of Suksaha, was all of his property confiscated on Oboi's instructions?' To this Songgotu replied:

'Neither Suksaha's land nor his property was impounded, but Oboi himself went to Suksaha's home and conducted a personal inspection of the contents, choosing for his own personal use such gold and precious jewels as he could find.'

'I feared as much,' replied Kang Xi. 'I want you to go now to Oboi's home and to take an inventory of his possessions. Anything you find that was originally the property of Suksaha I want to be returned to his family.'

'Your Majesty is most generous,' replied Songgotu, and seeing that Kang Xi seemed to have no more to say he began backing out towards the door. Before he had left, Kang Xi remarked:

'The Empress Dowager tells me that in her old age she would like to spend more time reciting the Sutras. She has heard that the heads of both the Bordered Yellow and the Plain White Banners possess a copy of the Sutra in Pony-Two Sections.'

When Trinket heard these last words his body trembled involuntarily. Kang Xi went on:

These two copies of the Sutra are both kept in silk wrappers—one plain white and one yellow with a red border. The Empress Dowager says that she would like to have a look at them both. She wants to see if they are the same as the copies of the Sutra in the Palace. I'd like you to keep an eye out for them when you're at Oboi's house.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' replied Songgotu. 'I will see to this immediately.'

He knew that the young Emperor was extremely devoted to the Empress Dowager and that he obeyed her in everything, even in matters of state. Her orders carried if anything more weight than the Emperor's.

'Laurel,' said Kang Xi, 'why don't you go with him? When you find the Sutras, the two of you can bring them back.'

Trinket was delighted at this and immediately assented. Old Hai had been pressing him to get hold of this Sutra for months, and he had not been able to do so much as set eyes on it. Now here he was with Imperial orders to expropriate

two copies of it. Best of all would be if somehow or other there turned out to be three copies of the Sutra in Oboi's house. Then he could sneak one out for himself and give it to Old Hai. That should make the old boy happy.

Songgotu was aware that Laurel had become one of the Emperor's most favoured eunuchs, and that he had saved the Emperor's life. At first he was puzzled that such an important person was being sent with him on such a routine job, but after a moment's thought it dawned on him what was really going on.

'Aha! The Emperor is trying to find a way of rewarding him. He knows that after all those years in power Oboi is bound to have amassed a considerable fortune, and that there are bound to be rich pickings! Why should he want to do me a favour? I've done nothing to deserve it. No, he's sending Laurel with me on the pretext of collecting the Sutras, so that the boy can have a good look around and see what's available. I'm just his cover. I'd better be sure to handle this one right.'

Songgotu's father Soni had been one of the Four Regents appointed to supervise Kang Xi when he first came to the throne. On his father's death Songgotu had been promoted to a prominent position in the Ministry of Civil Office. At that time Oboi was supreme and Songgotu had not dared to go against him. He was

in due course removed from his position at the Ministry and made an officer in the Palace Guard. Kang Xi knew that he and Oboi had never been on good terms, and that was why he had selected him for this particular mission.

Songgotu and Trinket proceeded to the Palace gate, where some of Songgotu's men were waiting with horses.

'Laurel Goong-goong, ' said Songgotu, 'why don't you mount first?'

'This little eunuch probably doesn't know how to ride,' he thought to himself, 'but I'd better go through the motions anyway.'

To his surprise Trinket, who after several months' kungfu practice had become quite agile—and who had learned the rudiments of riding from Whiskers before they even arrived in the Capital—vaulted nimbly on to the horse's back and sat comfortably in the saddle.

They made their way to Oboi's mansion. All the members of the household staff had been taken away into custody and the front and back gates were under strict guard.

'Laurel Goong-goong, ' Songgotu said to Trinket, once they were inside, 'if you see anything that you take a fancy to, just keep it for yourself. His Majesty has sent you to look for the Sutras as a way of rewarding you for what you have done. I'm sure you can take whatever you like and no questions will be asked.'

Trinket looked around him. Oboi's mansion was piled high with priceless jewels. His eyes were quite dazzled by what he saw. Everything there seemed worth having. By comparison, the knick-knacks decorating his old home in Yangzhou paled into insignificance. First he thought he wanted everything there, and then he started trying to choose between one beautiful object and another and found it extremely hard. Anyway, he reflected, he was planning to make his getaway any day now and it would be a handicap to be weighed down with too many things. So he had better restrict himself to one or two of the choicest items. Songgotu's staff meanwhile began the business of taking a proper inventory. If Trinket picked up a pearl, the scribe would obligingly delete that item from the inventory, as if it had never existed. If Trinket shook his head and put the pearl back, the scribe would obligingly reinstate the item on the list.

While all this was going on, an official came hurrying in and fell respectfully to one knee:

'Gentlemen, in Lord Oboi's bedroom, we have discovered a

hidden vault which we do not dare to open. Would you kindly come and inspect it for yourselves.'

'A secret vault!' exclaimed Songgotu delightedly. That should be very interesting. Have you come across the two Sutras yet?' he added.

'We've not found a single book in the entire house, ' replied the officer, 'apart from all the ledger-books which we are busy sorting through now.'

Songgotu took Trinket by the arm and the two of them made their way to Oboi's bedroom. It was very much the lair of a rough and ready Manchu warrior—the floor strewn with tiger skins and leopard skins, the walls hung with bows and arrows and swords of every description. The 'hidden vault' was in fact a large cavity hollowed out beneath the floor, covered by a metal sheet and a tiger-skin rug. When they arrived, both the rug and the sheet of metal had been removed and two guards were standing over the hole.

'Haul the stuff up for us to have a look!' ordered Songgotu.

The guards jumped down into the hole and began passing up everything that was stored inside it. Two scribes noted down the items one by one and carefully placed them to one side, piling them up on top of a panther-skin rug.

'Oboi's certain to have kept his most precious things in this vault,' commented Songgotu. 'Laurel Goong-goong, why don't you choose something here that you really like. I am sure you won't be disappointed.'

'Come come!' said Trinket. 'You choose something too!'

Even as he said this he let out a gasp of astonishment, as he saw one of the guards hand up a large casket made of white jade with five-characters inscribed on it, touched in with cinnabar red. Three of the characters were legible even to Trinket: they were unmistakably the numerals spelling Forty-Two. He took the casket at once, and raised the lid. Inside lay a slim volume in a white silk wrapper, with the same five characters inscribed on a little title-slip. Trinket turned to Songgotu:

'Is this the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections then? I can read the Forty-Two bit, but I'm afraid I can't read the rest.'

'Yes, yes it is' cried Songgotu delightedly. 'This is it!'

The words for Sutra and Section are really hard to read,' said Trinket rather lamely. 'But I suppose with a book, if the title's got Forty-Two in it, it's pretty much bound to be a Sutra, isn't it?'

The guard handed up another jade casket. It contained another book, this time in a yellow silk wrapper bordered with red. Both books were clearly very old. There were no further jade caskets of this kind in the secret vault—much to Trinket's disappointment.

'Laurel Goong-goong,' said Songgotu happily, 'now that we've dealt with this matter of the two Sutras, the Empress Dowager is sure to be very pleased and we will be well rewarded.'

'I must have a closer look at this Sutra,' said Trinket, taking out one of the books and beginning to open it. Songgotu laughed

nervously.

'Laurel Goong-goong, there's something I feel I ought to say. I hope you won't take it the wrong way.'

Now Trinket had grown up in a whore-house, and had been shouted at and ordered around all his life. He had grown used to being called a pesky little brat or a filthy little turtle. But ever since he had won the favour of the young Emperor, everyone in the Palace had become extraordinarily respectful and courteous towards him. It was a novel and extremely gratifying experience. Here, for example, was Songgotu, a person viewed with considerable awe by those around him, a man whose very presence caused civil and military officials alike to tremble with fear—here was this very important person treating him with extreme deference. It gave Trinket a glow of satisfaction. It caused warm feelings towards this Manchu nobleman to burgeon within his breast.

'Go ahead, please,' he said, gracefully. 'Just say whatever's on your mind.'

Songgotu smiled.

'Oh, it's not exactly on my mind. It just sort of flashed through it. Laurel Goong-goong, as you know, the Empress Dowager and the Emperor gave particular instructions about these two Sutras. And Lord Oboi hid them down there in his secret vault. Obviously there's something very special about them. Now we really don't know why exactly they should be so important, and I must confess I too would really like to open one of them up myself and have a look; but I'm afraid there might be something of enormous importance written down in there, and the Empress Dowager might not be too pleased if we were to see it—whatever it is—so I just wonder it... if perhaps ... it wouldn't be wiser to . . .'

Trinket got the message at once. He also got the fright of his life and immediately put the Sutra back down on the table.

'You're absolutely right, ' he said. 'Songgo my friend, I'm really glad you tipped me off. I understand so little about these things. Nearly got myself into a pile of trouble.'

Songgotu smiled.

'Come come, Laurel Goong-goong, we were sent on this mission together. Your affairs are mine too. If I hadn't thought of you as a friend I would hardly have dared to say what I did just now.'

'But you are a great Minister of Court, while I am just a little ... a little eunuch! How could I possibly deserve to be called your friend!'

Songgotu waved the assembled officials out of the room: 'Would you please leave us alone for a moment.' They bowed and left. Songgotu took Trinket by

the hand: 'Goong-goong, you really mustn't speak like that. Allow me

to share with you a heartfelt desire of mine: it is that we should

swear an oath today and become blood-brothers.'

He said this in the most touchingly earnest tone of voice.

Trinket was greatly taken aback.

'But. . . how could I swear an oath with you? I'm not worthy. . .'

'Brother Laurel, ' said Songgotu, 'talk like that again, and it will only mean one thing: that you wish to reject me. I don't know why, but somehow I feel a real bond with you. Why don't we both go into the little household shrine and seal this bond now? Then from this day forth we'll be like real brothers. We'll mention it to no one else.'

He held Trinket's hand tightly in his own, and there seemed to be an expression of heartfelt sincerity in his eyes.

In actual fact, Songgotu was a shrewd individual and very aware of the change of wind blowing at Court since the downfall of Lord Oboi. At present the Emperor was clearly well-disposed towards him, and would no doubt promote him in the near future. But he also knew that if one wanted to advance at Court, the most important thing was to be able to predict the Emperor's every whim. This little eunuch was at the Emperor's side all day long. He might put in a good word for Songgotu with the Emperor, in which case the benefits would be incalculable. But even if he did not, it would still be invaluable to receive firsthand information about the Emperor's likes and dislikes, to know what he might be planning, and to be able to adjust his own actions accordingly and win the

Emperor's approval. Songgotu had grown up in a family of prominent officials and knew how difficult it was to tune into the Emperor's intentions. Here, Songgotu realized, staring him in the face, was a superb opportunity. If he could somehow bind this young eunuch to him, success—rank, riches, power—all lay within his grasp. Hence the inspiration to seal a bond of friendship.

Now Trinket was a clever lad, but he was still relatively new at Court and all of this was way beyond him. He merely supposed that this great official had taken a genuine liking to him—and of course he felt hugely flattered.

'But this is beyond my wildest dreams!'

Songgotu took his other hand.

'Come! Let us two brothers proceed to the shrine.'

The Manchu people were devout Buddhists, and in every prominent civil or military official's residence there would be a Buddhist shrine. The two of them made their way there. Songgotu lit a stick of incense and knelt down with Trinket before the statue of Buddha. He bowed several times and then said:

'Your humble disciple Songgotu today wishes to form a bond of friendship with . . . with

He turned to Trinket.

'Brother Laurel, what is your real name? I've never thought to ask you. How silly of me!'

Trinket hesitated: 'My real name ... is . Songgotu smiled. 'Yes, I know. I mean Laurel.'

All right... So Laurel's your Court name, is it? But what's your proper name?'

'I... well, I . . .' Trinket hummed and hawed. 'I'm called . . . well. . . Trinket Laurel!'

Songgotu laughed.

'A fine name! A fine name! You really are a little treasure—a Trinket among men!'

'I don't think!' thought Trinket to himself. 'In Yangzhou people always used to call me "that little turtle Trink"! I don't see anything very fine about the name myself!'

Songgotu went on, rather formally:

'Your disciple Songgotu wishes to be united in the bond of friendship with Trinket Laurel. From now on we will share blessing and hardship. We may not have been born on the same day of the same month of the same year, but we wish to die on the same

day of the same month of the same year. If I do not fulfil this obligation with honour, may Heaven strike me dead, may the Earth swallow me up, and may I never see the light of salvation!'

He knocked his head on the ground and bowed again, saying: 'Brother, you must also bow to Lord Buddha and take the oath.'

Trinket was thinking to himself:

'You're a lot older than me—so why should I want to die on the same day of the same month of the same year as you!'

But then he managed to think his way round it:

'Why, I'm not really Trinket Laurel anyway! I can just say it, and it won't really mean a thing!'

So he knocked his head on the ground in front of the Buddha and spoke out loud and clear:

'Your disciple Trinket Laurel, who has for all these years been waiting on the Emperor in the humble role of eunuch, and whom people call little Laurie, wishes to be tied in a bond of friendship and brotherhood with His Excellency Songgotu, to share with him blessing and hardship. We may not have been born on the same day of the same month of the same year, but I pray that we may die on the same day of the same month of the same month ... If little Laurel does not fulfil this obligation with honour, may little Laurel be struck dead by Heaven and destroyed by Earth, may little Laurel be sent down to the deepest pit of Hell and never be reborn for ten thousand years.'

He made sure to say 'same month of the same month', and not year, but so quickly that Songgotu could not catch it.

'I don't mind dying on the same day of the same month,' he thought to himself. 'If you die on the third of the third month, I'd be quite happy to die on the third of the third—a hundred years later

As for that stuff about little Laurel being sent down to Hell and not reborn, that didn't seem too bad an idea either. It was after all Trinket who had killed the real little Laurel in the first place, and it would be no joke if the eunuch's spirit came back for vengeance. If however the eunuch was locked up in Hell, Trinket could breathe more easily here on earth.

When Songgotu had heard Trinket through, the two of them bowed again eight

times, and then they both stood up and laughed loudly.

'Brother!' exclaimed Songgotu. 'Now the two of us are sworn

brothers—and that is closer than real brotherhood. From now on if you need my help in anything, you have only to say the word. You must never hold back.' Trinket laughed.

'Why should I hold back? Since the day my mother brought me into the world, I haven't understood the meaning of the words "hold back"! Tell me, what does it mean, to hold back?' And the two of them burst out laughing again. 'Brother Laurel,' said Songgotu, 'you mustn't speak of this bond of ours to anyone else. People might take it amiss. According to Court regulations, we Ministers of State are not allowed to be too close to people like you working on the inside. Just so long as we know, between ourselves, where we stand, that's all that matters.'

'Yes! Yes!' cried Trinket. 'Like the dumb man eating dumpling soup. He knows how many he's had—that's all that matters!' Songgotu was delighted at Trinket's quick response. 'Brother,' he said, 'in front of other people I'll still have to call you Laurel Goong-goong, and you must call me Excellency Songgotu. In a few days' time you must come to my home and I'll throw a party for you. We'll have plenty to drink and watch some plays together—we'll have a really good time.'

Trinket was delighted to hear this. He might not have been a great wine-connoisseur, but watching plays was one of his favourite activities. He clapped his hands.

'Excellent! Excellent! I love watching plays! You name the day and I'll be there.'

Back in Yangzhou the wealthy salt-merchants had the habit of throwing big parties whenever one of their daughters was being married, or a child had been born, and they would have theatricals for several days on end. On such occasions Trinket would sneak up to the front of the stage and watch the fun for free. The guests were too busy celebrating to take any notice. They might even give him a bowl of rice, piled up with a few leftovers. There would be plays on festivals and feast-days as well. When Trinket heard the word 'plays' he was already in seventh heaven.

'If you like plays so much,' said Songgotu, 'I must ask you over as often as I can—whenever you're free. You just let me know.' 'What about tomorrow?' said Trinket.

Tomorrow it is! I shall wait for you at the entrance to the Palace in the early evening, about six o'clock.'

'Will I be allowed to leave the Palace?'

'Of course you will.'

Songgotu took him by the hand.

'Come on now, let's go back inside the house and choose a few good things.'

An Inventory, a Sword, and a Waistcoat

The two of them went back into the main part of Oboi's mansion and Songgotu carefully supervised the removal of all of the objects from the 'vault'.

'Brother, ' he said turning to Trinket, 'what do you fancy?'

'I haven't any idea which of these things is the most valuable. You just choose something for me.'

'Very well.'

Songgotu picked out a couple of strings of pearls and a jade horse inlaid with malachite.

These pearl necklaces are very valuable,' he said. 'Do you want them?'

'Sure,' said Trinket, and he popped the necklaces and the jade horse into his pocket, at the same time casually picking up a dagger. The dagger seemed strangely heavy. It was only a little over a foot long, including the handle, and was sheathed in a sharkskin case. In appearance it did not seem that different from any ordinary knife. Trinket held it in his left hand and drew it from its sheath. As he did so, he felt a breath of cold air strike him in the face. His nose twitched, and he gave a loud sneeze. When he looked at the blade of the dagger, it was as dark as an ink-stick and reflected not the slightest gleam of light. He imagined that if Oboi had chosen to store this dagger in his secret vault, it must be something precious. And yet it seemed so ordinary and unattractive, just like a wooden sword. Trinket was rather disappointed, and dropped it down on the floor by his feet. He heard a gentle thud, and when he looked down he saw that the blade had penetrated the wooden floor right up to its hilt. Both Trinket

and Songgotu gasped with astonishment. Trinket had dropped the dagger without the slightest force. Its point must have been extraordinarily sharp for it to have sunk so deep, slicing through the wood like soft mud. Trinket bent down and pulled it out again.

This little dagger seems rather special.'

Songgotu had seen rather more of the world and knew rather more about weapons than Trinket.

'I should call it extremely special! Let's try it out.'

He took down an ordinary short-sword from the wall, drew it from its scabbard, and held it horizontally in his hands.

'Brother, try and cut this one in half with your dagger!'

Trinket raised the dagger and brought it down across the blade of the sword. The sword was sliced clean in two.

'Fantastic!' they both cried simultaneously. The dagger was clearly a rare weapon of extraordinary power—of that there was no doubt. It had sliced through the heavy metal blade as if it were wood. There had not even been the sound of metal on metal. Songgotu laughed.

'Congratulations, brother! You seem to have acquired some sort of magic dagger! This must have been one of Oboi's chief treasures.'

Trinket was delighted.

'Brother Songgo,' he cried, 'if you want it you can have it!'

Songgotu shook his head.

'I may have been a warrior once, but now I have put down my weapons. I think you should keep it. Have some fun with it.'

Trinket slipped the dagger back in its sheath and tied it to his belt. Songgotu laughed.

'Brother, a little dagger like that would be better off tucked down the side of your boot. Otherwise when you go back into the Palace people might see it.'

'Yes, I'll do that,' said Trinket, who in fact knew quite well that only the

Imperial Guard were allowed to carry weapons inside the precincts of the Forbidden City. He therefore slipped the dagger down inside his boot.

Now that he had acquired this magic dagger, Trinket did not seem interested in anything else from Oboi's vault. He began to feel at a loose end again and pulled out his new toy. He took a lance from the wall, and sliced it in two. Then he started waving his dagger wildly through the air and slicing most of the objects in the room into pieces. He used the point to carve a picture of a turtle on a sandalwood tabletop. He had no sooner finished carving it, than a turtle-shape fell out of the table, leaving a perfect turtle-outline.

'Oboi old friend!' cried the delighted Trinket. 'I really owe you one for this!'

Songgotu meanwhile was completing his careful inventory of the items in the vault. In amongst them he saw an interesting-looking pitch-black waistcoat, and fished it out. It was extremely light and made of some unusually soft and flexible material, which was neither silk nor wool. He had no idea what it was, but foremost in his mind was his desire to please Trinket, so he called out to him:

'Brother, this waistcoat here would keep you nice and snug. Take off your jacket and put it on.'

'Ha ha!' said Trinket. 'What have we here?'

'I really don't know,' said Songgotu. 'Come on—try it on!'

'It looks too big for me.'

'It's very soft,' said Songgotu. 'If it's too big, you can just have it taken in a bit.'

Trinket took the waistcoat from Songgotu. It really was very light. He remembered how just the year before he had begged his mother to make him a padded-silk jacket. She had worked extra hard for a few days, but had not been able to save the money to make one. This waistcoat would do the job nicely, even though it wasn't quite as bright as he'd had in mind.

'Next time I go back to Yangzhou, I can show it to Mum,' thought Trinket. So he took off his jacket and put the waistcoat on underneath it. It was slightly on the large side, but so soft that it did not matter.

When Songgotu had finished sorting out the vault, he summoned his men back in and examined the inventory they had been taking of the rest of Oboi's belongings. He shot his tongue out in amazement.

'What a rogue! That Oboi certainly knew how to fleece people! He's ten times richer than I ever imagined!'

He waved his men out again and spoke to Trinket.

'Brother, the Chinese have a saying: "An official treads a long and winding road, and every step of the way is paved with wealth." His Majesty in his great generosity has chosen us for this job, with a view to letting us line our pockets. I've been thinking of making a few little changes to this inventory. With the figures, for example. Here, it gives a total of something over two million taels—what do you think we should put?'

'Oh dear, Brother Songgotu, I really don't know anything about these matters. I leave it up to you.'

Songgotu laughed.

'Well, let's see. What have we got here? The list says altogether two million, three hundred and fifty-three thousand, four hundred and eighteen taels' worth ... We can leave most of the digits as they are, but I suggest we make a minor alteration and turn the first two into a one, which would make the figure read one million, three hundred and fifty-three thousand, and so on. And as for the one million left over, I suggest we chop it neatly in half between the two of us.'

Trinket looked absolutely flabbergasted.

'You mean . . . You're saying

Songgotu smiled.

'Does that seem too little?'

'Oh no! No, I really don't understand—'

'What I am suggesting is that we should share the one million, and each take five hundred thousand. But if that seems too little to you, I'm sure we could work it out some other way, '

Trinket stood there gawping. In the whore-house in Yangzhou he had never had more than a tael or two in his possession, and now suddenly he was about to become a wealthy man. Why, even when he'd been gambling at the Palace he'd never won much more than twenty or thirty taels at a sitting—at the very

most a hundred or two. And here he was, being asked if he'd accept half a million ... He could hardly believe his ears.

Songgotu's thinking was to pile Trinket so high with wealth that he would be obliged to maintain a discreet silence about the whole operation. Seeing the look of utter astonishment on Trinket's face, he hurriedly added:

'Brother, you just tell me how you want to deal with this and I'll go along with whatever you say.'

Trinket let out a long breath:

'As I've already said, I leave the decision entirely to you. It's just that... for me ... half a million seems a little bit... much!'

Songgotu laughed with relief.

'No, ' he said, 'it's not too much. Not at all. I'll tell you what. The others who've been helping us here, they need something for their pains. So I suggest I take fifty thousand out of your half million and divide it up as tips for them. And then, when you get home, you can take another fifty thousand and hand out a few gifts to the Palace ladies and all of the eunuchs. That way everyone will be pleased and everyone will keep quiet.'

Trinket did not look entirely happy.

'It sounds a good plan, but I wouldn't have any idea how to divide it up.'

'Just leave it to me,' said Songgotu. 'I'll take care of the tips at this end. You can deal with the rest. People will say afterwards how wise and capable young Laurel Goong-goong was for a person of such tender years, and what an excellent friend he was. By handing out the money like this, both of us will smooth our path into the future.'

'Yes, yes, I see,' said Trinket.

'Now of course, there won't be that amount in ready cash amongst Oboi's possessions, ' said Songgotu. 'We're going to have to sell a lot of the stuff very quickly. And it must be done very discreetly. Obviously you wouldn't have anywhere in the Palace to store that many gold and silver ingots, now would you?'

'Yes,' said Trinket. 'I mean, no.' His head was still reeling at the thought of his sudden wealth.

'What I'm going to do,' said Songgotu with a smile, 'is this: in a few days' time I'll have some of the banks in the Capital issue notes for gold and silver, each worth a hundred or fifty taels. You can carry them around with you, and if you ever need cash you can change them at the bank. It will be convenient and safe. And no one will know that this young fellow I see before me is one of the Capital's wealthiest residents—that is, they won't know unless they actually put their hands inside your pockets!'

He burst out laughing, and Trinket joined in, thinking to himself:

'Will I really have that much money? What will I do with it all? Tamardy! I'll eat pig's trotters and chicken casserole for the rest of my life! Yum! And I'll still have lots left over! Hot-piece mother's! Old Trink will be able to go back to Yangzhou and open his very own whore-house! No, ten whore-houses—a chain—and each one better than Vernal Delights! Ten times better!'

His single greatest ambition in life, ever since he'd been a little boy, had always been to get rich and open a whore-house that was bigger and better than the one his Mum worked in. Whenever he got into a scrape with the old bawd at home, he always used to shout at her: 'Red-hot tamardy mother's! What's so special about this dump? Give me a few years, and when I've made my pile, I'm going to open up my own place right across the road, and I'm going to call it Summer Delights! And then I'll open Autumn Delights on

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he left and Winter Delights on the right! I'll steal all your business! You won't have a single customer left! You'll all starve!'

How that he was about to be seriously rich, he could just picture himself, a big shot, the biggest, swankiest whore-house proprietor in Yangzhou. The look on people's faces as he strolled down the street! Things were going to be different! Trinket was over the

moon.

Songgotu of course had no idea of what was going through

Trinket's mind.

'Brother Laurel,' he said, 'His Majesty instructed us to return to Suksaha's

family all of the property which was originally confiscated by Lord Oboi. I think we should hand them over about sixty or seventy thousand taels. This will be an act of generosity on the Emperor's part, and they will be only too pleased to accept it. They are not going to make a fuss. Besides, if we give them too much, it will make it look as if Suksaha was a corrupt official while he was alive, and his descendants might feel ashamed. Do you agree?'

'Oh yes!' piped Trinket. 'What about us though?' he was thinking to himself. 'Our hands aren't exactly clean. Aren't our descendants going to be ashamed?'

The Emperor and the Empress Dowager specially asked for these two Sutras—that's very important,' said Songgotu. 'We must take them back straight away. As for the rest of Oboi's stuff, we can take our time going through it.'

Trinket nodded. Songgotu wrapped the two jade caskets containing the Sutras in lengths of brocade. He and Trinket took one each and returned with them to the Palace to report to the Emperor.

Kang Xi was very pleased to see that they had accomplished their mission successfully on behalf of the Empress Dowager, and he ordered Trinket to accompany him with the Sutras and to present them to the Empress in person. Songgotu was not allowed into the inner quarters and he withdrew, returning to Oboi's mansion to continue with his inventory. < • -

Blossom

As they walked on together, Kang Xi turned to Trinket and asked: 'How rich was that rogue Oboi?' 'Excellency Songgotu has finished making an inventory,'

replied Trinket. 'He said it came to a total of one million, three hundred and fifty-three thousand, four hundred and eighteen taels.' He made a point of saying that this was Songgotu's figure. If the Emperor should ever find out the true extent of Oboi's wealth, Trinket wanted to be sure that he was covered.

Trinket had always been a past master at this kind of skulduggery. Once, at Vernal Delights, when he was a little boy of five, one of the whores had given him five coins to go and buy some peaches. He had spent one coin on sweets and bought the peaches with the remaining four. The whore noticed nothing, and even rewarded him with a peach. The way Trinket saw it, whenever money passed through his hands, it should leave a little something behind, a trace of some sort—it was bound to, that was only right and proper. But if someone found out, there had to be a yarn ready to spin. Over the years he had received countless clouts on the head, and countless boots up the bum. He was very

experienced at this kind of thing.

Kang Xi humphed.

The rogue! To think how many ordinary innocent citizens he must have cheated! Over a million taels! I can hardly believe it!

Trinket was thinking to himself:

'You'd better believe it! What would you think if you knew about that little missing digit!'

By now they were at the Empress Dowager's personal compound. She seemed delighted to learn that two copies of the Sutra had been found. She took them from Kang Xi's hands, removed the brocade covers, and opened the jade caskets. When she saw the books in their wrappers, a broad smile spread across her face. She turned to Trinket and said:

'Young Laurel, you have done very well!'

Trinket dropped one knee to the ground.

'It was all thanks to Your Majesties.'

She turned to one of her maids-in-waiting.

'Blossom, take young Laurel round to the back and give him some honey-cakes.'

The maid called Blossom must have been thirteen or fourteen. She was a pretty girl.

'Yes, Your Majesty, ' she said with a smile.

Trinket dropped one knee to the ground again.

'I am most grateful to Your Majesties!'

'Laurel, ' said Kang Xi, 'when you've eaten your cake you can

make your own way back. I'll stay here with Her Majesty. You needn't wait for me.'

'Yes, Majesty,' said Trinket and went with Blossom across the inner courtyard

and into a little room. Blossom opened a muslin cupboard, stocked with all sorts of cakes and biscuits and candied

fruit.

'Since your name is Laurel, ' she said, with a little simpering smile, 'you'd better start off by trying some of these candies flavoured with laurel honey

She took out a little box of assorted candies, some of them laurel-flavoured, some of them pine-nut-flavoured. Trinket thought they smelled delicious. He smiled.

'Won't you have some too?'

'Her Majesty said to give some to you. She didn't say I could have any. I wouldn't dream of stealing.'

'Oh go on! Just a few! No one's looking! It won't matter.'

Blossom flushed and shook her head. She gave a little smile.

'I won't.'

'Oh come on!' said Trinket. 'I shan't enjoy them if I have to eat them on my own with you standing there watching me, '

Blossom smiled again. It was a most captivating smile.

'And Her Majesty told me to offer you these little cakes.'

Trinket smiled back:

'Come on—you have one too! Then we'll both be happy.'

She gave a little splutter of laughter and held her hand to her mouth.

'Eat up!' she cried. 'Her Majesty would be angry with me if she knew I was in here chatting with you.'

In Yangzhou, when Trinket lived in Vernal Delights, he had constantly seen pretty women going to and fro; but since his arrival in the Palace this was the first occasion on which he had been together with a girl of his own age, and he felt strangely elated. He had a sudden inspiration.

'I know what I'll do,' he said. 'I'll take some of these cakes back with me. When you have finished waiting on Her Majesty, we can meet and eat them together.'

Blossom blushed again.

That would never do! By the time I've finished waiting on Her Majesty, it'll be late at night.'

'So much the better!' exclaimed Trinket. 'Where's it to be?'

Most of the Empress Dowager's other female attendants were

much older than Blossom and she had never got on with them or talked to them much. She could not help finding Trinket's assignation rather touching.

'What about the little garden outside?' he suggested. 'Sometime after midnight I'll be there—no one will know.'

After a little hesitation Blossom nodded. Trinket was very pleased.

'Good!' he said. That's settled then. Come on now, give me

some of that crystallized fruit! And you choose some of the ones

that you like best.' She smiled.

'What about you? Which ones do you like?' 'Whatever you like eating, my petal, I'm sure to like too . . . ' Blossom was beginning to enjoy being flirted with. She

selected a dozen or so different kinds of cakes and crystallized fruit

and put them in a paper box.

Tonight, after midnight, wait for me in the garden,' whispered Trinket.

Blossom nodded and whispered back:

'But you must be careful!'

'So must you!'

He took the box and made his way contentedly home.

Trinket had been very happy during his sparring days with Misty—but then the

truth of Misty's identity came to light, and the fun had gone out of their games. Since then everyone in the Palace had become so deferential towards him, which was flattering, but not exactly fun. Now he had a midnight assignation with one of the Empress Dowager's maids—and that was not only fun, it was new and exciting and even a little bit dangerous. He was after all still just a boy. Inevitably, having grown up in the whore-house, he had observed a fair amount of what went on between men and women; but he had no experience or understanding of love—even if at times he liked to pretend that he did.

CHAPTER 5

In which Trinket becomes more deeply embroiled in Palace Intrigue

Of Soup and Poison, and Other Things

When Old Hai asked what he had been doing that day, Trinket told him that he had been helping supervise the confiscation of Oboi's estate. He concluded his account—which of course omitted any mention of the dagger and various other valuables that he had pocketed for himself—by telling him about the two copies of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections that had been discovered in Oboi's house. The old eunuch jumped up in surprise.

'Did you say there were two copies at Oboi's place?'

'Yes,' said Trinket. 'We were told to look for them by the Empress Dowager; otherwise I could have brought them to you without anyone knowing.'

Old Hai's face fell, but he soon recovered his composure.

'Hm, in the Empress Dowager's hands now, are they?' he said grimly. 'Well, it could be worse.'

Shortly after this their evening meal was brought in from the Imperial kitchens. After eating barely half a bowl of rice, the old eunuch sat back, turned up his pale, unseeing eyes towards the ceiling, and appeared to be lost in thought. When he had finished his own meal, Trinket decided to get a little sleep in before going to his midnight assignation with the maid-in-waiting. Not wishing to disturb the old eunuch, who was still sitting motionless in his chair, he slipped over to his bed, lay down on it fully clothed, and was soon asleep.

After sleeping fitfully for what must have been several hours, he got up silently, stuffed the box of cakes inside his breast pocket, and made his way on tiptoe across the room, pausing at each step for fear the old eunuch might waken. Then, slowly and gently, he slid back the door-bar and opened one of the leaves

of the door. At that very moment he heard the old eunuch's voice calling out from behind him.

'Laurie, where are you going?'

'I'm . . . I'm going out for a piss.'

'Why can't you piss in the pot?'

'I can't get to sleep,' said Trinket. 'I thought I'd walk around in the garden for a bit.'

No point in standing there talking, he thought; better get off quickly, before the Old Devil could stop him. But just as his foot crossed the threshold, he felt a tightening around the throat.

'Ow!' he hollered. The old eunuch had him by the collar and was propelling him back into the room.

'Damn!' thought Trinket, 'Damn!' as the old man threw him down on the bed. The Old Devil knows I want to go and see that little maid and now he's going to stop me.'

'Is this to test my reactions, Goong-goong?' he said, forcing a laugh. 'It's a long time since you've taught me any kungfu. What do you call that grip?'

'Catching a Turtle in a Jar, ' said the old eunuch. 'Little turtle!'

'Turtle yourself!' thought Trinket, but didn't dare say it out loud.

His eyes were darting all round him, looking for some means of escape; but the old eunuch sat himself down beside him on the bed and began addressing him in a low, almost mournful voice.

'You're bold but not careless,' he said. 'You're a sharp, intelligent lad. You haven't shown much willingness to exert yourself, but if I could have taken you in hand and knocked you into some sort of shape, you might have made quite a promising little fighter. It seems such a pity.'

'What does, Goong-goong?' Trinket asked. 'What seems a pity?'

The old eunuch ignored his question and heaved a sigh. After a pause he said:

'Your Peking accent is almost perfect now. If your voice had sounded like this a

few months ago, without a trace of the Yangzhou twang in it, I might have been taken in.'

Shock raised the fine hairs on Trinket's body. An uncontrollable shivering took possession of him and his teeth began chattering. Nevertheless he managed a nervous laugh.

'G-g-goong-goong, you're speaking very—ha ha!—s-strangely tonight.'

The old eunuch heaved another sigh.

'How old are you, child?'

He was speaking so calmly that Trinket's terror was somewhat allayed.

'About fourteen, I think.'

'If you're thirteen, you're thirteen; if you're fourteen, you're fourteen. What do you mean, you "think"?''

'My mother's not sure herself,' said Trinket. 'I can't say exactly.'

This was true. His mother had always been vague when asked about his age. The old eunuch nodded and coughed for a bit.

'A few years ago I overtaxed my body in some way while I was training. It brought on this cough which just seems to get worse and worse. This last year I've begun to realize there's no hope for me.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Trinket, not quite sure where this conversation was heading. 'I thought your cough was getting a bit better lately.'

'Better?' said the old eunuch shaking his head. 'It's not the least bit better. I've got a terrible pain in my chest all the time. What would you know about it?'

'What's it like at the moment?' said Trinket. 'Would you like me to get you some of your medicine?' Again the old man sighed.

'I've already lost my eyesight. Medicine has to be taken in the proper doses.'

Trinket almost stopped breathing. Did this mean that the Old Devil had guessed about that as well?

'You've got a lucky streak,' the old eunuch continued. 'Getting yourself into the Emperor's graces like that—it could have been very useful. You haven't been purified, of course, but that's no problem. I could have done the cutting for you. Ah, it's a pity. Too late. Just too late.'

Trinket had no idea what 'purified' meant; but everything the old eunuch was saying tonight seemed to have something odd about it.

'Goong-goong,' he said, 'it's very late. Shouldn't you be getting some sleep?'

'Sleep?' said the old eunuch. 'Sleep? There's plenty of sleeping to come: sleeping all day, sleeping all night, sleeping and never waking up again. No more getting up in the morning, no more pains in the chest, no more coughing. What do you think, boy? Don't you think it would be nice?'

Trinket was too frightened to answer.

Tell me, boy,' said the old eunuch, 'who else is there besides you in your family?'

The question was straightforward enough and seemed to have been asked without sinister intent, yet Trinket did not know how to answer it. He hadn't the faintest idea what family the late Laurie had had and feared that almost any answer he gave was likely to betray his ignorance; yet he had to say something. He settled for a modified version of the truth, hoping that Old Hai himself knew nothing about Laurie's family.

'My mother's the only one at home,' he said. 'What's happened to the rest of the family during these past few years, I'd rather not say.'

'Only a mother,' said the old eunuch. 'And what word do you use for "mother" in the Fujian dialect?'

Here was another surprise for Trinket.

'Could the real Laurie have been a Fujianese?' he wondered. 'I thought he said just now that I used to have a Yangzhou accent. Perhaps . . . perhaps he does know that I blinded him.'

Some seconds elapsed while his brain raced through a number of possibilities. His final response was a lame one.

'I... I—why do you ask?'

There was another sigh from the old eunuch.

'So young and yet so wicked! I wonder where you get it from. Who do you most resemble, your father or your mother?'

'I don't think I'm like anyone,' said Trinket. 'Anyway, I'm not all that bad. I may not be very good, but I don't think I'm wicked.'

'I haven't always been a eunuch,' the old man said after a few more coughs. 'I was already a grown man when I was purified.'

Trinket was horrified.

'So that's what being "purified" means: having your piss-pipe and the other bits cut off. I hope he doesn't think he's going to purify me. Holy ding-a-ling dongs!'

But the old man's thoughts were on another track.

'I had a son once,' he said. 'Unfortunately he died when he was only eight years old. If he'd lived, I might have had a grandson today of about your age. Tell me, is that Whiskers Mao your father?'

'No. No, he's not. Hot-piece mamma, of course he's not!'

'I didn't think he was,' said the old eunuch. 'If you were my son and you were trapped here in the Palace, I would find the means of getting you out somehow, whatever the danger.'

Trinket forced a smile.

'Pity you're not my father,' he said. 'I could do with a nice, kind father like you.'

'Those two kinds of Martial Art I was teaching you, the Greater Catch-Can and the Merciful Guanyin,' said the old eunuch, '—I'd only started you on them: you couldn't be said to have more than a smattering of either.'

'You ought to teach me them properly, Goong-goong,' said Trinket. 'You're a world champion. You ought to have someone to carry on the tradition when you're gone. Teach me, so that one day I can make you famous: that's what you ought to do.'

The old man shook his head.

'I'm not a "world champion". There are any number of kungfu Masters in the world as highly qualified as I am. In any case, you couldn't master my two kinds of kungfu if you spent a whole lifetime studying them.'

After a moment he said:

'Put your fingers on your belly about three inches to the left of your navel and press. Hard. Tell me what you feel.'

Trinket did as he said. A pain shot through his vitals, so intense that he cried out loud. He found himself panting, and the sweat stood out on his brow.

As a matter of fact, for several weeks now he had from time to time been conscious of a slight pain in his left side which he put down to indigestion. Since it had invariably gone away after a bit, he had not paid it much attention. He had certainly never imagined that pressure on the source of this pain could produce such agony.

'Interesting, isn't it!' said the old eunuch with ill-disguised satisfaction.

Trinket cursed him inwardly: 'Hateful Old Devil! Stinking Old Turtle!' But all he said was:

'It hurts a bit. I wouldn't have said it was interesting exactly.'

'Every morning when they deliver our food from the kitchens,

you're still not back from gambling with your friends or wrestling with the Emperor, ' said the old eunuch. 'I noticed some time ago that the soup they serve is in need of seasoning, so every day I've been getting out one of the little bottles from my medicine chest and tipping a little of the powder in the soup to give it a bit of flavour. Only a tiny bit. Too much of the poison would have too obvious an effect. A smart lad like you doesn't miss much; but as I had been careful never to take soup myself anyway, you didn't suspect anything.'

Trinket could feel his skin crawling.

'But. . . but... I thought you didn't like soup,' he said. 'You said it made you cough.'

'I'm very fond of soup as a matter of fact,' said the old eunuch, 'but when the soup's poisoned, even if there's only a minute amount of poison in it, the effect of drinking it day after day could in the end become a little dangerous, don't you think?'

'I should say it could!' said Trinket indignantly. 'You think of everything, Goong-goong, don't you!'

'Oh, I don't know, ' said the old eunuch with a sigh. 'I'd originally been planning to let "you take the poison for about three months and then set you free so that it would have a nice long time to work on you. To start with you'd just have about half-an-hour's pain every day, not very severe. Then, as time went by, it would get gradually worse and the periods when you felt it would get longer. After about a year you would be in pain continuously, night and day, and the pain would get so terrible that in the end you would be dashing your head against walls and tearing the flesh of your arms and legs with your teeth, '

He sighed again.

'Unfortunately my health is getting so bad that I doubt if I can wait that long. Now then, no one else has an antidote for this poison but me, so why don't you be a good little boy and tell me who you are working for? Who was it that put you up to blinding me? If you will give me an honest answer to that question, I promise to give you the antidote this minute, '

The question was unanswerable because there was no such person; but Trinket, though young, was not so naive as to believe that the old eunuch would spare his life even if he answered it.

The person I'm working for?' he said. 'You'd get a nasty shock if I told you. So you knew all along that I wasn't Laurie and you thought this trick up to make me suffer? Well—ha ha ha!—

ou're the one who's been tricked. Ha ha ha! You've been had good and proper.'

He kept up the artificial laughter in order to cover up the wriggling of his body. While he was talking and laughing he had managed to draw up his right leg so that he could get his hand on the dagger in his boot and draw it from its sheath. Any slight sound that this operation might have given rise to was masked by his idiotic cachinnation.

'What do you mean?' said the old eunuch. 'How have I been had?'

Trinket had to go on talking in order to keep the old man's

attention distracted. Any old nonsense would do.

'I could tell there was something funny about that soup the very first day I tasted it, ' he said. 'I asked Misty about it and he told me you were trying to poison me . . , '

The old eunuch was clearly startled by this.

The Emperor knew this?'

'Of course he did, ' said Trinket, '—though I didn't realize at the time that he was the Emperor. Misty advised me not to let on that I knew. He said pretend to drink the soup but don't swallow it; then afterwards you can spit it back in the bowl. So that's what I did. It wasn't very difficult to fool you because you couldn't see.'

All the while he was saying this, he was raising the dagger inch by inch and aiming it at the pit of the old man's stomach. He knew that in order to succeed he would have to kill him instantly. Even a correctly aimed blow, if it did not kill him at once, would cost him his own life.

The old eunuch wasn't sure whether to believe him or not.

'If you didn't drink the soup, ' he said, 'how is it that it hurt so badly when you pressed your belly?'

Trinket affected a sigh.

'I suppose it's because I didn't rinse my mouth after spitting it out. Some of the poison must still have got into my stomach.'

While he was saying this he managed to move the dagger a few inches nearer.

'Good!' said the old eunuch. The important thing is, there's no cure; so though you've had a lighter dose, all that means is that the poison will act more slowly and you will have that much longer to suffer.'Trinket began laughing loudly again. Under cover of his laughter he made a tremendous stab, concentrating all the strength of his body into his right arm and aiming at a place he had chosen just beneath the old man's ribs. He had worked out in advance that, after driving the dagger home, he would roll towards the corner of the bed, crawl out from under the foot of it, and make for the still open door.

But at that very moment the old eunuch sensed a slight coldness of the air

caused by the proximity of the metal. Surprised but, because of a lifetime of training, never totally off his guard, he raised his left hand almost automatically to fend off an attack—though of what nature, he had no time to think—while his right hand followed with a blow of such giant force that it knocked Trinket flying through the papered lattice of the bedside window and into the garden outside. Almost at the same time the old eunuch became aware of an agonizing pain in his left hand. The dagger had severed all four of the fingers on it.

The old man calculated that the blow must have killed Trinket instantaneously and that he was probably already dead when he crashed through the window.

'Pity!' he muttered to himself, smiling grimly. The little devil didn't deserve to die so quickly.'

When he had recovered somewhat from the shock of his own gruesome accident, he went to his medicine chest and got out some wound-powder to put on the bleeding stumps; then he tore a strip off the bed-sheet to bind up his left hand with, continuing to mutter to himself as he did so.

'Where on earth could the little devil have got hold of a blade like that? I've never come across anything so sharp in my life before.'

Forcing himself to endure the excruciating pain in his hand, he jumped through the broken window into the garden, groped his way to the place where he thought Trinket must have fallen, and began feeling around for this extraordinary weapon; but though he searched for a long time, he could not find it.

Because he had come to know the garden so well while he still had his sight, he retained a clear memory of where each rock and shrub was situated. According to his calculation, Trinket must have fallen into the bed of peonies. He could understand that the weapon might have flown from his hand and be lying at quite some distance away, but where was the body?

Trinket keeps an Assignment

The blow that Trinket sustained had knocked all the air out of his lungs and caused an agonizing pain in his chest, coupled with the feeling that every bone in his body had been broken. When he hit the ground, he very nearly fainted; but somewhere at the back of his fading consciousness there was an awareness that to lie where he was would mean certain death, for the old eunuch had not been killed and would certainly come after him to finish him off. Making a supreme effort, he struggled to his feet, but after staggering no more than a

couple of steps, his legs gave way and he collapsed once more onto the ground. Fortunately the place where he had fallen was the beginning of a fairly steep declivity in an open part of the garden, so instead of lying where he fell, he began rolling downwards. If the old eunuch had not been so distracted by pain, he would probably have heard something; though so certain was he that the boy was dead, that even if he had, he would probably have attributed the sound to some other cause.

The slope was a long one and Trinket must have rolled a dozen yards or more before his body came to rest. He struggled to his feet and began walking again in the same direction. This time, though his whole body hurt unbearably, he did not fall. Incredibly, he was still holding the dagger tightly in his hand.

'I think I must have a lucky streak,' he said to himself when he became aware of this. 'After being knocked through the window and rolling down the bank and everything, it's a miracle I didn't cut myself.'

He stopped for a moment to put the dagger back inside his boot.

Well, the cat's really out of the bag now, ' he thought. 'If the Old Devil knows I'm not what I'm pretending to be, I can't stay in the Palace a moment longer. Pity about that half a million taels though. Fancy winning all that money in a single go and then losing the lot in an evening! That's what I call real style!'

A few minutes before this he had been nearly dead, but now, after a little boasting, he was on top of the world.

That little maid will be wondering what's become of me,' he thought. 'I can't get out of the Palace anyway in the middle of the night, so I might as well still go and see her. —Aiyo!'

Fishing it out from inside his gown, he found that the box of honey-cakes had, as he feared, been squashed completely flat.

'Better take this as evidence, in case she's feeling cross because I've kept her waiting so long, ' he thought. 'I'll tell her I had a fall. Ha! Some fall! It's turned the cakes into a cow-pat.'

He sampled a small piece of the sticky mess.

'Hot-piece tamardy, this is really nice! Have you ever eaten a piece of cow-pat? Do try some, it's delicious!'

As he started walking again, this time in the direction of the Hall of Maternal

Tranquillity, the Empress Dowager's compound, he was feeling so cock-a-hoop that he was stepping out at quite a pace. The result was a most frightful pain in his chest which at once slowed him down to a shuffle. When he reached his goal, however, he found the gate tightly closed.

'Damn!' he thought. 'I didn't think this one would be shut. Now how the devil am I going to get inside?'

Just as he was wondering what to do next, the gate suddenly opened a bit and a girl's head popped out which he recognized in the moonlight as Blossom's. She smiled at him and beckoned to him to come in. He complied happily, and when he had slipped inside, she fastened the gate after him.

'I thought I'd better wait here in case you had trouble getting -in,' she said softly in his ear. 'I've been waiting ever such a long time.'

'I know, I'm late,' Trinket whispered back, 'but I had a fall on the way. I tripped over a horrible old turtle.'

'I didn't know there were any in the Palace,' said Blossom. 'I've never seen one. Did you hurt yourself?'

The effort of getting to this appointment had absorbed so much of his attention that it had almost taken his mind off the pain; but as soon as she asked the question he became aware that he was hurting dreadfully all over and groaned in spite of himself. Blossom seized his hand in her own.

'Where does it hurt?' she asked in an anxious whisper.

As Trinket was on the point of answering her, a shadow appeared on the ground and he looked up to see a dark figure like a great eagle floating down from the top of the garden wall and softly alighting at the foot of it. He was so startled that he almost called out. While he watched, the monstrous bird-shape transformed itself into a much taller, thinner shape which he could see now, in the light of the moon, was no eagle but a man—a tall, thin man with hunched shoulders and a rounded back: none other, in fact, than Old Hai the eunuch.

Blossom, who had her face towards Trinket and away from the wall, had not seen this apparition; but when Trinket fell silent and turned to stare at something with a startled look on his face, she turned to look as well. The next moment Trinket had his hand over her mouth, holding it perhaps rather tighter than was necessary for fear she might cry out. At the same time he signalled to her with his other hand to keep quiet. When she nodded to show that she understood, he slowly withdrew the hand from her mouth, though all the time

keeping his eyes on the old eunuch.

Old Hai had now straightened himself up and was standing rather stiffly with his head cocked to one side as if listening for something. After a while he began, very slowly, to move forwards. Trinket breathed a silent sigh of relief when he saw that he was not walking in his direction.

'Who'd have thought the Old Turtle would be able to follow me all the way here in spite of being blind?' he thought. 'Still, provided neither of us makes any noise, he isn't likely to find me.'

After taking a few steps forwards, the old eunuch made a sudden leap sideways which brought him right in front of Trinket; then, shooting out his right arm, he grasped Blossom round the neck. She tried to scream, but because of the pressure on her throat, it was only a little smothered sound that came out.

'It's me he's after, not this girl,' thought Trinket. 'I don't think he'll kill her.'

He was only a couple of feet away from the old man and so scared that he was nearly wetting himself, but he dared not budge an inch, knowing that if he made the slightest movement he would be heard.

'Don't make any noise,' the old eunuch hissed to Blossom. 'If you don't do as I tell you, I shall strangle you. Now tell me, but keep your voice down, who are you?'

'I . . . I . . .' Blossom began.

The old eunuch ran his hand over her head, then over her face.

'You're one of the maids-in-waiting, aren't you?' he said.

'Yes,' said Blossom in a little voice.

'So what are you doing out here in the middle of the night?'

'I'm just. . . just playing,' said Blossom.

A faint smile appeared on the face of the old eunuch which the dim moonlight transformed into a ghastly leer.

'Who is here with you?' He cocked his head to listen.

What had enabled him to tell where Blossom was standing was the fact that she

did not know how to control her breathing and had been breathing rather heavily because she was frightened. He hadn't been aware of Trinket's presence because Trinket's breathing was more restrained. When Trinket heard the old eunuch's question, he wanted to signal to Blossom not to let on that he was there, but dared not risk even moving his hand. Fortunately Blossom's quick wits had already sensed that the old man was blind and she said 'no one' without needing to be told.

'Where are the Empress Dowager's rooms?' said the old eunuch. 'Take me to her!'

'Goong-goong, please, ' said Blossom pleadingly, 'please don't tell her. I... I promise never to do this again.'

She assumed that he intended to report her for being caught wandering outside at an unauthorized hour.

'No use bleating,' said the old eunuch. Take me to her, or I'll strangle you this minute.'

He increased the pressure on her throat so that she could no longer breathe and her face became swollen and purple. Trinket was so frightened that he lost control of his bladder and piss soaked through his trousers and began falling drip after drip on the ground. Fortunately the faint sound it made was not detected by the old eunuch; or if it was, he must have assumed that it was the little maid of honour who was wetting herself.

He released the pressure on her throat.

'Come on! Take me there!'

Blossom had no choice but to obey, but before they went, she shot a look full of tenderness at Trinket which seemed to say, 'Go, quickly! I promise I won't give you away.'

That's the Empress Dowager's bedroom, over there,' she whispered, temporarily forgetting that the old man couldn't see. She began walking, very slowly, in the direction she had indicated. The old eunuch walked beside her, his right hand still encircling her throat.

The Old Devil's going to tell the Empress Dowager about me, ' thought Trinket. 'He'll tell her everything—how I killed Laurie and dressed up in his clothes, and how I made him blind, and he'll ask her to have me arrested. But I wonder why he doesn't tell the Emperor? I suppose it's because he knows the Emperor likes

me and is afraid he might not do anything about it. Oh help! What am I going to do? I have to get out of this Palace as quickly as

possible. Aiyo, I can't though! The gates will have been shut long ago. It won't be long now before the Empress Dowager gives orders for my arrest. I shan't get away then, even if I grow wings.'

The Old Devil and the Old Whore

While Trinket stood wondering what to do, he suddenly heard a woman's voice issuing from the building opposite.

'Who's that out there?'

There was something unpleasant and rather threatening about the voice. Realizing that it must be the Empress Dowager, he was about to run off in panic when he heard the old eunuch answering her.

'Your servant, Hai Dafu, come to pay my respects to Your Majesty.'

He noticed with surprise that though the words were polite enough in themselves, they were uttered in the same unpleasant, threatening tone that the Empress Dowager had used and were anything but respectful.

'What a nerve!' he thought. 'Who does Old Turtle-head think he is, talking to the Empress Dowager in that tone of voice?'

Then another thought struck him:

'If he's always as disagreeable to her as this, she probably doesn't like him. Why don't I take advantage of that to fake some kind of defence? She might just take my word against his. There's no escaping from the Palace at this time of night, so I'll probably have to face the music anyway.'

It would be risky, he knew; but there were certain advantages on his side. After all, he had done the Court a great service and the Emperor and Empress Dowager were very pleased with him. Surely the arrest of the mighty Oboi would more than compensate for the killing of young Laurie or the blinding of even half a dozen old eunuchs like the Old Turtle? And if there was still any difficulty, he could always rely on his sworn brother Songgotu to put in a good word for him. On the other hand if he tried to get away, it would look as if he had a guilty conscience and anything the Old Turtle said about him would be believed, even if it was untrue.

He began planning what he would say in his defence.

'Suppose she asks me why I killed Laurie. I'll tell her... I know, I'll tell her I heard him and Old Hai saying bad things about her and the Emperor—all sorts of terrible things—and, er, it made

me very angry, so angry that I couldn't stand it any longer. So I stabbed Laurie and blinded the old eunuch with an overdose of his own medicine. I may be no match for the Old Turtle-head in Martial Arts, but I bet I can beat him hands down at telling a story!'

He began to feel rather pleased with himself, and as his courage returned, he abandoned all thought of running away. His only fear now was that when the Old Devil found himself getting the worst of the argument, he might suddenly rush at him and kill him with another terrific blow. What a waste that would be, to die when he had as good as won his case! What he must do now, he realized, was to find a safe place where the Old Devil couldn't get at him and install himself there in advance. But just at that moment he heard the Empress Dowager speaking.

'If you wanted to pay your respects to me, why couldn't you have done so in the daytime? The middle of the night is hardly the proper time to do it.'

'I have a matter of the utmost secrecy to impart,' the old eunuch replied. There are too many people about in the daytime. It's not a matter for any ears but your own.'

'Here we go!' thought Trinket. 'Now he's going to tell her about me. Better let him speak first and chip in when he's nearly finished. But where shall I hide?'

Having quickly surveyed the layout of the garden, he chose a suitable spot and began edging his way towards it. It was a rockery 'mountain' made out of Tai Hu rocks with a goldfish pool at the foot of it.

'If the Old Turtle makes a dash at me while I'm hidden behind those rocks,' he thought, 'he'll fall splash in the middle of that fishpond and that will give me a chance to nip inside her bedroom. Even he wouldn't dare to follow me in there.'

'What is this matter of the utmost secrecy?' he heard the Empress Dowager saying. 'You can tell me now.'

'Is there anyone in there with you, Your Majesty?' said the old eunuch. 'What I have to say really is an extremely confidential matter.'

'Do you want to come in and search my room?' said the Empress Dowager. 'I should have thought someone so skilful would have been able to tell whether there was anyone else in here or not by merely listening.'

'I wouldn't presume to enter Your Majesty's bedroom,' said

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the old eunuch. 'Could I trouble you to come outside, so that I can talk to you here?'

'Your request is impertinent,' said the Empress Dowager. 'I wonder on what authority you dare to take such liberties.'

'That's right, you Old Devil, ' Trinket mouthed silently. 'How dare you take such liberties with the Empress Dowager!'

'Your pardon, Majesty,' said the old eunuch.

'Humph!' said the Empress Dowager. 'You have never had proper respect for me. How do I know what sort of mischief you are up to now, groping your way here at this time of night?'

Trinket was delighted. He would have liked to add a reproof or two of his own.

'Not getting a very good reception, are you, Old Devil?' he thought. 'Perhaps there won't be any need for me to say anything. Perhaps she'll send you off with a flea in your ear before you can even get started.'

'If Your Majesty does not want to hear any news of that person, I have nothing more to say,' said the old eunuch. 'I may as well take my leave.'

'Yes, do! Please do!' thought Trinket. 'I wish you would. Just bugger off! The Empress Dowager doesn't want to hear your news, you old fool!'

But it seemed from her next words that he was mistaken.

'What news?' she asked.

'News from the Wutai Mountains.'

'What? What did you say? The Wutai Mountains?'

Trinket thought he could detect a slight tremor in her voice.

Suddenly, in the moonlight, he saw the old eunuch make a stabbing motion with his hand at little Blossom, who had been standing all this while a prisoner beside him. She toppled over instantly to the ground.

'You hurt someone then,' said the Empress Dowager, who must have heard the fall. 'Who was it?'

'One of your maids-in-waiting,' said the old eunuch. 'But I wouldn't presume to hurt her. I merely struck her on a vital point so that she won't be able to hear what we are saying.'

Thank goodness!' thought Trinket, who'd assumed that he had killed her.

'Wutai?' said the Empress Dowager, repeating her former question. 'Why did you mention the Wutai Mountains?'

'Because there is someone there whom Your Majesty is very much concerned about,' said the old eunuch.

'Are you . . . are you telling me he went to Wutai?" said the Empress Dowager. Her voice was shaking.

'If Your Majesty wants to hear more, I really must request you to come outside,' said the old eunuch. 'I can't go into Your Majesty's bedroom in the middle of the night, and I can't stand here shouting state secrets at you from outside. Suppose any of your ladies-in-waiting or eunuchs were to hear me?'

There was a moment or two of silence while she hesitated, then:

'Very well,' she said.

A door was heard opening and she came stepping out. She had a swaying, rather graceful walk.

Bearing in mind that the Empress Dowager, unlike the old eunuch, could see, Trinket, who had been leaning out watching, drew back quickly behind the rocks, but not before he had got a glimpse of her as she came out—enough at any rate to see that she was short and rather stout. He had seen her a couple of times previously, but only sitting down.

'You said just now that he had gone to Wutai,' said the Empress Dowager. 'Is that really true?'

'I didn't say anyone had gone there, ' said the old eunuch. 'All I said was that there is someone there that Your Majesty is very concerned about.'

'All right, ' said the Empress Dowager after a moment's hesitation, 'let us suppose he—the person there—is who I think it is. What is he doing there? Is he staying in one of the temples?'

Until the subject of the Wutai Mountains had come up, she had been speaking calmly. Since its first mention she had become flustered and excited.

'He is living in the Pure Coolness Monastery, ' said the old eunuch.

The Empress Dowager seemed greatly relieved by this information.

'Thank heavens!' she said. 'At last—at last I know where he is. He ... he ... he ...'

Her voice was shaking so much that she was unable to go on.

Trinket wondered who this person could be that the Empress Dowager was so concerned about. Not her father or brother, he decided, because in that case there would be no need for secrecy.

It must be her boyfriend. This was not so good for his own prospects, because it gave the old eunuch an edge over her which he could exploit to make her do what he wanted—like having Trinket executed, for example.

'Never mind, ' he thought, 'I've heard everything too; so if the Old Whore tries to have me killed, I'll spill the beans to the Emperor. That will settle the two of them.'

Not many people in those days could have called—or even thought of calling—the Empress Dowager 'the Old Whore', but the expression tripped easily off the tongue of young Trinket who was brought up in a brothel and even applied it on occasion to his own mother. 'Filthy whore!' 'Dirty old whore!' he would shout when she was beating him particularly hard. Foul language was common currency in the brothel—so much so that it was heard without offence. His mother, hearing these choice epithets, would not be in the least put out. She would merely shout back 'Little bugger!' 'Little bastard!' and beat him all the more soundly.

The Empress Dowager, whom emotion seemed temporarily to have deprived of breath, began again.

'He... he ... what is he doing in the Pure Coolness Monastery?'

'Does Your Majesty really want to know?'

'Need you ask?' said the Empress Dowager. 'Of course I do, '

'My Master has become a monk, '

'Ah!' Again she seemed to be having trouble with her breathing. 'Has he ... has he really become a monk? You are not deceiving me?'

'I wouldn't dare, ' said the old eunuch. 'Why should I want to deceive you?'

'Huh! How typical of him, ' she said bitterly. 'Always wrapped up, heart and soul, in that—that fox-woman. Willing to throw up everything—family, State, the Empire that his ancestors fought for in a hundred battles—because of her.'

As Trinket listened, he was growing more and more puzzled.

""Empire that his ancestors fought for"? Who is this person?" he wondered. 'And the Old Devil called him "my Master". Perhaps it isn't her boyfriend after all.'

'My Master has seen through the vanity of human wishes, ' said the old eunuch coldly. 'Now that he has embraced the Truth, neither Imperial power nor human passions concern him any longer—no more than the clouds that float in the sky, ' ;,

'Why couldn't he have seen through the vanity of human wishes a little earlier?' said the Empress Dowager angrily. 'Why did he have to wait until that—that scheming vixen died? I'll tell you why: because his country, his throne, his wife, his children never did mean anything to him. In his estimation the whole lot of them put together was of less importance than a tiny hair on that wicked creature's arm. No, it was because of her that he went off so suddenly, not some revelation of the Truth. All right, he's left the world. So why send you back here to tell me about it?'

She was getting angrier and angrier and her voice had grown louder and more strident while she spoke.

An indescribable sense of panic took hold of Trinket as he became dimly aware that what these two people were discussing •was some person or event of very great importance.

'As a matter of fact, my Master was most insistent that I should keep all this a

secret,' said the old eunuch. 'He particularly warned me against telling Your Majesty or the Emperor. As long as the Emperor's accession was assured and the Empire at peace, he said, he could set his mind at rest.'

'Then why have you come here to tell me all this?' said the Empress Dowager in a high, angry voice. 'I didn't want to know this. I didn't need to know it. The only person he ever cared about was that fox-woman. He didn't care a rap about his son's accession or whether the Empire was at peace or not. Set his mind at rest, indeed! What humbug!'

It suddenly struck Trinket that the person they were talking about was Kang Xi's father, the Emperor Shun Zhi.

'But the Old Emperor died years ago,' he thought. That's why the Young Emperor is on the throne. Perhaps his real father was someone else.'

Trinket's knowledge of Court history was extremely limited; in fact, beyond knowing that Kang Xi's father Shun Zhi was the last Emperor, he was almost totally ignorant. Old Hai and the Empress Dowager could have been ten times more explicit and he would still have been hard put to it to say exactly what they were talking about.

'When my Master became a monk, I ought by rights to have become one too and stayed with him in the Pure Coolness Monastery to look after him,' said the old eunuch. 'But there remained one thing which he said he could not set his mind at rest about and which he sent me back to Peking to investigate.'

'And what was that?' said the Empress Dowager. 'According to my Master, although Lady Donggo—' 'I forbid you to mention that fox-woman's name in my presence,' said the Empress Dowager angrily.

'So this fox-woman she keeps talking about was called Lady Donggo,' thought Trinket. 'She must have been one of the Imperial Concubines. I suppose the Empress Dowager's boyfriend took a shine to this Donggo lady and didn't love the Empress Dowager any more, so the Empress Dowager got jealous.'

'Very well,' said the old eunuch. 'If you forbid me to mention her, I won't do so.'

'What did he say about the fox-woman?' 'I don't know who Your Majesty is referring to,' said the old eunuch. 'My Master said nothing about any fox-woman.'

'Of course not,' said the Empress Dowager angrily. 'No doubt he referred to her as the Empress Donggo. There were plenty of creeping sycophants who

proposed that she should be given that title posthumously. There was even a pair of academic toadies who put together a booklet called The Sayings of the Empress Donggo and had it published. Shameless!

'Your Majesty does right to remind me, ' said the old eunuch. 'I should have referred to her as the Empress Donggo, not Lady Donggo. As regards The Sayings of the Empress Donggo, I happen to have a spare copy on me at this moment. Would Your Majesty care

to see it?'

'You . . . you . . . you . . .' The Empress Dowager was almost screaming with fury. After some moments struggling for breath, however, she suddenly calmed down and smiled as she thought of

something.

'Yes, at one time everyone who wanted to curry favour with him was reading it. The rubbish concocted by those precious academicians was treated with more reverence than The Analects of Confucius or The Book of Mencius. But what about now? Apart from the copy you've got on you now and the one which your Master no doubt carries, where else will you find a copy

today?'

'After your secret directive banning the Sayings, who would dare to retain a copy?' said the old eunuch. 'But as to whether my Master also carries a copy, I should think it unlikely. Since every word the Empress Donggo uttered during their time together is engraved on his heart, he would hardly need to.'

ju...so what did he send you back to Peking to investigate?' said the Empress Dowager.

Two things, ' said the old eunuch, 'but by the time I had completed my investigation, I had discovered that they were really one.'

'So what were these two things,' said the Empress Dowager, 'and what was the one thing?'

The first was to discover the cause of Prince Rong's death.' The fox-woman's brat.'

'I was referring to the son of the late Empress Donggo, His Imperial Highness Prince Rong,' said the old eunuch. The Empress Dowager snorted

contemptuously. 'What is so extraordinary about a sickly baby dying at the age of four months, I should like to know.'

'My Master told me that the little Prince's illness came on very suddenly and that when the Imperial physicians examined him they found that the three meridians connecting the Greater Yang of the foot to the stomach, the Lesser Yin of the foot to the heart, and the Greater Yin of the foot to the spleen had all been severed, and that all his internal organs had been ruptured. It was certainly not natural causes that he died of.'

There was another contemptuous 'Huh!' from the Empress Dowager.

'I know none of our Imperial physicians who would be capable of such a diagnosis,' she said. 'I expect you made it up yourself.'

The old eunuch ignored the interruption and continued.

'When the Empress Donggo died, because her death followed so closely on the death of the little Prince, most people thought she had died of grief; but this belief was not borne out by the facts. I discovered that someone had used a rare Martial Arts technique to sever her Yin Cord and Yin Cradle ducts. It was that which caused her death.'

'And you mean to tell me that your Master really believed these fantasies?' said the Empress Dowager coldly.

'At first not,' said the old eunuch. 'Not until I had given him proof. Not long after the Empress Donggo's death I began a series of experiments on five ladies-in-waiting. In the course of a single month I performed the operation of severing these two ducts on all five of them. They all died, showing exactly the same symptoms that had been observed in the case of the Empress Donggo. One

such case might have been a coincidence, but five in a row was evidence so overwhelming that finally he was convinced.'

'Amazing!' said the Empress Dowager sarcastically. 'I'd no idea we had such a medical genius in the Palace.'

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' said the old eunuch. 'You are too kind. The method I used was not quite the same as the murderer's, but the principle was the same.'

The Empress Dowager made no reply, and for some time the two of them, the Empress and the old eunuch, faced each other in silence—a silence punctuated

only by a few low coughs from the latter. After what seemed a very long pause he continued speaking.

'My Master ordered me to return to Peking to find out who it was that murdered the little prince and the Empress Donggo in that highly sophisticated manner.'

'I wonder he bothered, ' said the Empress Dowager coldly. 'I doubt there is anyone in the Palace besides yourself who has the skill, '

'Ah, but there is, ' said the old eunuch. 'It couldn't, in any case, have been me, because the Empress Donggo was always very good to me. I wished her nothing but happiness and long life. If I had known that someone was plotting her death, I would have done everything in my power to protect her, '

'You are very loyal, ' said the Empress Dowager sneeringly. 'She was a lucky woman to have such a servant, '

The old eunuch sighed.

'Unfortunately not, ' he said. 'In the event I failed miserably to protect her, '

'Oh well, ' said the Empress Dowager, 'with your Master praying to the Buddha morning, noon, and night for her soul, you can console yourself with the thought that she must certainly be in Paradise by now, instead of in the lowest depth of Hell where she belongs, ' There was a chilly edge to her voice which suggested that the removal of Empress Donggo from this world had given her a good deal more satisfaction than the thought of any comforts she might be enjoying in the next.

'Whether praying to the Buddha does any good or not I don't know, ' said the old eunuch, 'but of one thing I am certain: that good is repaid with good and evil with evil, '

He paused for a while before adding, very slowly and deliberately, 'And that if any evil has not yet been paid for, it is only a matter of time, '

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The Empress Dowager sniffed contemptuously.

'I have something to report to Your Majesty,' said the old eunuch. 'As I said, the

two matters that my Master sent me back here to investigate turned out to be one. But that is not all. While investigating them, I unintentionally found out about two other

matters as well.'

'There seems to be no end to your discoveries,' said the Empress Dowager. 'Very well, what were they?'

The first concerns Lady Zhen,' said the old eunuch. 'The fox-woman's younger sister,' said the Empress Dowager scornfully, 'the little vixen. Why do you mention her?'

'When my Master fled from the Palace, ' said the old eunuch, 'he left a letter behind him in which he said that he was never coming back. His grandmother the Imperial Grand Dowager and Your Majesty both took the view that the Empire must not be without a ruler for a single day and, so that they could make the arrangements for a regency, gave it out that he was dead. At the time only six people in the whole world shared the secret that he was still alive: Your Majesty, the Imperial Grand Dowager, my Master himself, the Venerable Yulin who became a monk when my Master did, and the two servants who accompanied him from the Palace. One of them, Hebacha the Captain of the Guard, is himself a monk now on Wutai. The other one is me.'

Now at last Trinket understood the full meaning of what he had been listening to. The person whom the Empress Dowager had been referring to as 'he' and whom Old Hai referred to as 'my Master' was Kang Xi's father, the Emperor Shun Zhi. Although everyone in the Empire believed that he was dead, the truth was that, overwhelmed by his grief at the death of his beloved concubine the Lady Donggo, he had gone off to the Pure Coolness Monastery in the Wutai Mountains to become a monk. And from what the old eunuch had been saying, it appeared that the Emperor's beloved concubine had died not naturally but as a result of hidden injuries inflicted on her by a highly-skilled assassin employed for the purpose by the Empress Dowager. Trinket's vanity was tickled.

The Old Devil said there were only six people in the world who knew this secret,' he thought. 'Well, now there are seven, and old Trink is one of them.'

But his elation soon gave way to fear. Up to now he had taken courage from the fact that the Empress and the eunuch were

enemies. If he was forced to confront the Old Devil in her presence, the Old Devil might for once get the worst of it. But now he was in real trouble. What

he had just heard was a state secret, and if they found out that he had been listening, he would be in danger from both of them; for even if the Old Devil didn't kill him, there would be no escaping the Empress Dowager, who would kill him

to stop his mouth.

He became aware of a slight rattling sound, but it was some moments before he realized that it was his own teeth chattering. He gritted them firmly, for fear the sound would betray him; but fortunately the old eunuch had just embarked on another of his coughing fits and his coughs and wheezes were the only sounds which broke the silence of the night.

Having eventually recovered from his coughing, the old

eunuch continued.

'When the Empress Donggo died, most people at Court were greatly impressed by the loyal devotion shown by Lady Zhen in taking her own life so that she could follow her sister to the grave; but there were those who whispered that she had not done so willingly but had been forced to by Your Majesty.'

They were vile traitors that said so, ' said the Empress Dowager, 'and they will be dealt with in due course.'

'Yet there was some truth in what they were saying, ' said the old eunuch. 'Lady Zhen certainly did not take her own life

willingly.'

'Are you saying that I was responsible for her suicide?' asked

the Empress Dowager angrily.

1 "'Suicide" is not the word I would use, ' said the old eunuch.

'What do you mean?'

: 'Lady Zhen wasn't forced to commit suicide, she was killed, ' said the old eunuch. 'I asked the undertaker who prepared her corpse for burial. When they put her in the coffin, there were multiple fractures in every bone in her body. Even her skull was in pieces. Soft Crush karate is what they call the art of killing people

in that way, isn't it?'

'How would I know?' said the Empress Dowager. 'From what I've heard, ' said the old eunuch, 'a person who has been attacked by a skilled practitioner of Soft Crush karate will afterwards show no sign of injury anywhere on their body, yet in the course of a year or so their entire bone structure will disintegrate. Obviously whoever killed her was only a semi-skilled

practitioner. According to the undertaker, when they were laying out the corpse, there was nothing that seemed to be amiss. It wasn't until the evening, when they came to put it in the coffin, that he noticed a change had come over it. It had gone completely soft, as if there wasn't a bone in it. But although it gave him the shock of his life, he didn't suspect anything. He put it down to unusually rapid decomposition. All the same, he didn't dare breathe a word about it to anyone else. In fact, I had a great deal of trouble getting it out of him. I tried threats and promises and in the end was obliged to use several kinds of torture before he would tell me. I wonder what Your Majesty's opinion is of this matter? I would have said myself that a practitioner of Soft Crush karate whose subject's bone structure disintegrated in only two or three days after the attack had not had very much training.'

'Enough to serve the purpose,' said the Empress Dowager chillingly.

'Oh, it served the purpose all right—heh, heh—it served the purpose,' said the old eunuch. (It was hard to tell whether he was coughing or chuckling.) 'It served to kill Lady Zhen. And it served to kill the Empress Kang as well.'

'Hot popping grandmother's!' exclaimed Trinket silently to himself. 'Just how many Empresses did this old Emperor have? Must have been more of them than all the girls in Vernal Delights put together.'

The Empress Kang? Why . . . why do you mention her?' The Empress Dowager's voice was shaking.

Trinket did not know that the Empress Kang was Kang Xi's own mother, otherwise he would have been less surprised by the Empress Dowager's sudden change of tone.

The undertaker who prepared the Empress Kang's body for burial was the same one who supervised the laying-out of Lady Donggo and Lady Zhen,' said the old eunuch.

'What nonsense has this villain been telling you about her?' said the Empress Dowager. The punishment for making slanderous allegations about Palace

matters is execution of the slanderer with all his clan.'

'If Your Majesty is thinking of killing the undertaker, I am afraid it is too late.'

'Why? Have you already killed him yourself?'

'No. Two years ago I sent him to the Pure Coolness Monastery to tell his story to my Master. After that I advised him,

if he wanted to' stay alive, to change his name and go abroad to live among the barbarians.'

'You . . . you are diabolically thorough,' said the Empress Dowager.

'Not as much as someone I could mention,' said the old eunuch. 'A mere novice by comparison.'

The Empress Dowager fell silent for a while.

'Why have you come to see me tonight?' she asked suddenly. 'What is the purpose of this visit?'

To ask Your Majesty a question,' said the old eunuch. 'I need an answer to take back to my Master on Wutai. The Empress Donggo, the Empress Kang, Lady Zhen, and the little Prince, all four of them died unnatural deaths. It was because of their deaths that my Master left his throne and the whole world behind him to become a monk. The person responsible for their deaths was a very skilled assassin living inside the Palace. Who is that assassin? That is the question I have taken my life in my hands to come here and ask Your Majesty. I am old and blind and suffering from an incurable disease. My life is like the flame of a candle that has burnt down low: a puff of wind would extinguish it. Yet I shall never close my eyes in peace until I have got to the bottom of this mystery.'

'Since your eyes are blind,' said the Empress Dowager unfeelingly, 'what difference does it make whether you close them or not?'

'My eyes may be blind,' said the old eunuch, 'but my mind is crystal clear.'

'Why come to me for the answer then?' said the Empress Dowager.

'Because I need to make doubly sure,' said the old eunuch. 'Because I don't want to accuse anyone who is innocent. During these past few months I have applied myself constantly to the task of finding out where in the Palace this

highly skilled assassin is hiding. The investigation has been very, very difficult, but I have had one great piece of luck. Quite by chance I have discovered that His Majesty the Emperor himself has some knowledge of the Martial Arts.'

'Fancy that!' said the Empress Dowager. 'Now, I suppose, you are going to tell me that the Emperor murdered his own mother?'

'God forbid!' said the old eunuch. 'God forbid that I should

even utter so unspeakable a thing! The devils in Hell would tear my tongue out in the life to come. They would scour my brains out for even thinking such a thought!' He coughed a while before continuing. 'It so happens that I have under my charge a little eunuch called Laurie . . .'

Trinket's heart missed a beat.

'Here it comes!' he thought. 'The Old Devil's got round to me at last!'

This Laurie is roughly the same age as the Emperor. Perhaps a year or two younger. The Emperor is very fond of him. He wrestles and boxes with him daily. What little this Laurie knows of the Martial Arts is what I have taught him. It does not amount to much, but for someone of his age, he is not at all bad.'

Trinket glowed with the pleasure of being praised.

'Good master, good pupil, ' said the Empress Dowager.

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' said the old eunuch. 'You are too kind. However, nine times out of ten when the boy wrestles with the Emperor he gets the worst of it. No matter what I teach him, the Emperor always comes off a little better. I conclude from this that the Emperor's teacher must be better at Martial Arts than I am. None of the skilled practitioners in the Palace who are known to me will fit this description. Only the very highly qualified person who killed the two Empresses, Lady Zhen, and the little Prince could be so described. If I can find the Emperor's teacher, I have found the murderer.'

'I see,' said the Empress Dowager. 'You seem to have gone about this business in an extraordinarily roundabout way.'

'Your Majesty just now remarked that good masters have good pupils,' said the old eunuch. 'The converse is also true. When one meets excellence in a learner, it can be assumed that he has a highly qualified teacher. His Majesty is able to use all sixty-four movements of the Roving Dragon style of kungfu. The person

capable of teaching him that could well be proficient in Soft Crush karate as well.'

'So, have you found this highly qualified person?' said the Empress Dowager.

'I have,' said the old eunuch.

'How devious you are!' said the Empress Dowager. 'You mean to tell me you have had young Laurie practising kungfu with the Emperor for more than half a year in order to find out who the Emperor's teacher is?'

CHAPTEK 3

'I had no alternative,' said the old eunuch. 'The boy is an evil, pernicious child. It was he who caused me to lose my eyesight. He gave me a poison to drink that blinded me. But I needed him to make absolutely sure that I was right. If it weren't for that, I would never have permitted him to live.'

The Empress Dowager burst out laughing.

'He blinded you? Ha ha ha! What a clever boy! Oh good! Oh wonderful! Tomorrow I must remember to reward him with something really nice.'

'Your Majesty is very kind,' said the old eunuch. 'An expensive funeral, I suggest. His soul in the next world should be very grateful.'

Why, have you already killed him?'

'I had put up with his nonsense long enough,' said the old eunuch. 'In any case, I had no further use for him.'

Trinket heard this with a mixture of anger and surprise. He had discovered earlier that evening that the old eunuch had known all along that he was not really Laurie and that it was he who had blinded him. Now it appeared that the only reason he had not killed him there and then was so that he could make use of him— teaching him kungfu as a roundabout way of finding out who the Emperor's teacher was.

'Hot grandmother's!' he thought. 'If I'd known what the Old Devil was up to, I'd never have given him all that information about the Emperor's style of fighting. Huh! so you think I'm dead, do you? Well, Old Turtle, it so happens that I'm not. Just wait a bit longer, and I'll pretend to be a ghost and scare the shit out of you!'

The old eunuch sighed.

'My Master was always an impatient man. Whatever he wanted always had to be carried out immediately—and Heaven help you if it wasn't! But for all his Imperial power, he was unable to prevent the person he loved most from being murdered. He couldn't stop thinking about Lady Donggo even after he had renounced the world to become a monk. Before I left the Pure Coolness Monastery to return to the Palace, he gave me an Imperial edict written in his own hand empowering me to execute summary justice on the murderer of Lady Donggo—I beg her pardon, the Empress Donggo—whenever and wherever I found out who it was.'

As the Empress Dowager gave a little snort of contempt.

'How can a monk write Imperial edicts? In any case, it's hardly

fitting that a Buddhist in holy orders should be constantly thinking about killings and executions.'

'On the contrary, sin and retribution are very much a Buddhist concern,' said the old eunuch. 'No one who takes another's life can hope to come to a good end. Unfortunately, some years ago I did permanent damage to my constitution while I was training and I've suffered from coughing and breathlessness ever since. In fact my whole body is full of sickness. And now, on top of that, I am blind. So there's not much hope of my carrying out the retribution.'

'Of course there isn't,' said the Empress Dowager. 'As you say, your body is full of sickness and your eyes are blind. Although you have a Secret Edict, what earthly hope is there of your acting on it?'

• The old eunuch sighed again.

'Alas! I'm afraid it's true. I beg to take leave of Your Majesty.' ••• - With that he turned and began, very slowly, to walk away. •• This was a great weight off Trinket's mind.

'Once Old Turtle-head's out of here, I shall be all right,' he thought. 'He won't come looking for me again because he thinks I'm dead. First thing tomorrow I'll slip out of the Palace gate, and if he ever finds me after that—well, I'll change my name to Hai!'

But the Empress Dowager was not letting the old eunuch go so easily.

'Not so fast, Hai Dafu!' she said. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'I've told Your Majesty everything,' said the old eunuch. 'Now I'm just going back to wait for death.'

'So you're not going to carry out the task he entrusted to you?'

'My spirit is willing enough, but my strength is not equal to it,' said the old eunuch. 'In any case, it would take greater daring than mine to lift a hand against my betters.'

'I'm glad you know your place,' said the Empress Dowager with an unpleasant laugh. 'Your years of service with us have not been wasted.'

'No, indeed, Your Majesty. Your Majesty is very gracious,' said the old eunuch. 'These unfathomable wrongs will have to wait for the Emperor himself to deal with when he is older.'

He coughed a few times.

'His Majesty showed great intelligence in his handling of the Oboi affair. I am sure there will not be long to wait before he takes action against the murderer of his own mother.'

The Empress Dowager took a few steps forward and called after him.

'Hai Dafu, turn round at once!'

'Yes, Your Majesty.' The old eunuch, who had already started to move away again, stopped in his tracks and turned round to face her. 'What is Your Majesty's command?'

This absurd nonsense you have just been telling me,' the Empress Dowager began—her voice was strident, but there was a tremor in it which betrayed extreme anxiety—'these preposterous allegations of yours . . . have you . . . have you already spoken to the Emperor about them?'

'I plan to tell His Majesty first thing tomorrow,' said the old eunuch, 'but—well, this evening I felt I just couldn't wait any longer and decided to tell Your Majesty first.'

'Good,' said the Empress Dowager. 'Very good.'

Mortal Combat

Suddenly there was a sound like a little squall of wind getting up followed, in rapid succession, by two loud slapping sounds. Startled but curious, Trinket peeped out from behind the rocks and saw the Empress Dowager circling round the old eunuch with surprising agility and aiming blow after blow at his body with her open palms, while the eunuch stood his ground, blocking and occasionally striking back. Trinket watched them in amazement. It had never occurred to him that an Empress might be proficient in unarmed combat.

Every time the Empress Dowager aimed a blow at the old eunuch she gave a shout. It was evident that she was delivering her blows with tremendous force. The old eunuch, on the other hand, never moved his feet at all, blocked each blow aimed at him with the minimum of effort, and, when he struck out himself, did so quite soundlessly. When they had been fighting for some time without the Empress Dowager being able to gain the least advantage, she suddenly leapt into the air, raising both hands above her to bring them crashing down on his head. At once the old eunuch's left palm was upturned to meet them, while his right hand struck out at her belly. There was a loud slap as their three palms met,

then the Empress Dowager's body went hurtling backwards. The old eunuch himself was staggering, but after swaying for a bit, he caught his hand against a tree and managed to right himself.

'You—you cheating devil!' cried the Empress Dowager shrilly. 'It was Shaolin boxing you taught that Laurie boy, but your own way of fighting belongs to the Kongdong School.'

'I must apologize,' said the old eunuch wheezingly. 'All the same, I think we are about quits. You taught His Majesty Wudang boxing in order to deceive me. In fact, though, I learned about the Soft Crush karate style of boxing that is taught by the Master of Snake Island some years ago, so you see . . .'

After racking his brains for a bit, Trinket began to understand the import of what they were saying.

'Hot grandmother's!' he thought. 'I remember now. He told me. That Greater Catch-Can and Merciful Guanyin stuff he taught me both belong to the Shaolin School. So it was just to fool the old girl into thinking he was a Shaolin boxer himself that he taught me them, while all the time what he really goes in for himself is this hot-piece-how's-your-mother's Kongdong stuff. Pity she didn't manage to take him in too, with her Roving Dragon type of Wudang!'

And as more and more of what he had heard began to sink in: 'Of course!' he

thought. 'It was the Empress Dowager who taught the Emperor Martial Arts!'

Then suddenly another thought struck him. 'Aiyo!'—and he could feel a cold sweat running down his back—'He said Soft Crush. She knows how to do Soft Crush. Does that mean—could it be—is she the one who did those four murders? Aiyo! And one of the four she killed was the Emperor's own mother. And now the Old Devil's going to tell the Emperor. That'll be a real calamity, because if the Emperor can't kill the Empress Dowager, the Empress Dowager will sure as eggs kill the Emperor. Hot tamardy sauce! What am I going to do?'

He wanted most fervently to run away, to take to his heels, and get out of that accursed place as quickly as possible. Then he would tell all to the Emperor and warn him to be on his guard. The trouble was that fear had deprived him of control over his body and, however much he wanted to run, his feet would no more obey him than if they had been nailed to the ground.

He became aware that the Empress Dowager was speaking again.

'Now that things have come to this pass, you don't, surely, expect to live beyond this night?'

'Are you going to call the Guard?' the old eunuch asked her. 'Let them come. The more the merrier. I shall tell them everything, in great detail. There is bound to be one of them who will carry the information to the Emperor.'

'If you imagine I would do anything so foolish, you are deluding yourself,' said the Empress Dowager.' She spoke slowly and deliberately because she was in the process of stabilizing her breathing, as kungfu experts do when they are preparing for action.

Until she attacked him, the old eunuch, in spite of what he had been saying, had not been at all sure that it was the Empress Dowager herself who killed Lady Donggo and the other three. She was, after all, a daughter of Prince Koran of the noble Borjigit clan whose men had for generations held high offices of state and whose women had supplied several Manchu rulers with their consorts. The Soft Crush karate technique, taught only on Snake Island off the coast of Liaodong by its sinister Master, was reckoned to be one that took anything up to twenty years to perfect. It seemed inconceivable that a daughter of the Borjigit, who could scarcely venture out of doors unless attended by beves of nurses and maidservants, should have made her way to so dangerous and remote a place for her training. And even if she had been allowed to practise Martial Arts, it would have been one of the gentler, mainly body-strengthening kinds suitable for young ladies, not the lethal and highly unorthodox methods of Soft Crush karate.

The old eunuch had been inclined to think that the person who had actually done the killings was some trusted eunuch or Court lady in the Empress Dowager's employment and had been hoping that, when sufficiently provoked, she would call on this person to attack him. He had not expected that when he told her he was going to tell his story to the Emperor she would completely lose her head and begin attacking him herself. By attacking him she was virtually admitting that the four murders were her own handiwork, for he had no difficulty in detecting the Soft Crush element in her fighting. Whatever the ultimate outcome of this confrontation, to have obtained this admission and to have dealt her a blow which he was sure had done her serious damage were ample reward for his years of patient scheming.

The blow sustained by the Empress Dowager had indeed been a damaging one. Several attempts to regulate her breathing

had proved unavailing; consequently her speech, when she addressed the old eunuch, was slow and laboured.

'Hai Dafu, ' she said, 'if it amuses you to invent these monstrous fabrications, by all means go and tell the Emperor. But there is an old head on those young shoulders, don't forget. Do you really think he will prefer your word to mine?'

'Of course not,' said the old eunuch. 'Not at first. He will probably have me beheaded. But in a year or two's time, when he has had a chance to think about it, he will come to see more and more clearly that what I told him was true. And then, Your Majesty, the great Borjigit clan, that breeding-ground of Empresses, will find that its days of glory are at an end.'

'Fine words!' said the Empress Dowager. 'Bravo!'

'My Master's orders were that as soon as I had tracked down Lady Donggo's murderer, I should put that person to death immediately no matter who it was. Unfortunately my powers are unequal to the task: I am clearly no match for Your Majesty. The best I can do, as a poor alternative, is to tell the Emperor about his mother's murder.'

With that he turned once more and, moving very, very slowly, began to go.

In the course of this exchange the Empress Dowager had finally succeeded in summoning up enough strength to renew the fight. But just as she was preparing to fly after him and attack him unawares, she was herself taken by surprise, for the old eunuch, moving like a little whirlwind, had already turned round again and was advancing on her with arms upraised to smite.

He had never abandoned his intention of carrying out his Master's order to kill the murderer of Lady Donggo. The talk of going off to tell his story to the Emperor had been merely a ruse, to put her off her guard and get her feeling anxious. Anxiety, he hoped, would cloud her judgement and cause her breathing to be unsettled. While she was thus ill-prepared, it might be possible to finish her off with one almighty blow.

And it was indeed a formidable blow, this two-handed strike that he now dealt her. Into it were concentrated all the resources of skill and strength he had accumulated during a lifetime's training. Moreover it was directed at a vital point on her body; for by listening intently to her voice, he had been able, in spite of his blindness, to calculate her position with great accuracy. If she had been able to dodge the blow, the initiative would have been hers,

because once out of his range she had only, by using quick footwork, to keep on the move, and the blind man could only parry her blows; he would have little hope of retaliating. But the onslaught was too sudden for her and she found herself blocking with her right palm almost before she could catch her breath.

Having blocked the blow, she wanted to skip back out of his reach, but some powerful adhesive or magnetic force in the old eunuch's two palms prevented her, so that instead of pulling her palm away, she found herself pressing with it against the two of his, and what started as a fight now turned into a trial of strength.

The old eunuch could sense the vital force flowing out of his opponent's palm and secretly rejoiced. Because of his blindness, he was enormously disadvantaged in a moving fight; but in a trial of strength, sight or the lack of it was irrelevant. The Empress Dowager had been seriously hurt and her breathing was unsettled and would take some time to regulate: in a situation like this it was possible, by correctly applying the principles of Yin and Yang, to so drain a person of their strength that they might actually die. At that moment he was exercising a Yin force with his wounded left palm and a Yang with his right. After a while he would gradually reverse the process, directing the Yin force through his right palm and the Yang force through his left.

To Trinket, peeping out from behind his rockery, the two figures standing there motionlessly a yard or so apart, the right palm of the one and the two palms of the other seemingly locked together, looked rather as if they were engaged in some sort of harmless game. He could not know that what he was witnessing was a deadly contest in which the slow, relentless pressure of the alternating Yin and Yang forces flowing from the palms of the old eunuch were imperceptibly draining the vital forces from the Empress Dowager's body.

He quickly ducked back behind the rocks in case she caught sight of him, but a sudden flash of light caused him to peep out again. The two figures locked in their strange stance appeared to be the same—except that there was now a blade protruding from the Empress Dowager's left hand, gleaming wickedly in the white light of the moon. It was a stiletto of finest Emei steel inlaid with white gold; and it was pointed at the old eunuch's belly.

Trinket inwardly cheered.

The Old Devil's done for now!' he thought This is his ticket to Heaven.'

Sensing the loss of vital force through her right palm, the Empress Dowager, using her free left hand, had very slowly and gently extracted the stiletto from the bosom of her dress and begun slowly inching it towards her opponent's body. Unfortunately the distance between them was such that she could get the point of it no nearer than a foot from his belly; and all the time the pressure from the old eunuch's palms was increasing and her own right hand was growing more and more weak and numb, so that she would soon need her left hand to help it out. At last the effort of keeping the pressure up with her right hand became so intolerable that she decided to make a wild thrust forward with the stiletto, no longer caring whether the old eunuch could sense it coming or not. But just in those few moments the strength seemed to have deserted her left hand as well, and she found herself powerless to advance it by even a fraction of an inch.

Suddenly, as the two of them stood in their clinch, they became aware of a pattering sound. It was the blood from the old eunuch's left hand splashing on the ground. The same sinister force which was draining the Empress Dowager's energy was causing the blood to flow more and more freely from the stumps of his severed fingers.

As Trinket watched, the gleam of reflected light from the stiletto began to jump and waver. The supreme effort being made by the Empress Dowager to stab it home was causing her hand to shake. The shaking grew more and more violent, then, to Trinket's dismay, ceased altogether as the left hand clasping the stiletto began slowly to withdraw.

'Aiyo, she's lost!' he thought. 'If I'm going to get out of this place at all, it had better be now.'

Very slowly, a step at a time, he crept out of the rockery and began making his way towards the garden gate. With each step he took nearer to deliverance, his spirits rose a little. In his relief he began to walk faster, and was almost running

by the time he reached the gate. His hand was already on its iron ring when he heard a despairing 'Aah!' from the Empress Dowager.

'Horrors!' he thought. The Old Devil must have killed her.' But then he heard the Old Devil talking to her and knew that she was still alive.

'You've run out of oil, Your Majesty, ' he was saying. 'Your lamp is about to go out. The only thing that could save you now would be if someone were to come up from behind and stab me

in the back; but there's not much chance of that happening. You're going to die.'

At that moment there was nothing to stop Trinket pushing the gate open and getting clean away—but he was tempted.

The Old Devil's right, ' he thought. 'He can't let go of her. If I wanted to stab him in the back now, there's nothing he could do to stop me. Well, if I did, he'd have no one but himself to blame.'

It seemed so simple—and no more dangerous than hitting a drowning dog on the head with a stick. As an inveterate gambler he was used to taking fifty-fifty chances, but this was no fifty-fifty chance: the odds were more like ninety-nine to one. Not that he would have taken even that small risk to save the Empress Dowager. But when the old eunuch had his hands tied and was almost asking to be killed, who could refuse the invitation? He drew out the dagger from inside his boot and, running up behind the old man's back, raised it above his head to strike.

'Old Devil!' he shouted. 'How dare you hurt Her Majesty!'

With a triumphant peal of laughter the old eunuch kicked backwards like a mule, catching Trinket a mighty thump in the chest that sent him flying.

'Young devil! I fooled you, didn't I!'

Just as victory seemed to be within his grasp, the old eunuch had heard the sound of someone coming out from behind the rockery and recognized the footsteps as Trinket's—with some surprise, because he thought the blow he dealt him earlier must have killed him. If Trinket got away he might call the guards, the Empress Dowager would be rescued, and the task he had worked on for so long and so very nearly completed would come to nothing. His fertile brain supplied him with the only ploy that might stop the boy leaving the garden and dispose of him altogether. The ruse had worked. Insufficiently

experienced in the duplicities of combat, Trinket had allowed himself to be taken in, and now he was sailing several yards through the air, and coughing out a full mouthful of blood.

The old eunuch had calculated that his backward kick would temporarily reduce the pressure in his palms, giving the Empress Dowager an opportunity, which she would probably exploit, of striking him with her free left hand. While he was kicking out therefore, he almost automatically dropped his right hand to protect his belly. As he gloated over the disposal of his detested house-boy, he

suddenly experienced a sensation of intense cold in this hand, while an agonizing pain shot through his bowels. The Emei steel stiletto had transfixed his hand and entered his body. This time his want of eyesight had betrayed him. He had expected the Empress Dowager to strike, but being blind, had no means of knowing that what she would strike with was not her bare hand but a pointed weapon.

With his right hand skewered to his own body and in dreadful pain, he yet had strength enough in his mutilated left hand to send her flying. Landing on her left foot, she at once jumped back another yard. Even then, though she could feel all the blood in her body rushing upwards and was almost fainting, so terrified was she that he would reach her that she forced herself to stagger back a few more paces and ended up propped against a wall when she could get no further.

The old eunuch gave a terrible laugh.

The luck is yours!' he cried in a loud, despairing voice. Then—whoosh! whoosh! whoosh!—he had hurled himself forwards, striking out as he went, three times in rapid succession, with all his remaining strength. The Empress Dowager leapt sideways—though there was little danger of his reaching her—then, as her legs gave way beneath her, sank to the foot of the wall. Lying there she heard a rending crash as one side of a pergola that the old eunuch had struck in passing came tumbling to the ground. Startled, but too weak to do more than raise her head, she saw the old eunuch lying face downwards on the ruined pergola. His body no longer stirred.

Not a Healthy Place to Be

The Empress Dowager made an effort to get up, but her arms and legs seemed to have turned into cotton wool and her whole body was utterly drained of strength. She was thinking of calling for one of her ladies-in-waiting to come and help her when there was a confused noise of voices in the distance.

'Neither of us made much noise throughout that fight,' she thought. 'It was just at the end, when that vile creature knew he was beaten: his shouting and laughing and smashing things must have been a deliberate attempt to make himself heard outside. So now the eunuchs and guards have been alerted and soon they will be here. Whatever is it going to look like when they see me lying

here with an old eunuch lying dead on one side of me and another young one lying dead over there?'

The thought prompted another effort to struggle to her feet and get indoors, but she could not summon up the strength. Just as she was growing desperate, she became aware that someone had walked up from another part of the garden and was addressing her. 'Is Your Majesty all right? Let me help you get up.' With a mixture of surprise and delight, she saw that it was the boy eunuch, Laurie.

'So you ... so the kick didn't kill you?' 'No,' said Trinket, 'it didn't kill me.'

The kick had in fact landed him in the midst of some flowering bushes where, after coughing up several mouthfuls of blood and spending some time trying to collect himself, he had finally got back on his feet. From there he had emerged to see the old eunuch lying face downwards on the broken pergola. Concealing himself behind a tree, he had aimed a stone at the recumbent body which by good chance had caught it squarely on the back of the head. The body had not moved.

The Old Devil's dead,' he thought delightedly, but was still too scared of him to go right up and investigate.

For a few moments he could not make up his mind what to do—run, or help the Empress Dowager. But then he heard a hubbub of voices and running feet and realized that even if he did run out, he wouldn't get very far. So he had gone to help the Empress Dowager.

'Good boy!' she said. 'Help me up, will you? I must go and lie down indoors.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' said Trinket, and half carrying, half dragging her, he got her inside her bedroom and on to the bed; then, his own legs being too weak to support him any longer, he collapsed, panting, on the thick-piled carpet.

'Just lie there,' said the Empress Dowager. 'If anyone comes here presently, say nothing.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' said Trinket.

After a bit, the sound of many footsteps could be heard in the garden and a small crowd seemed to have gathered outside the building. The lights of their lanterns and torches could be seen through the latticed windows.

'Aiyo!' they heard someone saying, 'there's a dead eunuch here.'

'It's Old Hai Goong-goong from the Catering Department,' said another.

Someone standing outside the window raised his voice to address the Empress Dowager inside.

'Your Majesty, there has been an incident in the garden. Is Your Majesty all right?'

'What kind of incident?' the Empress Dowager shouted back.

The eunuchs and Palace Guards standing in the garden breathed a sigh of relief when they heard her voice. As long as the Empress Dowager was all right, whatever it was that had happened in the grounds of the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity, at least their heads would be safe.

The most senior officer present answered her.

'It seems that some eunuchs have been fighting, Your Majesty. Nothing very serious. Your Majesty can safely go back to sleep. We shall report in detail in the morning.'

'Very good,' said the Empress Dowager.

They heard the commanding officer in a lower voice giving orders for the old eunuch's body to be removed.

'Hey, there's another body here, a little maid-in-waiting,' said another low voice outside. 'No, just a minute. She's not dead; she's just fainted.'

'Carry her away, along with the other body,' said the commanding officer. 'We'll interrogate her when she comes to.'

The Empress Dowager had heard this.

'Did you say there's a maid-in-waiting there? Bring her in here.' (When Blossom eventually came round, she didn't want her giving away any secrets.)

There was a murmur of assent from outside and presently a eunuch came in carrying little Blossom in his arms. He laid her down on the carpet, kowtowed to the Empress Dowager, and retired.

By this time the Empress Dowager's ladies-in-waiting, who had been wakened by the noise, were all gathered outside the closed doors of her bedroom, not daring to go in until they were summoned. It was some time before all the eunuchs and guardsmen in the garden left. When they had all done so, she dismissed the women.

'You can go back to bed now,' she called to them. 'I don't need you to wait on me.'

The women murmured a reply and dispersed.

The Empress Dowager's proficiency in the Martial Arts was a closely guarded secret which not even the more intimate of her ladies-in-waiting knew about. Because she needed to exercise twice daily, morning and evening, she made it a rule that no eunuch or Palace lady should ever enter her bedroom or even so much as touch the curtain of its door, except when expressly commanded to do so, on pain of the severest penalties.

By the time the Empress Dowager had regularized her breathing, Trinket, too, had begun to revive a bit and was able to sit up on the carpet; and before very long he managed to struggle to his feet. For some moments the Empress Dowager studied him in silence. This young eunuch had sustained what had looked like a lethal blow in the chest, yet appeared to be almost unscathed. He had even got her, single-handed, into her room. Surely he must have undergone some sort of special training, she thought.

'Apart from Hai Dafu, has anyone else given you training in the Martial Arts?' she asked him.

'I only studied Martial Arts for a few months with that person you mentioned, Your Majesty,' said Trinket, 'but what he taught me was all rubbish. He was a very wicked man, Your Majesty. All the time I was with him he was trying to kill me.'

'Hm, ' said the Empress Dowager, 'wasn't it you who blinded him?'

'It was because night and day he was always saying wicked things about Your Majesty and His Majesty the Emperor, Your Majesty,' said Trinket. 'I couldn't stand it. I wasn't able to kill him, so I . . . so I . . .'

'What sort of wicked things did he say about me and the Emperor?' said the Empress Dowager.

Terrible things,' said Trinket, 'so awful, I just made myself forget them straight away. I've forgotten them so completely, I couldn't even tell Your Majesty any of them now if I tried.'

The Empress Dowager nodded.

'I can see you are a very sensible boy. What were you doing here in the garden tonight?'

'While I was lying in bed, I heard that wicked person open the door and go outside. I thought he might be planning some new trick to kill me, so I got up and followed him. I followed him all the way here.'

That nonsense he was saying to me,' said the Empress Dowager, speaking very slowly, 'did you hear all that?'

'Nothing that wicked old man said was worth a fart, ' said Trinket. 'Oh, I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, I shouldn't have said that. I hated him, though. He called me the most terrible names. And he said all sorts of things about my family. I don't think anything he ever said was true.'

'I asked you whether or not you heard what Hai Dafu said to me,' said the Empress Dowager icily. 'Kindly answer the question.'

'I was hiding outside the gate, Your Majesty,' said Trinket. 'I didn't dare go inside. His ears were so sharp, he'd have heard me if I'd got any nearer. I could see him talking to Your Majesty and I tried to hear what he said, but you were too far off. Though I tried my hardest, I couldn't hear anything. Of course afterwards, when I saw him lay hands on Your Majesty—well, that's treason, isn't it—I had to come inside then and do what I could to help. I don't know what he was talking about to Your Majesty, but he was probably saying bad things about me, I shouldn't wonder. Of course, if he told you I blinded him, I have to admit that I did. But anything else he told you about me, I beg you, Your Majesty, a thousand, thousand times over, don't believe a word of it. But it's probably because Your Majesty didn't believe what he was saying that he attacked you.'

'Hm,' said the Empress Dowager. 'You are a very sharp boy, very intelligent. I don't know whether you really didn't hear what Hai Dafu was saying or whether you are only pretending you didn't, but if one little whisper of it ever

reaches my ears, I am sure you know what will happen to you.'

'Your Majesty has been so good to me,' said Trinket. 'In future if I ever hear anyone so wicked or so bold as to say bad things about Your Majesty or His Majesty the Emperor behind your backs, I promise I'll deal with them, even if it costs me my life.'

'If you do as you say, I shall be very pleased, ' said the Empress Dowager. 'But why do you speak of my kindness to you?'

'When His Majesty and I Erst began wrestling, ' said Trinket, 'I didn't realize who he was. I must have done and said all sorts of things I shouldn't have, but Your Majesty and His Majesty the Emperor have never taken me up on it. I call that a very great kindness, Your Majesty. If you wanted you could have had my head off a hundred times over for the things I did and said then. Besides, that wicked old man was trying to kill me every day for months, so Your Majesty has saved my life. That makes me feel very grateful indeed.'

'So you know how to be grateful for what is done for you, ' said the Empress Dowager. 'I'm glad to hear it. Light the candles on that table, '

Trinket struck a light and lit the candles. The Palace candles were very thick ones and unusually bright.

'Now come over here, ' said the Empress Dowager. 'I want to look at you.'

'Yes, Your Majesty, ' said Trinket, moving, with a marked lack of enthusiasm, to the side of her bed.

She had a snowy-white, completely bloodless complexion. Her eyebrows slanted slightly upwards and the eyes beneath them were hard and bright. Trinket could feel his heart beating faster.

'Is she going to kill me, to shut me up?' he wondered. 'If I were to leg it now, she wouldn't be able to run after me. Still, suppose she grabbed me before I could get away?'

But it was too late to run anyway. While he was still trying to decide, she shot her left hand out and imprisoned his right hand in its grasp. Trinket almost jumped out of his skin and cried out in terror.

'Why are you afraid?' she asked him.

'I'm not afraid, ' said Trinket. 'It's just. . . it's just

'Just what?' said the Empress Dowager.

'It's just that Your Majesty is so kind, I'm over. . . over . . . something by this . . . this . . . what-d'you-call-it, ' (He'd often heard the expression 'overwhelmed by this unexpected favour', but fear had caused his always unreliable memory to abandon him completely.)

The Empress Dowager looked puzzled.

'But you are trembling all over, ' she said.

'I'm not. . . I'm not. . . not. . . not. . . , ' Trinket abandoned the attempt to finish.

The Empress Dowager might at this point have killed him with a single blow and been rid for ever of the fear of discovery, but she simply did not have the energy left to do it. In fact, she was so weak that even though she had Trinket's hand in her own, her grasp was powerless. Had he but known, he could have shaken it off easily and got away.

Conscious of her own weakness, she gave him a little smile.

'You have done me a great service tonight, ' she said. 'I shall see to it that you are well rewarded.'

That wicked old man wanted to kill me, ' said Trinket. 'Your Majesty has saved my life. I only did what I should.'

'I think we understand each other, ' said the Empress Dowager. 'You will not find me ungrateful. You may go now.'

She gently released his hand.

Greatly relieved, Trinket dropped to his knees and made several kowtows before retiring.

The Empress Dowager had noticed that the front of Trinket's gown was still wet with expectorated blood; yet his movements as he made his kowtows had been almost sprightly. She was finding this little eunuch distinctly puzzling.

On his way out Trinket took a quick look at Blossom, lying unconscious on the carpet. She was breathing gently and regularly as if she was merely sleeping, and her normally fresh and rosy complexion had lost none of its colour.

'In a few days' time I'll find some more little cakes to bring her, ' he thought, as he hurried back to his room.

As soon as he was inside and had barred the door behind him, he let out an enormous sigh of relief. He felt as if he had been carrying an intolerable weight on his back and had just that moment put it down. These last days spent in the old eunuch's company had been a nightmare. Every minute of the day his heart had been in his mouth. But now the Old Devil was dead. There was no longer any need to be afraid. No one was going to kill him now.

But just a minute! A vision of the Empress Dowager's white face as he had seen it in the candlelight flashed momentarily before his eyes and made him shudder.

'It's no good, ' he thought, 'this Imperial Palace is not a healthy place to be. I tell you what, old Trink, we ought to ... we ought to—ha ha!— I know what we ought to do: get a hold of those half a million silver taels and go back to Yangzhou to see our Mum!'

And the thought that he was still alive and that he had half a million taels of silver, lost and found again, had him very nearly dancing round the room.

But rejoicing at last gave way to exhaustion and, throwing himself down on the bed, almost instantaneously, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 6

In which Trinket is promoted; Oboi is killed; and Trinket eavesdrops on a Struggle for Succession

Nice Little Crumbs

Trinket woke next morning with a dull pain in his chest and a weakness in all his body, attributable, he at once realized, to the two blows, one with the hand and the other with the foot, which Old Hai had dealt him the night before. Struggling with some difficulty to his feet, he saw that there was a large bloodstain on the upper part of his gown. He took the gown off and put it in the water-butt to soak. While he was giving the bloodstained part a few rubs, he was greatly surprised to see pieces of the material floating off into the water. He took the gown out again and held it up to look. To his astonishment he saw two large holes in the breast of it, one shaped rather like a hand and one like a foot.

'But. . . but. . . this is spooky, ' he said to himself.

Spooky. As the real meaning of the word struck him, he felt the small hairs rising along his spine.

His first thought was, The Old Devil's come back to haunt me. This is the work of his ghost, '

Then he thought, 'I wonder if the Old Devil's ghost is blind too, or if he is able to see.'

But the interesting notion that blind men might turn into blind

ghosts was quickly discarded by his agile mind. As he held the garment up and stared at it bemusedly, he suddenly realized that these holes had been caused by the blows which a still living Old Hai had inflicted on him the night before. He chuckled self-admiringly to think that he had been able to survive two such lethal shocks to his system.

'You must be in pretty good training, old Trink. Only a mouthful or two of blood—that's nothing. Hm. But perhaps my insides are damaged. I'd better have a look in the Old Devil's medicine chest and see if there's anything there for internal injuries. If there is, it might be a good idea to take some.'

Now that Old Hai was dead, Trinket felt no compunction about taking over his possessions. With a self-important cough he opened up the old eunuch's big trunk and extracted the medicine chest from among its contents. Inside it were rows and rows of little bottles and little packets, all containing pills and powders. All of them had writing on them, but as there were only a few characters that he could recognize, he had no means of knowing which were medicines and which were poisons. One little bottle with yellow powder in it he recognized with a shudder as the one that had been used in the disposal of Laurie's corpse. A small amount of the powder shaken into his wound had, within a comparatively short time, reduced not only the whole body but even the clothes and shoes of the young eunuch to a pool of yellow liquid. This bottle, needless to say, he did not dare even to touch. Remembering that he had caused Old Hai's blindness by giving him an overdose of his potent cough medicine, he told himself that taking medicines was something you couldn't be too careful about and, anyway, his chest wasn't, fortunately, hurting him too badly.

'Dammit!' he muttered to himself, 'After all that Martial Arts training, old Trink must be in pretty good condition. Surely it won't matter if I don't take any medicine at all?'

So he closed the medicine chest and had a look at the other things in the trunk. As well as old clothes and old books, he found rather more than two hundred taels of silver, but the money meant nothing to him. Quite apart from the half million taels that Songgotu had promised him, he could easily pick up a few hundred taels any time he liked by playing dice with Wen Youdao and his friends.

In Laurie's trunk he found a gown to replace the one of his with holes in it. While he was putting it on, he was surprised to

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observe that the black waistcoat of soft, light material that he had been wearing underneath his gown was unimpaired.

'If there are two big holes in my gown where the Old Devil hit me last night, why aren't there holes in this too?' he wondered. 'How let's think. I found this waistcoat in Oboi's secret vault. There must be something very special about it or he wouldn't have kept

it there.'

This led to a further reflection:

'Perhaps it wasn't my Martial Arts training that saved me from being killed by those two thumps after all. Perhaps it was this precious waistcoat of Oboi's. Old Songgotu must have had second sight when he insisted that I put it on. Yes, and I must have had second sight too, not to have taken it off again!'

While he was in the midst of these self-congratulatory reflections, he heard a medley of shouts outside his door.

'Goong-goong, congratulations!'

'Open up, Goong-goong!'

'Congratulations, Goong-goong!'

Trinket opened the door, still buttoning his gown as he did so.

'What's up?'

The four eunuchs who had been standing outside began bowing and pumping their hands as he appeared in the doorway.

'Congratulations, Goong-goong!'

'Bit early in the morning for all this goong-ing, isn't it?' said Trinket. 'What's it all about?'

One of them, a forty-year-old eunuch, answered him with a beaming smile:

The Empress Dowager has sent a Gracious Edict to the Minister of the Interior appointing you Assistant Manager of the Imperial Catering Department to fill the place of Hai-goong now that he has died of his illness.'

We didn't want to wait for the Minister to inform you,' said another of them. 'We rushed here to congratulate you as soon as we heard. You'll be in charge of the whole Imperial Catering Department now. It's wonderful news.'

Trinket couldn't see what was so wonderful about being promoted as a eunuch, but in one respect the news came as something of a relief.

'If she's promoting me,' he thought, 'it means she wants me to keep quiet about what happened. Well, I'd have kept quiet anyway. I don't want my head to go missing, thank you very much, and she'd certainly have it off if I opened my mouth too wide. Now that she's arranged for my promotion, she can't be planning to kill me—not just yet, anyway.'

Though it was this sense of relief rather than any pleasure he took in his promotion that now wreathed his face in smiles, he took four fifty-tad notes from his wad of banknotes and handed one to each of the four eunuchs to reward them for the good news.

There has never been an Assistant Manager as young as Laurie-goong in the Palace before,' said one of the eunuchs. There are fourteen Managers and eight Assistant Managers, just twenty-two Goong-goongs in all, at the very top of the tree, and up to now not one of them under thirty. To think that after today you'll be on a level with Zhang-goong and Wang-goong and the other Assistant Managers! It's amazing!'

'We all knew you were a great favourite with the Emperor,' said another of the eunuchs, 'but we never realized that the Empress Dowager thought so highly of you too. At this rate they'll be making you a Manager six months from now. You won't forget your friends, will you, now that you've gone up in the world? We'll be looking to you now for advancement.'

'Course I won't forget my friends,' said Trinket. 'We're all brothers still, aren't

we? The promotion makes no difference. But I don't know about this looking to me for advancement stuff. We depend entirely on the gracious favour of their Imperial Majesties for our promotion.' (He knew this was the appropriate jargon to use on these occasions.) 'Old Tr ... old ... I mean I've done nothing special to deserve mine.'

It had required a great deal of effort not to call himself 'old Trink' as he habitually did when he was feeling pleased with himself.

'Come on,' he said, 'come inside, all of you. Sit down and have a cup of tea.'

'It will be at least midday before the Ministry delivers the Gracious Edict,' said the middle-aged eunuch. 'Let's go and have a few drinks now to celebrate Laurie-goong's big rise. Two grades in one go, Laurie-goong: you'll be an officer of the fifth rank now. That's really something.'

The other three joined him in clamorous insistence that Trinket should go with them to celebrate. Trinket had recently grown pretty used to flattery, but, since a little massaging of

the self-esteem is always agreeable, he laughingly consented, locked the door of his room, and went off with the four eunuchs to imbibe.

Two of the four were personal attendants of the Empress Dowager who had been sent by her to the Ministry with the order for Trinket's promotion and had therefore been the first to know about it. The other two worked in the Imperial Catering Department, one of them as Purchaser of Grains and Cereals, the other as Buyer and Selector of Meats and Victuals for the Imperial Kitchens: both extremely profitable appointments for those who held them. This last pair had taken their stand outside the doors of the Ministry as soon as they got the news of Old Hai's death, resolving not to budge an inch from there until they had found out who was going to replace him so that they could get to work on whoever it was immediately and make sure of keeping their own jobs.

The four eunuchs conducted Trinket to the Imperial kitchens, where, with much show of deference, they made him sit down at a table in the place of honour. The Palace cooks, knowing that this young lad was from tomorrow onwards going to be in charge over them, summoned up all their skills in preparing delicacies to go with the wine. It is doubtful whether the food normally served to the Emperor and Empress Dowager themselves could equal the culinary triumphs which were set before Trinket on this occasion.

Trinket had no head for wine and was soon chattering away uninhibitedly under the influence of the drink.

'Hai-goong was a good person, ' said one of the eunuchs with a sigh. 'It's a pity his health was so poor. And then going blind as well. These last few years, though he was supposed to be in charge of Catering, I doubt whether he came in more than once or twice a month.'

'It was lucky for him that everyone pulled so well together, ' said another. There might easily have been trouble if they hadn't.'

'Hai-goong's service went back a long way, ' said a third. The Late Emperor thought very highly of him. It was out of respect for the Late Emperor that they kept him on. If it weren't for that, they'd have given the job to someone else long ago. It'll be very different now, though. You have the favour of both the Emperor and the Empress Dowager, Laurie-goong. You'll be able to look after us. It will be like having a tree we can shelter under. Our job should be a lot easier from now on, '

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'I hear it was Hai-goong's cough that finally killed him, ' said one of the two who had spoken previously.

'Yes, ' said Trinket. 'He very often used to cough till he was out of breath, '

'Dr Li the Imperial Physician came first thing this morning to report to the Empress Dowager, ' said one of the eunuchs who waited on the Empress. 'He said Hai-goong's consumption had got into his bones and the rheumatism had reached his heart. He said there's not much you can do about an attack when the disease is a chronic one that the patient has been suffering from for years. He said because of the danger of infection they'd had the body cremated as soon as it was daylight. The Empress Dowager seemed very upset. "What a pity," she said, "what a pity! He was such a good man, "'

Trinket was agreeably surprised. Evidently the Empress Dowager's attendants, the Imperial Physician, and the eunuchs, scared of getting involved, had all conspired to conceal the violent nature of Old Hai's death, thus unintentionally falling in with the Empress Dowager's own wishes.

'I don't know about the consumption getting into his bones and the rheumatism reaching his heart, ' he thought. The blade going into his belly and the knife reaching his heart would have been more like it, '

After they had been drinking a bit longer, the two eunuchs from the Catering Department began edging the conversation around to the business that was

uppermost in their minds. A eunuch's life was very hard, they told Trinket. They depended very much on the few crumbs they were able to pick up in the performance of their duties. They very much hoped that Trinket would not be as rigid as Hai-goong had been. Flexibility in all things was so important, didn't he think? Trinket could only half understand what they were getting at, so he merely answered 'yes' or 'no' to their questions as seemed appropriate. When they had all finished drinking, one of them slipped a little packet into the breast pocket of Trinket's gown which Trinket took out and opened as soon as he got back to his own room. Inside it he found two banknotes, each for one thousand taels. ('One thousand' and 'taels' were among the very few characters he was able to read.)

'Hm, two thousand before I've even started the job, ' he thought. 'Nice little crumbs!'

On Public Business

Some time towards the middle of the afternoon Kang Xi sent someone round summoning Trinket to the Upper Library. Trinket found him all smiles.

'Laurie, the Empress Dowager tells me you have performed another great service for us. She wants to have you promoted, '

'I could have told you -that, ' thought Trinket, but instead he at once assumed an expression of astonished delight, fell on his knees, and kowtowed.

'I've done nothing to deserve this. This is entirely thanks to the gracious favour of Your Imperial Majesties.' (The words, which he had practised, now came out pat.)

The Empress Dowager says there were some eunuchs fighting in the garden last night, ' said Kang Xi. The noise gave her a nasty fright. But she says you managed the whole affair very competently. She was most impressed that someone so young should have so mature a grasp of things, '

Trinket got up off the floor.

'I don't know about having a mature grasp of things, ' he said. 'All I know is that there are some things you have to be very careful to remember and some things you need to forget about straight away and never, never mention. Eunuchs fighting sounds bad. I think the less said about it the better, '

Kang Xi nodded, laughing.

'Laurie, ' he said, 'though you and I are both young, there are several important things we have got to do. We must be careful that people older than we are don't look down on us and say that we don't know what we're doing, '

'Of course, ' said Trinket. The best thing would be if Your Majesty did all the planning and left the carrying out of whatever it is to me, '

'Good, ' said Kang Xi. 'It's that wretched Oboi—the traitor! Though I let him off with his life, I'm beginning to be afraid that he might try to make a comeback. He has a lot of supporters. It would be pretty awful to have a rebellion on our hands, '

'It certainly would, ' said Trinket.

'I always knew he was a hard man who wouldn't give in easily, ' said Kang Xi. That's why I didn't have him sent to the Board of Punishment's Tian Lao prison. He'd talk too much and there would be too many people there who might listen to him. Up to

now he's been in Prince Kang's custody at the Prince's private residence. Now the Prince tells me he's shouting and bawling all day long—a lot of treasonable nonsense.'

He dropped his voice.

'He's saying I stabbed him—in the back—with a dagger.'

That's absurd,' said Trinket. 'Why should Your Majesty need to do anything like that yourself? It was I who stabbed him. Let me go to Prince Kang's place and explain.'

Kang Xi had been worrying that a rumour to the effect that he had personally engineered a plot against Oboi's life would greatly diminish his Imperial dignity, so Trinket's suggestion was a welcome one. He nodded vigorously.

'Actually I think it would be best if you said it was you.'

He mused silently for a while.

'Go to Prince Kang's place and have a look at him,' he said. 'See if you can get an idea how much longer the fellow is likely to live.'

'I will, ' said Trinket.

The only reason I didn't have him executed is because I thought that after being wounded like that he would probably die quite soon anyway, ' said Kang Xi. 'I never imagined that anyone could be tough enough to hold out for so long. And now here he is talking a lot of nonsense for everyone to hear, sowing doubts in people's minds. If I'd known . . .'

His voice trailed off regretfully.

Trinket could tell that what Kang Xi really wanted but couldn't say was that Trinket should dispose of Oboi secretly himself.

'I shouldn't think he's very likely to last longer than today, ' he said, by way of showing that he understood.

Kang Xi summoned four of the Palace Guards and ordered them to escort Trinket to Prince Kang's residence 'on public business'.

Jade Flower

After first fetching the things he would need from his room, Trinket mounted a tall, foreign type of horse and set off for Prince Kang's place escorted by the four guards, two in front and two behind. As he rode through the streets, he looked round to right and left of him, feeling very pleased with himself. At one point he heard a man standing at the side of the road say to the man next to him:

'Someone told me the person who arrested the traitor Oboi was a little eunuch only twelve or thirteen years old.'

The Emperor is only a boy himself, ' said the other. That's why all his favourite eunuchs are young ones.'

'Do you think this little eunuch is the one?' said the first man.

That I wouldn't know, ' said the other.

One of the guards, anxious to ingratiate himself with the Emperor's young favourite,-said in a loud voice:

This is the one who arrested the traitor Oboi. Laurie-goong. He's the one.'

Because of his cruel butchery of so many Chinese, the brutal repressiveness of his government, and his rapacious extortions, the common people hated Oboi with a fierce and burning hatred. When news came overnight that he had been

arrested and sentenced to imprisonment and confiscation, the whole city and all the area round about re-echoed to the sound of countless people rejoicing. Soon everyone had heard the story that the boy Emperor had ordered Oboi's arrest but that Oboi had used his mighty strength to resist and only finally been brought down by a handful of little eunuchs.

The story became wonderfully embroidered in the telling. In every tea-house a dozen amateur storytellers, hands waving, spittle flying, demonstrated how Oboi had aimed a flying kick at the Emperor; how a few young eunuchs, each of them a master in the Martial Arts, had brought Oboi to the ground using the Clinging Vine technique; how Oboi had countered with a Threshing Carp movement; how the little eunuchs had then applied the method of attack which the manuals call the Panther Stealing the Heart; and so on, blow by blow, so that you would swear they had witnessed the whole struggle with their own eyes.

During the last few days any eunuch who appeared in the market would be instantly surrounded by a knot of idlers eager for information about the circumstances of Oboi's arrest. Now that the guardsman had let it be known that the public benefactor who had succeeded in arresting Oboi was none other than the little eunuch riding by on the horse, the news, spreading like wildfire through the whole quarter, produced a storm of clapping and cheering. Never in the whole of his young life had Trinket experienced such a moment of glory. A feeling of elation swept over him and he began to believe that he really was a hero. The two guardsmen marching ahead of him to clear the way dropped their hands

threateningly on their sword-hilts, and it was only a healthy respect for the swords that prevented a crowd of curious spectators from mobbing him to get a closer view and overwhelming him with their questions.

The Prince must have received warning of the visit, for when the five of them arrived at his residence, they found the central portals wide open and the Prince waiting outside, a table with incense burning on it laid out in readiness, as if for the formal reception of an Imperial Edict.

'His Majesty has just ordered me to come and have a look at Oboi, Your Highness,' said Trinket. That's all I've come about. Nothing important.'

'Very good, ' said the Prince.

Prince Kang had often seen Trinket in attendance on Rang Xi in the Upper Library and knew that he had played a major part in Oboi's arrest. As there was no Edict, he dropped the formality, seized Trinket by the hand, and gave him a

broad and friendly smile.

'It's an unexpected pleasure to have you here, Laurie-goong, ' he said. 'Let's have a drink or two first to celebrate. You can have a look at Oboi afterwards.'

He gave orders for a meal to be served. On his instructions the four guardsmen from the Palace were to be entertained by the officers of his own private guards while he and Trinket took their drinks in the garden.

Prince Kang asked Trinket what sort of things he liked doing best.

'If I say playing dice,' thought Trinket, 'he'll ask me to play with him and lose deliberately so that I can win a lot of money. It'll be one of those "bloodless victories". That I don't like.'

So he said, 'Well, nothing in particular really.'

'Old men are fond of money; middle-aged and young ones are fond of girls,' thought the Prince, 'but that rule can't very well apply in the case of eunuchs. This is going to be difficult. He knows how to fight, of course, but if I gave him a valuable sword or something like that, he might get into trouble with it in the Palace, and then I should be responsible . . . Ah, I know.'

'Laurie-goong,' he said, 'I feel as if we're old friends already. I've got quite a good stable here. Why don't you come along with me now and choose a few horses? We can call it my little present to you to celebrate our new acquaintance.' :

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Trinket was very taken with the idea, but thought he had better decline.

'I'm not worthy of such a favour, Your Highness.'

'Nonsense!' said the Prince. 'We're like brothers. It's not a favour. Come on! We'll go and look at the horses now and have our drinks when we get back.'

He seized Trinket by the hand again and marched him off to the stables, where he gave orders to the groom to lead out a few of his best ponies. Trinket was a bit disappointed.

'Why ponies?' he thought. 'Do you think I'm a child and can't ride anything bigger?'

To tell the truth, Your Highness,' he said after the groom had paraded five or six sturdy little creatures for his inspection, 'as I'm so short, I rather like riding bigger horses because they make me look taller.'

Prince Kang understood immediately.

'Oh, how stupid of me!' he said, slapping his thigh with a laugh. He turned to the groom. 'Bring out the dappled grey. Let Laurie-goong have a look at Jade Flower.'

The groom disappeared into the inner stables and presently reappeared leading a big, tall horse, already saddled and bridled, whose white coat was lightly dappled with pinkish markings: a superb animal who tossed his mane proudly as if conscious of his superiority over other horses. His bridle-trimmings and stirrups were of gold and the edges of his saddle were decorated with precious stones set in silver. These furnishings alone must have been worth a fortune. Only a prince or nobleman, not even the grandest minister or wealthiest merchant, would presume to flaunt saddlery of such magnificence. Trinket knew nothing about horses, but at the sight of this one he let out an involuntary cry of admiration.

'He's a beauty!'

Prince Kang smiled.

'He comes from the Far West. He's one of the famous Ferghana breed. Don't be deceived by his size. He's still very young, only two and a half years old. A handsome horse needs a handsome rider. What about choosing my Jade Flower for your present, brother?'

Trinket was genuinely overcome.

'I... well. . . but this is the horse Your Highness rides. It wouldn't be right for me to ride him. I really couldn't.'

'Brother,' said the Prince, 'you're treating me as if I were a

stranger. Don't you want to be my friend? Aren't I good enough for you?'

'I'm only a Palace ... a very lowly sort of person,' said Trinket. (He couldn't quite bring himself to say 'eunuch'.) 'How could I really be Your Highness's friend?'

'We Manchus are blunt, straightforward folk,' said the Prince. 'Either you treat

me as a friend and take this horse and from now on behave with me as an equal, or... or I am going to be very, very angry.'

He bristled his little moustache up in a very convincing simulation of rage.

Trinket was thrilled.

'You're so good to me, Your Highness, I don't know what I could possibly do in return.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said the Prince. 'If you're willing to take this horse, you'll be doing me a favour.'

He went up to the dappled grey and gave it a few gentle pats on the rump.

'Jade Flower,' he said, 'from now on you're going to belong to this Goong-goong here. Now be a good boy, won't you?' He turned to Trinket. 'Why don't you give him a try?'

'All right,' said Trinket, and slapping a hand on the saddle, he vaulted up into it in a single leap. His few months' training in the Martial Arts may not have produced much real skill in combat, but at least it had greatly added to his agility. Prince Kang was impressed and shouted an appreciative 'Bravo!'

The groom, who up to now had been holding Jade Flower by the bridle, now let go, and the horse, with Trinket on its back, trotted off into the sandy area outside the stables. As it circled round, Trinket experienced a sensation of speed coupled with a reassuring feeling of stability. He hadn't much idea how to manage a horse and was dreadfully afraid of making a fool of himself, so after they had trotted several times round the ring, he jumped off. Fortunately Jade Flower at once came to a halt and stood still of his own accord.

'Thank you, Your Highness,' said Trinket. 'This really is a wonderful present. Now I think I'd better go and have a look at Oboi. I'll come and see you when I get back.'

'You're right, little brother,' said Prince Kang. 'We mustn't forget that you're here on Imperial business. When you get back and make your report, do tell the Emperor that we are being

extremely careful about security. I don't think Oboi could escape from here even if he grew a pair of wings.'

'I'm sure he couldn't,' said Trinket.

'Would you like me to come with you?' the Prince asked him.

'No, no, please don't bother, ' said Trinket.

Previously, every time the Prince had been to see Oboi, he had been subjected to a continuous stream of foul-mouthed invective. Rather relieved that Trinket had declined his offer to go with him, he at once ordered eight of his personal bodyguard to accompany him on his inspection of the Imperial prisoner.

Behind the Iron Door

These eight members of the Prince's bodyguard conducted Trinket through the big garden at the back of the residence to an isolated stone building outside which another sixteen of them, with bared sabres in their hands, stood guard, while two officers patrolled the building in continuous circuit. The Prince was clearly taking no chances with his prisoner. On learning that their visitor was an emissary from the Palace come to make an inspection, the officer in command drew up his little troop and made them bow to him and then salute; that done, he unlocked a big padlock, pushed open the iron door of the prison, and invited Trinket and his escort to enter.

Inside the stone prison it was very dark. The iron door opened on to a wide corridor which ran round the sides of a little, gloomy courtyard and led to the main part of the prison at the back. On one side of the corridor was a portable stove on which an old orderly was doing some cooking.

The iron door is normally kept locked, ' the officer explained. 'This old man cooks the prisoner's meals for him here, inside the prison. To feed him he only has to take them from here to the cell, '

Trinket nodded.

'Very good, ' he said. The Prince seems to have thought of everything. As long as that iron door is kept shut, the prisoner would have a job getting out of here even if he tried, '

The Prince has given orders that if the prisoner does try to escape, he is to be killed immediately, ' said the officer.

The officer conducted Trinket to the main part of the prison on the farther side of the courtyard. They were now in a sort of

large vestibule from which they could hear the sound of Oboi shouting out

imprecations against the Emperor.

'Damn you, you misbegotten little bastard! How many times have I risked my neck for you lot? It was my blood, my sweat that won this great Empire for your grandfather and your father to enjoy. And now you've inherited it, you simpering little brat, how do you show your gratitude? By stabbing me in the back, like the dirty little sneak-thief you are. But you won't get away with this. Even if I die, my ghost will come back to haunt you.'

The officer frowned distastefully.

'Listen to that,' he said. 'It's a disgrace. They ought to cut his head off.'

Walking in the direction of the cursing, Trinket came to the barred window of a cell, inside which a dishevelled Oboi, fettered at both wrists and ankles, paced to and fro. A long chain trailed behind him which clanked each time he moved.

He broke off his cursing for a moment when he caught sight of Trinket peering in through the window.

'So it's you,' he said, 'you . . . you bollockless little criminal! You deserve to die a thousand times over. Come inside and let me strangle you!'

His eyes, round with anger, glared at Trinket as if he hoped to burn him up with their fire. Suddenly he made a rush towards the window, hurling his body with a crash against the wall. Despite its thickness Trinket gave an involuntary start and, when he saw the evil, contorted expression on Oboi's face, began to feel really frightened. The officer spoke reassuringly.

'Don't be afraid of him, Goong-goong. He can't get out.'

Trinket took a good look at the massive iron bars in the window, the thick stone wall, and the heavy shackles on Oboi's hands and feet and felt his courage returning.

'I'm not afraid of him, ' he said airily. 'Would you gentlemen mind leaving me alone with him for a few minutes and waiting for me outside? There are a few questions that the Emperor has asked me to put to him.'

The officer and escort chorused their compliance and withdrew.

Meanwhile Oboi's cursing continued unabated.

Trinket laughed.

The Emperor sent me here to see how you were,' he said. To judge from your cursing, it sounds as if you've still got plenty

of energy. In pretty good shape I should say you were. The Emperor will be glad to hear it.'

Oboi lifted up his fists in a rage and hammered with his manacles on the iron bars of the window.

'Up your mother's, you little bitch's abortion!' he said. 'Go back and tell the Emperor that there's no need for this lousy pretending. If he wants to kill me, tell him to get on with it. Do you think Oboi gives a damn?'

Trinket could see the thick iron bars of the cell window shaking in Oboi's grip and began to wonder if he might not, after all, be able to break through the window and get out. He moved back a step, but continued smiling.

'Oh no, the Emperor has no intention of killing you. He wants you to spend a nice, quiet time here reflecting—twenty or thirty years maybe—until you've thoroughly repented. Then, if you crawl out of here and kowtow to him a few hundred times, he just might remember your past services and grant you a pardon. You'd be allowed to go free then, though not, of course, to hold high office any more.'

Oboi's voice rose to a shout.

Tell him he's day-dreaming. Tell him if he wants to kill me, that's easy; but if he wants me to kowtow to him, that's not difficult, it's impossible.'

'We'll see,' said Trinket, still smiling. 'Perhaps in four or five years' time the Emperor will suddenly remember you and send me to see you again. In the meantime, Lord Oboi, take care of your health, won't you? We wouldn't want you getting colds or coughs or the bellyache or anything.'

'Bellyache be damned, you horrible little vermin!' said Oboi in a rage. The Young Emperor was all right until he was ruined by you stinking Chinese. The Late Emperor ought to have listened to me. He ought never to have employed a single Chinese on public business. He ought not to have allowed so much as a Chinese dog inside the Palace. If he'd done as I said, we shouldn't be in the mess we're in today.'

Trinket took no further notice of him. Walking back into the corridor in the front part of the prison, he saw that the pot on the portable stove was giving off

a good deal of steam. He lifted the lid off and inspected the pork and cabbage bubbling away inside.

'Smells good,' he said.

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THE DEER AND THE CAULDRON

'It's not very nice, really, ' said the old orderly. 'It's what the prisoner eats.'

The prisoner's feeding arrangements are one of the things the Emperor told me to look into,' said Trinket. 'He's not to be starved.'

'No fear of that, Goong-goong,' said the old man. The Prince's orders are that he is to be given a pound of meat every day.'

'Ladle out some for me in a bowl, so that I can have a taste, ' said Trinket. 'If I find that you're not feeding him properly, I'll tell the Prince to have you beaten, '

'I assure you I'm feeding him properly, ' said the old orderly, all of a tremble. 'I wouldn't dare not to.'

He hurried off to fetch a bowl, ladled out a generous helping of the stew into it, and offered it respectfully to Trinket with both his hands. He also handed him a pair of chopsticks. Trinket held up the bowl to his lips and sipped the liquid; but instead of commenting on it, he glanced at the chopsticks and handed them back to the old man.

These chopsticks are dirty. Take them away and give them a good wipe.'

'Yes, yes, very good, ' said the old man humbly, and trotted off with them to the water-butt in the courtyard, where he proceeded to give them a prolonged and vigorous rub. While he was doing this, Trinket turned his back to the courtyard, took a packet from the inside breast pocket of his gown, and poured its contents into the bowl of pork and cabbage; then, slipping the empty packet back inside his gown, he gave the bowl a few shakes to help the powder dissolve.

Trinket knew that Kang Xi wanted Oboi dead, but with no incriminating evidence to show how he had died. An idea of how this might be accomplished had come to him as he was on his way out of the Upper Library. When he got back to his own room he had taken a dozen or so little packets from Old Hai's

medicine chest, mixed their contents together and wrapped the mixture up in a larger packet. He had no means of knowing which of the randomly chosen packets had contained medicines and which poisons, but he argued that out of a dozen or so there must have been at least two or three which contained poisons, from which it followed that if Oboi could be induced to swallow the mixture, the chances of his survival were very slender.

Having now finished his meticulous wiping of the chopsticks, the old orderly brought them back and handed them very respect-

fully to Trinket, who busied himself for some time picking over the contents of the bowl with them.

'Hm, ' he said presently. There's a lot of meat here. Do you always give him as much meat as this? I'm sure you're quite capable of stealing bits of it to eat yourself.'

'Oh, I wouldn't dare, ' said the old orderly. 'He always gets as much as this, every mealtime, ' But while he said this, he was thinking, 'Funny, I wonder how this little Goong-goong knows that I always sneak a bit for myself. Very strange

'All right, ' said Trinket. 'Give the prisoner his food then, '

The old man filled three large bowls with boiled rice, put them, together with the bowl of pork and cabbage stew, on a tray and carried the lot off to Oboi's cell. Trinket drummed softly with the chopsticks on the side of the cooking-pot, feeling very pleased with himself.

'When Oboi has finished my specially seasoned pork and cabbage stew, ' he said to himself, 'he ought to bleed from at least eight of his orifices, '

Trinket had heard it said of people who died of poisoning that they had 'bled from all seven orifices' and been greatly impressed by the saying; but he didn't know what an 'orifice' was or that the body has, in any case, only got seven of them, so his hyperbole was not, strictly speaking, anatomically correct.

Presently he left off his drumming, laid down the chopsticks and strolled through the doorway to gossip with the sentries outside. After chatting with them until he estimated that Oboi must have had ample time to polish off his stew, he suggested to the officer that they should go inside again 'to have another look'.

Black-clad Intruders

The two of them had barely got inside the prison when they heard a shout from the two soldiers guarding the door:

'Halt! Who goes there?'

This was followed by the whirring sound of two arrows fired in rapid succession.

'Goong-goong,' said the officer in a state of great alarm, 'I must go out and see what's happening.' And he dashed outside.

Trinket, following behind, heard a great clashing of steel on steel and saw about a dozen swordsmen, entirely clothed in black,

engaged in hand-to-hand combat with two dozen or more of the guards.

'Aiyo!' he cried out in dismay, 'Oboi's supporters have come to rescue him.'

The officer who had been accompanying him had now drawn his sword and was issuing commands to his men, but before he had uttered more than a few words, two of the intruders, one male and one female, closed in on him from either side. The four Imperial guardsmen who had escorted Trinket from the Palace, hearing the sounds of the fray from where they were waiting, now ran up to help and joined in the melee. The black-clad intruders appeared to be the superior swordsmen: already two of the Prince's guardsmen lay dead upon the ground in testimony of their skill.

Trinket slipped back inside the prison, shut the door quickly behind him, and was just about to fasten a door-bar across it when a tremendous shove from outside caused it to fly inwards, with such force that he was thrown back a couple of yards across the corridor. Four of the black-clad intruders hurled themselves through the open doorway shouting 'Where's Oboi? Where's Oboi?' as they ran. A bearded elderly man in black seized hold of Trinket and asked him the same question: 'Where's Oboi?'

Trinket pointed towards the doorway: 'He's in the underground dungeon outside.'

Immediately two of the men in black dashed out again; but even as they did so, another four came rushing inside, jumped into the courtyard, and ran through into the back part of the prison. A few moments later one of them could be heard shouting 'He's here!' Angrily the old man with the long beard raised his scimitar, intending to cut Trinket down. Trinket jumped clear of the blade, but a kick aimed at him by another of the men caught him in the backside with

such force that it lifted him clean into the air so that he fell in a heap inside the courtyard.

Farther back in the prison six of the black-clad intruders were battering at the iron door of Oboi's cell; but the door was very strong and there was little hope of their being able to break it down in a hurry. Outside the dong dong dong of gongs could now be heard. Already the alarm was being sounded everywhere in the Prince's residence.

'We've got to hurry,' cried one of the men in black.

'Idiot!' said the long-bearded elder. 'Of course we've got to hurry.'

But already one of the men in black, more resourceful than the others, realizing that there was no hope of battering the door down, had inserted the steel stock that he carried as a weapon between two bars of the cell window and was using it as a lever to prise them apart. After a few heaves, the bars began to bend.

By this time another three of the men in black had rushed in to join the others outside the cell. Already the space there was crowded, leaving little room for manoeuvre. Trinket, who had meanwhile crawled out of the courtyard, was trying to worm his way to some corner of safety in the rear part of the prison when one of the men spotted him and made a stab at his back. Trinket threw himself out of the way, but the man raised his sword and slashed at him from the side. The blade caught him between the shoulder-blades and made a big rip in his gown. It was lucky that he was wearing his weapon-proof waistcoat underneath or the sword would have cut into his flesh. Trinket jumped up in a panic and, scarcely knowing where he was going, dashed headlong into the group outside the cell.

'You little devil!' cried one of the men with a curse and made a slash at him with his sabre. In desperation Trinket jumped up and caught at the bars of the cell window. As he hung there with his feet well above the ground, he was getting in the way of the man with the steel stock who was prising open the bars. The man drew out his weapon from between the bars and flourished it over his head, preparing to knock Trinket down with it. There was nowhere for Trinket to go now but the cell. With a great heave he hauled his legs up and pushed them between the two bars that the stock had been working on. Fortunately his body was slight enough to follow his legs through the gap. Releasing his grip, he was able to drop down into the cell just as the stock crashed down on the bars.

At once there were competing shouts from the men outside the cell: 'Let me go through!' 'Let me try!' It was the man with the stock, though, who poked his

head between the bars and tried to squeeze his body through the gap. But the space which would admit a skinny thirteen-year-old was far too narrow for a solidly built adult like the man with the stock, who now appeared to be stuck halfway, unable to go either forward or back.

Unaware that the man was stuck, Trinket took the dagger from inside his boot and prepared to defend himself. He could hear a confused medley of sounds outside the prison—the sound of the

alarm gongs being beaten, the shouts and cries of men, and the clash of weapons—and quietly prayed that help would soon be forthcoming.

Then, quite suddenly, what seemed like a miniature whirlwind knocked him over and sent him spinning. There was a great clanking sound and dust and dirt from the floor of the cell was thrown up into his face, making his eyes smart, so that for a moment he was unable to see what was happening. When he jumped to his feet and opened his eyes again, he could see Oboi swinging his chain about with both hands, bellowing like a bull, and jumping up and down like a demented animal. As the man with the stock struggled to get further in, Oboi lifted his hands up and brought the chain and the two manacles down on his head with savage force, splitting his skull open so that the brains gushed out and he died instantly.

Trinket was unable to overcome his astonishment.

'But why?' he thought. 'Why has he killed a man who was coming to rescue him?'

Then suddenly it dawned on him.

'Aiyo! It's my special mixture. Instead of kicking the bucket, he's gone off his head!'

There was a great cry from the men outside the cell, to which Oboi responded by hammering fiercely with his manacles and chain against the bars.

'If he turns round and gives me a swipe,' thought Trinket, 'I shall end up in Heaven.'

There was no time for reflection. Almost without thinking what he was doing, he raised the dagger and plunged it with all his might in Oboi's back. The poisonous mixture had produced so great a confusion in Oboi's mind that he was totally unaware that there was anyone behind him and he made no effort to avoid the blow. As the dagger sank, with a clearly audible sound, into his

back, Oboi opened his mouth wide and let out a fearsome yell, simultaneously threshing the air with his chained and manacled fists. Without releasing his grip on the dagger, Trinket drew it downwards, still buried up to the hilt in Oboi's back. The blade, which could cut iron as easily as putty, sheared through flesh and bone, opening his back up like the belly of a gutted fish. Oboi fell like a log and measured his length on the floor.

For some moments there was an awed silence from the men crowded round the window, as if what they had just witnessed was

the most extraordinary thing that had happened since the world began. Then three or four of them began shouting simultaneously, 'The boy has killed him!' 'Oboi has been killed by the boy!'

'Prise those bars farther open,' the man with the long beard ordered. 'We need to get in and see if it really is Oboi.'

At once two men took up the steel stock and began working away with all their might on the iron bars. Just then two of the Prince's guards came running in, only to be cut down, in rapid succession, by the bearded man's scimitar. Meanwhile one of the black-clad men thrust a spear through the bars and jabbed it repeatedly in Trinket's direction so as to prevent his getting near enough the window to hurt anyone.

In no time at all the gap between the bars had been considerably widened and a very thin man volunteered to be the first to go in. As he jumped down into the cell, Trinket aimed a blow at him with his dagger which the man parried with his cutlass. There was a swishing sound as the dagger cut the blade in two, and for a split second the man looked at his truncated weapon in astonishment; then, quickly recovering himself, he flung it in Trinket's face. Trinket ducked to avoid it, but as he did so, felt his wrists being tightly gripped, while at the same time a second man bore him down backwards, pinning him to the floor. As he lay there, yet another of the men stood over him holding the point of his sword against his throat and shouted to him not to move.

By now two more bars of the window had been prised apart and the bearded elder and another man who had a completely bald head squeezed through into the cell. One of them seized Oboi by the back of his hair and jerked his head up so that they could examine his face.

'It's Oboi all right,' they said.

The bearded man wanted to push Oboi's body through the cell window, but the chain to which his fetters were attached was fastened to a ring built firmly into

the wall and there seemed little prospect of their being able to cut through it. The thin man, however, knew better. He picked Trinket's dagger up from the floor and with four swift slashes neatly severed the chain at Oboi's wrists and ankles.

'Good blade!' said Long Beard admiringly as he dragged the corpse up to the window; and now, with the help of those pulling outside, he managed to push it through. The thin man shoved Trinket through, and when he had climbed through himself, the

remaining three, the man who had pinned Trinket to the floor with his sword and the other two, followed, leaving the cell empty.

The bearded man now issued the command to retreat:

'Now everybody, out! We'll be carrying the boy with us.'

There was an answering cry from the men, and the whole party, one of them carrying Trinket like a parcel under his arm, ran towards the exit. They had reached the doorway and were preparing to make a dash into the open, when there was a whirring sound and a hail of arrows came flying, thick as locusts, through the air. A score or more of the Prince's guardsmen were shooting continuously at the doorway. Prince Kang himself, sword in hand, was directing operations.

As the party of black-clad men wavered, held back by the storm of arrows, one of their number, a hefty Taoist priest who had been carrying Oboi's body shouted out to the others 'Follow me!', at the same time moving into the doorway and holding Oboi's body in front of him as a shield. Prince Kang recognized Oboi but did not realize that he was dead. However, when he saw that the intruders had captured Trinket, he called out to the archers to hold their fire.

'Stop shooting! Don't hurt Laurie-goong!'

'You're a good bloke, Prince Kang,' Trinket said to himself. 'I shan't forget this.'

As soon as the Prince's archers ceased shooting, the party of black-clad intruders raised a cheer and came surging out of the prison. Four of them, at a sign from Long Beard, made a rush for Prince Kang, causing the startled guardsmen to forget about the enemy and run to their master's defence. It was only a feint, for the rest of the party profited from the confusion to climb over the surrounding wall and make their getaway.

The four men left behind were evidently expert in diversionary tactics. Avoiding actual contact with the guardsmen, they had weaved and circled around as if looking for an opening to get at the Prince himself until they were satisfied that the rest of the party were safely out of the grounds; then, exchanging whistles, they made a run for the surrounding wall and were soon on top of it. Before dropping behind it, all four of them appeared to be waving with their hands. In fact they were releasing a shower of little dart-like objects in the direction of the Prince. When the guards saw them coming, there was a great hullabaloo as they tried to knock them down with their sabres. In spite of all their efforts, one small

steel dart lodged itself in the Prince's arm, and by the time the tumult had subsided, the four had got well away from the residence.

As Trinket sped down the street under the big man's arm, he could hear a thunderous sound of many running feet and someone shouting 'Intruders at Prince Kang's!' It was a large reinforcement of Imperial troops on their way to help the Prince.

The little troop of men in black ran inside the house of a commoner next door to the Prince's residence, made fast the door with a door-bar, and then ran out at the back. It was clear that they had studied the layout of the area carefully beforehand and planned their getaway. For a while they ran along a narrow lane, then entered another house, ran through it, and once more left by the back. After taking several turnings in the maze of back streets beyond, they ran inside a much larger residence which had a very big yard inside the gate. There they proceeded to take off their black clothing and don a variety of different disguises.

In no time at all the men in black had transformed themselves into countrymen, many of them with carrying-poles on their shoulders from which hung loads of firewood or vegetables. One of them trussed Trinket up with a hempen rope, while two others pushed a cart upon which were two large wooden barrels. Into one of these they put Oboi's body; into the other one they lifted Trinket. Tamardy!

Trinket began swearing to himself; but before he could think of any more appropriate curses, a seemingly unending shower of jujube-dates was poured down on his head, until he was completely covered and had disappeared beneath them. Then a lid was placed on top and he could no longer see anything. Shortly after that his body began to be jolted to and fro: evidently the cart was being pushed out of the yard. Although there was sufficient air in between the dates to prevent him suffocating, he found it very hard to breathe. For some time he remained in a state of shock; then gradually, as he began

recovering, he was able to think about his

predicament.

'This lot must have been members of Oboi's staff. The reason they've kidnapped me is almost certainly because they want to cut my heart and liver out and sacrifice them to Oboi's ghost. My best chance of escape would be if we were to run into a troop of soldiers. If I could wriggle about a bit so that the barrel overturned, they'd see that something funny was going on and I'd be rescued.'

But it soon became apparent that he was trussed up so tightly that he couldn't move an inch. The jolting went on interminably, accompanied by the squeaking of the cartwheels, only faintly audible from inside the barrel. As time went by, the chances of their encountering a party of Imperial troops receded and Trinket passed the time alternating between periods of cursing and periods of silent panic. On a sudden impulse he opened his mouth and began to eat one of the dates. He found it plump and sweet and went on to eat several more. A great tiredness began to take possession of him— his body's reaction to all the shock and fear it had been subjected to—and in a very short time he was fast asleep.

When he woke up again, the cart was still moving as before but his body was now aching all over. He had an overwhelming desire to change his position, but was unable to move himself even the tiniest bit.

'Old Trink's never going to get out of this one, ' he thought. Til just have to wait until the time comes and have a good curse. Give them a piece of my mind. I'll feel better then.'

He tried to remember the sort of things the bolder spirits among the condemned used to shout on their way to execution, clinging desperately to the hope of reincarnation as they cried out their defiance to an admiring crowd: Til be back, good people, I'll be back. Twenty years from now, look out for a brave young man!'

Then he thought:

'Well, at least I killed Oboi. If I hadn't, and they'd rescued him alive, they'd still have taken me, and I'd still be for it. That would have been dying for nothing. Besides, Oboi was a big shot at Court and I'm only a little kid from the brothel. My life for his: that's a pretty good bargain. Ha ha! It's a very good bargain.'

Since there now seemed no hope of escape, this was the only way in which he

could try to cheer himself up. But though, viewed in these terms, the exchange was indeed a remarkably good one, it cannot be said that he felt the least little bit cheered.

After a bit he dropped off again and this time he slept for quite a long while. When at last he woke up, he found that the cart was running smoothly on level ground. Presently it stopped, but no one came to take him out. He was left alone in his barrel amidst the dates.

Another long period elapsed during which Trinket's spirits reached their lowest ebb. He was just beginning to doze off again when there was a sudden rush of sound as someone lifted the lid

off the barrel and began scooping out the dates above his head. He was able to take a few big breaths of air, which brought a delicious feeling of relief; and when he opened his eyes, there was now, in the inky darkness of the barrel, a faint suggestion of brightness overhead. The person scooping out the dates now plunged his hands down into the barrel, yanked Trinket out of it, and held him like a baby in his arms. Another man, standing beside him, was holding a lantern. For the first time Trinket realized that it was night. He was being held by a rather dignified old man—though of considerable strength. They appeared to be standing in a large courtyard.

Choosing a Master

The old man carried Trinket to a building on the far side of the courtyard. In addition to the main entrance, there were several screen-doors at regular intervals along the facade, one of which the man with the lantern held open for them to enter. As they did so, Trinket let out an involuntary 'Help!'. They were in a large hall, densely packed with men, at least two hundred of them, all in mourning—white bands round their heads and white sashes over their black clothes—and all with expressions of angry bereavement on their faces. In the centre, at one end of the hall, was a funeral shrine, an altar-like table with eight large, blue candles burning on it, two white funerary scrolls hanging, one at each side of it, on the wall behind, and a large 'spirit banner' and 'spirit tablet' in the middle.

Back in Yangzhou Trinket often used to go to the big houses when they were having a funeral, partly for the fun of watching, partly in the hope of earning a few coppers as a supernumerary mourner. Sometimes, when everyone was too busy to notice, he would sneak one or two of the funeral vessels and hide them under his clothing to sell later in the market, in order to raise money for his gambling. He was therefore very familiar with funeral furnishings and at once realized what was going on in the hall. He had already decided, when he was in

the barrel among the dates, that the probable intention of his captors was to cut him open and offer his heart to Oboi's ghost, but now that the moment had actually come, he felt sick with terror and his teeth chattered noisily in his head.

The old man now put him down and, holding him tightly by

the shoulder with his left hand, used his right hand to cut the ropes binding his hands and feet. But Trinket's legs were so wobbly that he was unable to stand, and the old man had to slip a hand under his right armpit to hold him up.

Trinket glanced furtively along the rows of mourners. All of them were armed with swords or cutlasses and all looked as if they knew how to use them. There wasn't a single one in that multitude that he would have been a match for. If he wanted to escape, it was going to be very, very difficult. On the other hand, if he was going to die anyway, he might as well give it a try now that he was no longer bound. If he made a dash for it, the very worst that could happen was that they would catch him again and cut his heart out, which they were going to do in any case. They couldn't do it twice over. If only the old man would take that hand away from under his arm! As long as it was there, he couldn't make the slightest move without him tightening his grip.

A middle-aged man now made his way to the shrine and addressed the spirit tablet in a voice that was choked with emotion.

'Brother, today you are at last revenged. Brother, now you can . . . can . . . can rest in peace.'

At this point he broke down completely, flung himself on his knees before the altar, and burst into loud sobs. Immediately the entire congregation began weeping and wailing at the tops of their voices.

'Hot-piece mamma!' thought Trinket disgustedly. This is where old Trink does a bit of cursing.'

But then, almost immediately, he changed his mind.

'As soon as I open my mouth, these clowns will be on to me. There certainly won't be any escaping after that.'

He took a sideways glance at the old man who up to now had been supporting him, and saw that he was surreptitiously wiping away a tear with his sleeve.

'Now's the time,' he thought, and turned to bolt. But the space behind them had

in the meantime filled up with other mourners. It would be impossible for him to move a single step without one of them grabbing him.

This isn't the right moment after all,' he thought. 'Mustn't rush it.'

From somewhere in the congregation an elderly voice called out, 'Make the offering.' At once a big, strapping fellow, bare to the waist and with a white cloth tied round his head, strode towards

the altar holding a wooden trencher above shoulder height in front of him. The trencher was covered with a red cloth on which, nearly fainting with horror, Trinket saw a bloodstained human head.

'Hot-piece mamma!' he thought. 'Are these turtle's-eggs going to cut my head off?'

'Whose head is it, anyway?' he wondered. 'Prince Kang's? Brother Songgotu's? Surely it can't be the little Emperor's?' The trencher was being held too high for him to be able to get a glimpse of the face.)

The big fellow placed the trencher with its severed head on the altar, knelt down, and kowtowed. Once more a sound of weeping rose from the congregation as, one by one, they too dropped to their knees and kowtowed.

Tamardy!' thought Trinket. 'If I don't try to get away now, I never will,' and he turned to run. But the old man pulled him back by his sleeve and pushed him lightly on the back. Because it was not long since his limbs had been trussed up, the circulation in them had still not properly returned, consequently his legs were still very weak and the pressure on his back was enough to bring him to his knees. As everyone else was kowtowing, he thought he had better do the same; but he was silently cursing as he did so:

'Stinking Oboi! Turtle-shit Oboi! I stabbed you in this world, and if I meet you in the next, I'll stab you a few times more!'

Some of the men got up again after kowtowing, but quite a few of them remained on their knees, still weeping uncontrollably.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, great big fellows blubbing away like babies,' thought Trinket. 'Oboi was such a rotten bugger when he was alive, why make such a fuss because he's dead? Anyway, it'll do him no good, shedding all this horse-piss at his funeral.'

When everyone had finally finished weeping, a very tall, very thin old man went

up to the front and took up a position at the side of the altar from which to address the congregation.

'Brothers,' he began, in clear, ringing tones, 'today the murder °f Brother Yin, our beloved Master, has been avenged. Oboi has at last been brought to justice. For all members of the Green Wood Lodge of the Triad Society this is a truly wonderful day . . .'

Oboi brought to justice! Trinket heard the words with a mixture of joy and incredulity. There was a buzzing in his ears as their full significance flashed like lightning through his brain. These weren't Oboi's supporters after all. They were his enemies!

The old man must have uttered a dozen or more sentences after this which Trinket listened to without hearing. It was quite some time before the turmoil in his mind subsided and he was able to take in what he was saying.

' . . . I have no doubt that today's successful attack on the residence of Prince Kang, in which we killed Oboi and returned without losing a single man, has dealt a heavy blow to the Tartars' morale,' Trinket heard him saying. 'But not only that. It also represents a very important step forward in the great struggle to which our Society is dedicated: the overthrow of the Qing and the restoration of the Ming. Every member in every Lodge of our Society will surely, when he hears about this, acknowledge with admiration the resourcefulness, bravery, and daring of the Green Wood Lodge.'

This was greeted with a variety of responses from different parts of the hall.

'Hear, hear.'

This time the Green Wood Lodge has done something it can really be proud of.'

This is one in the eye for the Lotus Flower Lodge and the Red Fire Lodge. They are always boasting about the wonderful things they've done, but they've never done anything that's a patch on this.'

'When this news gets public, the storytellers in the tea-houses will be singing ballads about what we've done, I shouldn't wonder. One day, when the Tartars have been driven back north of the Wall, the Green Wood Lodge will go down in history.'

'What do you mean, when they've been driven back north of the Wall? We're going to wipe the buggers out, aren't we? Every man jack of them!'

Almost everyone seemed to have something to say. In the general excitement the uncontrollable grief they had been displaying only a few minutes before seemed to have been totally forgotten.

By now it was clear to Trinket beyond any shadow of doubt that the men who had captured him were a group of Resistance fighters. Long before he had met Whiskers Mao, as an urchin playing in the streets and markets of Yangzhou, he had often heard people talking about the heroic exploits of the Triad Society. The Qing army's entry into Yangzhou after the siege of '45 had been followed by an orgy of massacre, rape, and pillage in which every

imaginable atrocity was committed by the victorious soldiery. The Ten Days of Yangzhou—the expression often used when people referred to this appalling episode in their history—had become a synonym for cruelty. Almost every household in Yangzhou had lost one or more of its members in the massacres. It was only natural, therefore, that these heroic Resistance fighters who still kept up the struggle against the Manchus should enjoy an even greater measure of popularity in Yangzhou than they did in other cities.

As only twenty years had gone by since the Ten Days of Yangzhou, Trinket was, from his earliest childhood, constantly hearing older people talk about the misdeeds of the Qing army, the heroic death of the Ming General Shi Kef a, and the bravery of this or that Ming fighter who had managed to take some of the enemy with him when he died. When Whiskers Mao fought single-handed against the salt smugglers in the Vernal Delights brothel, it was the good name of the Triad Society, although he did not himself belong to it, that he was quixotically defending; and afterwards, when Trinket was accompanying him on the journey to Peking, Whiskers Mao was constantly talking about the heroic deeds of the Triads and reciting the little rhyme about their Helmsman:

Who's never yet met Chen Jinnan . . . Can't call himself a proper man.

So Trinket had long been an admirer of those heroes devoted to the extermination of the hated Tartars and was tremendously excited to be seeing them in the flesh for the first time, forgetting that, insofar as he was supposedly a little eunuch in the employment of the Manchu Court, he was now one of the hated Tartars himself.

When the interruptions from the floor had subsided somewhat, the tall, thin old man continued:

'Never for a moment, during the whole of this past two years, have we members of the Green Wood Lodge ceased remembering the great wrong that was done to our beloved Master. Each one of us, standing before his spirit tablet, took an

oath, sealed with our own blood, to kill Oboi in revenge. How bravely our Brother went to his cruel death! Not only members of our own Society but members of the entire Brotherhood of River and Lake admired his courage. And now, looking down from Heaven and seeing that vile dog's head on the altar, he must be giving one of those big laughs we all remember so well.'

A chorus of agreement arose from the assembly. Somewhere from among them a powerful bass voice could be heard speaking: 'Two years ago when we took that oath, we said that if we didn't succeed in killing Oboi, then all members of the Green Wood Lodge could consider themselves a pack of lily-livered cowards and never be able to hold their heads up on River and Lake again. For my part, I don't mind telling you, I haven't been able to eat or sleep properly during these last two years. Every minute of the day and night I've been turning over in my mind how we were going to get vengeance for Brother Yin and put an end to our shame. And now— we've done it at last!'

He broke off into somewhat hysterical laughter, in which many of those around him joined.

'As Brother Fan has just said,' the tall, thin old man continued after this interruption, 'the Green Wood Lodge has regained its honour; we can feel proud of ourselves once more; we can lift up our heads again in front of other people. During this past two years we have been like a troop of lost souls. At meetings of the Society every look, every sneer from a member of one of the other Lodges has made us wish we could sink into the ground to hide our shame. For that reason we haven't dared open our mouths, even when the matters under discussion were of no importance. And though the Helmsman sent strict instructions that avenging Brother Yin's murder was to be considered the business of the whole Society and not only of our Lodge, it was obvious from the sarcastic comments made by members of other Lodges that they didn't agree with him. But that's all ended now. From now on things are going to be different.'

'Brother Li is right,' said one of the men. 'But we shouldn't let this opportunity go by. We ought to press on now and do a few more really big jobs. They used to call that evil bastard Oboi the Number One Manchu Champion. Now we've got rid of him, you can bet that Number Two and Number Three and Number Four are all shaking in their shoes.'

This was greeted by a great explosion of laughter from everyone in the hall.

'What a lot of babies you are!' thought Trinket. 'Crying your eyes out one minute and laughing your heads off the next.'

Suddenly a dry, ironical voice could be heard above the laughter.

'Was it the Green Wood Lodge who killed Oboi?'

At once everyone stopped laughing and a total hush fell over all the men gathered in the hall. After what seemed a very long time someone said:

'It was someone else who actually killed him, but we made the successful attack on Prince Kang's place. They simply took advantage of our attack to kill him in the confusion.'

'I see,' said the man who had asked the question, still speaking in a very sarcastic tone of voice.

What exactly are you trying to say, Tertius?' asked the man with the big bass voice.

What am I trying to say?' Tertius replied in his dry, sarcastic voice. 'I'm not trying to say anything. I was just wondering what we'll do when we meet someone from one of the other Lodges. Suppose they ask for some details. "That last job done by you Green Wood Lodge fellows was really impressive. Tell me, which of your members was it who actually killed Oboi?" Wouldn't we find that question a little bit hard to answer? I think you'll agree that nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand would be sure to ask that question. Yet here we are taking all the credit for ourselves and blowing our own trumpet fit to burst a gut. Isn't it all—heh heh!—well, you know what I mean.'

Again there was silence. Tertius's words had grated on their ears and made them all feel extremely uncomfortable; but unfortunately they were true; there was no denying it. After another long pause, the tall, thin elder gave his opinion:

'It was rather a fluke that a little eunuch from the Qing Palace should have been the one to take Oboi's life. I think we should see the hidden influence of Brother Yin's spirit in this, borrowing this boy's hand as an instrument to bring that evil villain to justice. But we're all honest, decent men here, I hope. No one's conscience is going to let him tell lies about it.'

The men hearing him looked at each other and some of them shook their heads. A moment ago they had been so happy, so triumphant; but now, when they considered that it wasn't a Brother from the Green Wood Lodge who had killed Oboi, they felt very much cast down.

'During these past couple of years,' the tall, thin elder went on, 'while our Lodge has been without a Master, I have been acting, at your request, as a temporary stand-in. Now that Brother Yin has been avenged, I am going to put the baton of office on the altar and ask the rest of you to choose someone worthy to be Master.'

'Brother Li, ' a man said addressing the speaker, 'everything during these past two years has run very smoothly under your management. I can't think of anyone more suited to the job of Master than yourself. There's no need for you to be so modest about it. I think you ought to just pick up that baton again and hold on to it.'

There was a moment or two of silence after this, then another of the men spoke up:

'It's not really for us to say who ought to be Master. We're supposed to wait for the Helmsman to appoint somebody.'

That may be what the rules say, ' the first man retorted, 'but what's always happened in the past is that the Lodges have first decided who they wanted and then reported it to headquarters for confirmation. Headquarters has never yet turned down anyone that the Lodges have chosen; so when you say "appoint", it's really just a formality.'

'Yes, but as every Brother here knows, ' said the second man, 'the new Master chosen by the Lodge has up to now always been someone that the old Master has recommended. It's always been done that way in the past, whether the old Master was retiring because of old age, or because he was ill, or whether he died and named someone in his will. It's never been a case of the Brothers choosing for themselves.'

'Brother Yin couldn't leave a will, because he was murdered by Oboi, ' said the first speaker. 'You know that as well as I do, Scar-face, so why all this fuss about rules and regulations? Of course, I know why you're so opposed to Brother Li being Master: it's because you want to twist things around in favour of your own little scheme.'

Trinket heard the name 'Scarface' with a start of fear. This was the name of the man the salt smugglers had been looking for in Yangzhou. He turned to look at this man: bald as a coot with only the tiniest little pigtail at the back and a scar on his face—just as the smugglers had described him.

Scarface replied angrily:

'What exactly do you mean, Squinty, twist things around in favour of my own little scheme? Either speak plainly or keep your nasty remarks to yourself.'

'Huh, if you want it plain, you can have it plain!' replied Squinty heatedly. (Trinket noticed that his left eye was missing, which presumably accounted for the nickname.) 'Everyone in this Lodge knows that you're trying to push your own brother-in-law

for Master. If Big Beaver gets the job, then with his authority behind you, you'll have the sun shining out of your arse-hole.'

Scarface's voice rose in angry protest.

The fact that Big Beaver is my brother-in-law has got nothing to do with it. We've just made a successful attack on Prince Kang's place. My brother-in-law led it, and it was thanks to his leadership that we came back from it victorious. Doesn't his ability qualify him to be Master? Brother Li is the most senior of us and we all get on well with him. I've got nothing against Brother Li. But if we're talking about ability, I should have thought Big Beaver was far and away the best qualified.'

Squinty let out a loud laugh at this, expressive of the deepest contempt.

'What are you laughing at?' asked Scarface angrily. 'Have I said something wrong?'

'Oh no, ' said Squinty. 'How could anything Brother Scarface said ever be wrong? I was just thinking that Big Beaver's ability, as you call it, can be a bit expensive at times. He can break through the five passes all right, but then you find he hasn't killed all the six generals. I mean, take this last job. When it came to the push, he allowed our great enemy Oboi, whom we were supposed to be trying to capture, to be polished off by a little kid with a knife, '

Another member of the congregation now strode to the front and took up his stand beside the altar. His face, which was dark with anger, Trinket recognized as that of the long-bearded man he had seen directing operations in the prison. Evidently the nickname 'Big Beaver' was a reference to the luxuriant growth which he wore like a bib on his chest and which made his already impressive figure

even more commanding.

'Now look here, Squinty, ' said Big Beaver in a voice that was thick with anger, 'if it's a slanging match with Scarface you're having, you can say what you like;

only leave me out of it. We're all supposed to be Brothers in this Lodge. We swore a sacred oath in front of Dragon Brother's tablet to live and die together. I've done nothing to offend you; why should you make these sarcastic remarks about me?'

Squinty was more than a little afraid of Big Beaver and willing to retract a little.

'I wasn't intending to say anything sarcastic about you, Big Beaver, ' he said nervously. Then, after an awkward pause, 'Look, Brother: if you ... if you will agree to let Brother Li's name go

forward for Master, I'm willing to kowtow to you and apologize. I'm willing to admit that what I said about you was wrong.'

Big Beaver looked at him stonily:

'I don't want your apology. In any case, it's not for me to say who ought to be the new Master. Nor for you to say either, unless by any chance you're planning to take over the job of Helmsman of the Triad Society yourself.'

Squinty retracted a little more.

'Who's being sarcastic now, Big Beaver?' he said. 'You know me. I could never hope to be Helmsman of the Triad Society, not in eighteen reincarnations. All I was trying to say was that Brother Li is a good man whom all of us respect. There's no one in this Lodge more sincerely admired by all the Brothers. I guarantee you that if anyone else were to be appointed Master, eight or nine out of ten of the Brothers in this Lodge would feel unhappy about it.'

'Hold on, Squinty!' said another voice from the floor. 'You're not eight or nine out of ten of the Brothers in the Lodge. How do you know what they would feel? Brother Li is a very nice man, nobody disputes that. If you're looking for someone to sit in the sun and have a jaw and a drink or two with, you couldn't find a nicer. But if you're talking about making him Master of this Lodge, I think you'd find that eight or nine out of ten of the Brothers in this Lodge would not agree with you:'

'I couldn't agree more with what Brother Zhang has just said,' another voice chimed in. 'You say that Brother Li is a good man whom all of us respect. Well, what about it? The aim of the Triad Society is to drive the Manchus out of China and restore the Ming, not to study the works of Confucius and learn how to be virtuous. If it's a good, highly respected person you're looking for, you can find one in just about any village school in the country, teaching the little lads to read their books.'

This last contribution set the whole assembly laughing.

A Taoist priest spoke next, addressing his question to the previous speaker.

'Who in your opinion ought to be Master of the Green Wood Lodge then?'

'Whoever takes the job on has got two objectives to bear in mind,' the man replied. The first is to carry on the business of the whole Triad Society, which is to drive out the Manchus and restore the Ming. The second is to make our Green Wood Lodge stand out

from among the other Lodges. That means doing the job with a bit of style. In my opinion whichever of the Brothers is best qualified to lead us towards those objectives should be chosen by the other Brothers to be our Master.'

'But in my opinion,' said the Taoist, 'the one best qualified to lead us towards those objectives is Brother Li.'

A chorus of some dozens of voices expressed dissent.

'No, no, Big Beaver.'

'Big Beaver.'

'Big Beaver is much more qualified.'

Whatever job he does Big Beaver always carries out with tremendous energy,' said the Taoist. 'I think we all of us admire him for that—'

A number of voices interrupted him:

'There you are then! There's nothing more to be said.'

The Taoist waved his hands impatiently.

'Just a minute, just a minute! Let me finish what I was saying. I was going to add that Big Beaver has a very violent temper which is always liable to flare up on the slightest provocation. At present he is only an ordinary member of the Lodge like all the rest of us, yet even now everyone is a little bit afraid of him. If he were to become Master, there would never be a moment's peace for any of us.'

'Big Beaver's temper has been a lot better lately than it used to be,' one of the

men said. 'If he were to become Master, it would get even better.'

The Taoist shook his head.

'You know what the proverb says: "It's easier for the earth to leave its moorings than for a man to change his nature." Big Beaver's temper has been with him since time out of mind. He might be able to control it for a week or two, but not for years on end. Whoever becomes Master of the Green Wood Lodge has got the job for life. We can't have the Brothers at loggerheads with each other and their morale undermined and their undertakings failing just because of one man's temper.'

'What about yourself, Father Obscurus?' said Scarface. 'I can't see that your own temper is all that wonderful.'

The Taoist whom Scarface called 'Father Obscurus' laughed unconcernedly.

'I know my own weaknesses better than anyone, Scarface,' he said. 'I know I've got a bad temper and I know that I give offence

to a lot of people. That's why I generally keep my mouth shut. I've only opened it on this occasion because choosing a Master is too important a matter to keep quiet about. It's true I've got a bad temper, but as I'm not Master, it doesn't matter. Any Brother who finds he can't get on with me doesn't have to speak to me, he has only to avoid me. If I were Master, he wouldn't be able to avoid me. He'd have to take notice of me.'

'But nobody's asking you to be Master, Obscurus,' said Scar-face. 'So why waste everyone's time by dragging in all these objections?'

The Taoist flew into a rage.

'Now look here, Scarface,' he said, in a voice that was charged with anger, 'wherever I go on River and Lake, everyone—everyone without exception—has the courtesy to address me by my proper title. I am "Father Obscurus". Even to the Helmsman I am "Father Obscurus". The Helmsman in fact is always extremely courteous to me. Not like you, you . . . you mannerless booby! Beaver's dog! Barking for Beaver! Let me make one thing perfectly clear. If Big Beaver is planning to be Master of this Lodge, I shall be the first one to oppose his election. Only on one condition would I consider withdrawing my objection, and I might not even then.'

Scarface had been considerably angered by the taunt that he was 'barking for Beaver'. However, Father Obscurus was a redoubtable fighter and therefore not

a person to be crossed when he was seriously angry; moreover he was not boasting when he said that he was widely respected by members of the kungfu fraternity and treated with a certain measure of deference even by the Helmsman. If he was fully determined to oppose it, he could make the election of Big Beaver, which Scarface was trying to promote, extremely difficult. Scarface was therefore pleasantly surprised to hear that there was a possibility that he might reconsider his objection.

'Oh,' he said, 'what condition is that? Let's hear it.'

The condition is that Big Beaver should divorce Real Gold, ' said Father Obscurus.

This produced a roar of laughter from the assembly. 'Real Gold' was the nickname of Scarface's elder sister who was married to Big Beaver. Her favoured weapons were a pair of gold-plated short-swords. Some of the more mischievous members of the Lodge, playing on the meaning of her real name which sounded like the Chinese word for 'fake', would innocently inquire whether

her two swords were real gold or fake gold. 'Oh,' she would reply seriously, wholly unaware that her leg was being pulled, 'real gold, real gold.' And so, from the frequent repetition of this hoary joke, she acquired the nickname 'Real Gold' and was now known by no other name. In pretending to make the divorce of Big Beaver from his warlike spouse a condition of his withdrawing his opposition to Big Beaver's election, Father Obscurus intended no more than a dig at Scarface. Real Gold was a blunt and outspoken but thoroughly good-hearted woman. For that matter, her Brother Scarface was by no means a bad fellow, merely somewhat overzealous in crying up the merits of his brother-in-law, a very irascible individual whose bouts of bad temper had offended many and were the occasion of much resentful muttering behind his back.

Big Beaver's irascibility was now provoked by the Taoist's

gibe.

'Father Obscurus, what do you mean by it?' he shouted, simultaneously dealing the altar-table by which he was standing a mighty thump. 'Never mind whether I should be Master or not; why do you have to bring my old woman into it?'

Before the Taoist could reply, an ironical voice spoke out from somewhere in the congregation:

'Hey, Big Beaver! What's Brother Yin done to offend you that you should bash his table like that?'

This took Big Beaver by surprise; but in spite of being so irascible, he had considerable presence of mind.

'Oh, I shouldn't have done that,' he cried out in a very loud voice so that all could hear, and, dropping down on his knees in front of the altar, he bowed to the spirit tablet and addressed his apologies to the soul of the dead Master.

'Brother Yin, in my anger I hit your altar with my hand. I shouldn't have done it, Brother Yin. I'm very sorry. Please look down from Heaven and forgive me.'

Having said that, he knocked his head hard on the floor a number of times. The assembly, seeing him so contrite, were prepared to let the matter rest.

Except, that is, for Squinty.

There you are, everybody! You see?' he called out triumphantly. 'Big Beaver's a fine man—honest, straightforward'—you know where you are with him. The only trouble is, he's got a bad temper and he can't control it. If he does something wrong, he'll admit it straight away, and that's very good. But suppose he were

the Master and made a mistake. The consequences could be very serious. Admitting it wouldn't help.'

Big Beaver's blustering attempt to take Father Obscurus to task for mentioning his wife had been somewhat undermined by his own careless treatment of the late Master's shrine; and though he soon disarmed criticism by kowtowing to the spirit tablet, the rebuke which his action provoked had so much taken the wind out of his sails that he had no spirit left to remonstrate further with the Taoist. Father Obscurus for his part gladly took advantage of the other's temporary silence to beat a graceful retreat.

'Come on, now, Big Beaver,' he said. 'You and I have been Brothers in this movement for a long time now: I don't know how many times we've faced death together or how many tight spots we've helped each other out of. Surely we're not going to fall out now over a few careless words? Anyway, whatever you do, don't tell Real Gold about this when you get home. I should hate to have her coming after me and pulling me by the beard.'

This caused a big laugh among all those present, which Big Beaver himself, who truth to tell was a tiny bit afraid of Father Obscurus, felt obliged to join in.

After that the discussion became general. One man would speak out for Brother Li, then another man would speak out for Big Beaver; and so it went on, with no sign that they would ever arrive at a conclusion. Suddenly someone in the assembly burst into noisy weeping and began speaking most emphatically through his sobs.

'Brother Yin, oh, Brother Yin, we were such a happy family when you were alive, all working together for the great cause. And then that monster Oboi went and killed you! There's no one like you left in the Green Wood Lodge, Brother, no one who comes anywhere near you. Come back from the dead and lead us, or we'll go on bickering with each other until the whole Brotherhood falls apart. The Green Wood Lodge will never thrive again as it used to.'

Many of the congregation who heard him could not refrain from weeping themselves.

Then someone came up with a new proposal.

'Brother Li and Big Beaver are equally good in their different ways and both are our good friends. We can't allow the business of choosing a Master to set us all against one another. As I see it, the best way out of this would be to let Brother Yin in Heaven make

the decision for us. Let's write down the names of Brother Li and Big Beaver on pieces of paper and after that we'll draw to see which of them it should be. There can't be a fairer way than that.'

A number of those present murmured their assent. Scarface, however, loudly objected.

'No, that way's no good.'

'Why not?' somebody asked him.

'Well, who's going to draw?'

'We choose one of ourselves to draw for the rest of us,' said the former speaker.

'Yes, but could you trust them to play fair?' said Scarface. There might be some cheating.'

'What, in front of Brother Yin's spirit tablet?' said Squinty angrily. 'Cheating our dead Brother who's up in Heaven? Who'd have the nerve?'

'People are funny,' said Scarface. They might.'

'Well, toot your granny's!' said Squinty coarsely. 'If anyone did, it would be you.'

'Who are you swearing at?' Scarface asked angrily.

'Suppose I'm swearing at you, boy?' said Squinty, just as angrily. 'What about it?'

'I've had enough of this,' said Scarface. 'You've insulted my grandmother. I'm not standing for that.'

There was a swishing sound as he drew his sword from its scabbard. With his free left hand he pointed challengingly at Squinty.

'Outside, Squinty!' he said. 'We'll settle this in the courtyard.'

Very slowly, Squinty unsheathed his own weapon.

'Now, you made the challenge. I'm fighting because you force me to. Bear witness, Big Beaver. You heard him challenge me.'

'We're all Brothers,' said Big Beaver. 'You shouldn't be fighting over a thing like this. But you did swear at my brother-in-law, Squinty. It's you who were in the wrong.'

'I knew all along you'd put the blame on me,' said Squinty. That's how you are now, and you're not even Master yet.'

'So you have the right to insult anyone you like, do you,' said Big Beaver angrily, 'including my ancestors? If you've been tooting my brother-in-law's grandmother, what sort of relation of yours does that make me?'

There was a lot of laughter at this; but because of this brawling between the protagonists of the two parties, the hall was now

in an uproar. Scarface, encouraged by his brother-in-law's support, was very cock-a-hoop and already pushing his way out of the hall towards the courtyard when one of the men put out a hand and restrained him.

'If you want your brother-in-law to be Master, Scarface,' the man advised him, 'I wouldn't offend too many people, if I were you. You've got to be a bit more

easygoing than this if you want to get other people on your side.'

Meanwhile Squinty was slowly sheathing his sword. As he did so, he shot a look at Scarface.

'Don't think I'm backing down because I'm afraid of you,' he said. 'It's out of consideration for the other Brothers. We're not supposed to bear arms against one another, it's against the rules. Anyway, ' he said, addressing the assembly at large, 'all I want to say is, if anyone's looking for votes to make Big Beaver Master, he can count me out of it. I can just about put up with Big Beaver's temper, but to have to put up with Scarface's as well—that's asking too much. The King of Hell I can face, but not his little sidekick.'

Trinket, watching and listening as an outsider while the men argued with each other interminably, occasionally swearing at each other and even threatening each other with their swords, was by this time quite enjoying himself. To begin with he had thought that they were intending to kill him as a sacrifice to Oboi's ghost. It had been a tremendous relief when he discovered that, far from being supporters of Oboi, they actually detested him. After a while, however, hearing the men's repeated references to the aim of their Society—getting rid of the Manchus and restoring the Ming—he began to worry again.

'As far as they are concerned, I'm a little eunuch from the Palace,' he thought. 'Whatever I tell them, I'll never be able to convince them that I'm not. Once they've chosen their new Master, probably the first thing they'll do will be to get rid of me. After all, from their point of view, I'm the only Manchu around here to get rid of. There aren't any others hereabouts. Besides, I've been listening to their secrets. Even if they don't kill me to shut my mouth, they'll probably shut me away for the rest of my life. I think the time really has come, old Trink, for you to scarper.'

With that he began edging, step by step, towards the open doorway, hoping that while confusion still reigned inside the hall he might, with a bit of luck, escape.

More than a Dog's Fart

Suddenly a familiar dry voice rose above the chatter:

'Poor Brother Yin! Out of sight, out of mind! The oath we all swore in front of your spirit tablet now counts for no more than a dog's fart!'

Trinket recognized the voice as that of the man they called Tertius—the one who was so fond of making sarcastic remarks. There was an instant hush; then,

after a moment or two of silence, several voices spoke at once:

'All right, Tertius. What are you trying to tell us?'

'I seem to remember kowtowing in front of the spirit tablets of Dragon Brother and Brother Yin,' said Tertius, 'and pricking my finger, and swearing a solemn oath: I, Tertius, do solemnly swear that if any Brother kills Oboi and avenges the great wrong done to our Master, Brother Yin, I will acknowledge that Brother to be the Master of this Lodge and will faithfully carry out his commands.' Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but when I say something I mean it. That oath meant more than a dog's fart to me.'

Once more there was silence. In the whole of that great hall it would have been possible to hear a pin drop. Every man in the hall had, in fact, sworn the same oath. Finally Scarface could contain himself no longer and broke the silence.

What you say is true, Tertius. All of us, including me, we all said those words. But—dammit Tertius!—you know ... I know . . . we all know ... the person who killed Oboi was this. . . this

He looked round the hall, seeking to locate Trinket. Suddenly he caught sight of him, already with one foot over the threshold and just about to make his getaway.

'Hold him!' roared Scarface. 'Don't let him get away!'

Trinket tried to make a dash for it; but on the instant he felt six or seven pairs of strong hands seize hold of him and drag him inside.

'Hey, hey,' he shouted, 'turtle's-egg sons of turtle's bastards! Take your dirty hands off me!'

'Now I'm really done for!' he thought. 'So I might as well have the satisfaction of swearing at them.'

One of the men stepped out from the assembly and approached him. He was wearing the dress of a scholar.

'You shouldn't swear like that, little brother,' he said.

Trinket recognized the voice.

'Aren't you Tertius?' he said.

The man was startled.

'Do you know me?' he asked.

'Know your mother's!' said Trinket rudely.

Tertius, for all his sarcasm, was in some respects rather a simple soul.

'How can you know my mother?' he asked, puzzled.

'I'm her boyfriend, aren't I?' said Trinket. 'Her fancy man.'

There was loud laughter from the assembled men. This young eunuch was a cheeky little devil they thought, half admiringly. But Tertius blushed.

'You're making fun of me,' he said. Then, looking very serious, 'Now tell me, little brother,' he asked Trinket, 'why did you kill Oboi?'

Trinket was quick to seize the opportunity this offered.

'The filthy bastard asked for it. He did so many wicked things. He killed so many of us Chinese. Look at all the brave Brothers of River and Lake he murdered. He was my worst enemy. I was a ... a whole boy till he had me taken to the Palace and snipped off all my best bits! I hate him. I hate him so much I'd like to chop him up into mincemeat and throw it into the water to feed the turdes.'

The thicker he laid it on, Trinket calculated, the greater were his chances of staying alive. Sure enough, the men in the hall, when they heard this diatribe, looked at each other in some surprise.

'How long have you been a eunuch?' Tertius asked him.

'How long?' said Trinket. 'Less than six months. Yangzhou is where I come from. I was rounded up by him there and brought to Peking. Hot-piece momma! That stinking Oboi! Now that he's dead I hope he's climbing the mountain of knives. I hope he's boiling in oil. I hope they're rolling him on spiked boards . . .' He proceeded to unleash a torrent of the foulest Yangzhou abuse.

A middle-aged man in the assembly nodded his head appreciatively:

'He's from Yangzhou, all right.'

The man who said this himself spoke with a strong Yangzhou accent. Trinket now appealed to this fellow-townsmen:

'We Yangzhou folk suffered more than they did anywhere else from the cruelty of those Manchu Tartars, didn't we, Uncle? The killing went on for ten days, from morning to night without stop. My grandpa, my grandma, and all three of my great-aunts were killed by those bloodthirsty Tartar turdes. They marched all the way

from the East Gate to the West Gate and all the way from the South Gate to the North Gate, killing as they went. That was on Oboi's orders they did that.' He searched his memory for a suitably resounding phrase. 'How could I share the same sky with a man like that?'

He could remember a great deal of what people had told him about the appalling Ten Days of Yangzhou. What he said on this subject therefore had the ring of truth about it. The men listening were visibly moved and many of them nodded their heads.

'No wonder,' said Big Beaver.

'It wasn't only my grandpa and grandma,' said Trinket. 'My father was killed by Oboi as well.'

'Poor lad!' said Tertius; but Squinty was less impressed.

'How old are you?' he asked.

Thirteen, I think,' said Trinket.

'It's all of twenty years since the Yangzhou massacres,' said Squinty. 'How could your father have been killed by Oboi too?'

Trinket at once realized that he had overdone it; but he was far too practised a liar to be at a loss for words.

'How should I know?' he said. 'I wasn't born then. I'm only saying what my mother told me.'

'Even if you were born after your father's death,' said Squinty, 'it's still not possible.'

'I think you're wrong there, Squinty,' said Tertius. The lad only said his father was killed by Oboi. He didn't say he was killed in the Ten Days of Yangzhou

massacres. From the moment Oboi became a great minister right up to the present he was killing people all the time. Our Brother Yin was killed by him only two years ago.'

That's true,' said Squinty, finally convinced.

'Young, er, young friend,' said Scarface suddenly, 'you said something about Oboi killing a lot of friends of River and Lake. Surely that didn't have anything much to do with you?'

'It certainly did,' said Trinket. 'I had a very good friend who was a River and Lake man—he was killed by Oboi in the Palace. He was captured at the same time as me.'

'Who was that?' several of the men asked, all speaking at once.

'He was very well known on River and Lake. His name was Mao Eighteen—his friends called him Whiskers.'

At this there was a chorus of 'Ohs'.

'Is Whiskers Mao your friend?' said Scarface. 'He wasn't killed, you know.'

'Do you mean he's still alive?' Trinket asked delightedly. 'I'm so happy! You know that time you badmouthed the salt smugglers in Yangzhou, Scarface? Whiskers fought a whole gang of them because of you. And I helped him.'

Scarface scratched his head:

'Well I'm damned!'

'Right then, ' said Big Beaver. 'It's rather important that we should know for sure whether our young friend here is on our side or not. Scarface, take a few of the Brothers with you and fetch Whiskers Mao here so that he can identify him.'

With a single word of assent Scarface turned and left the hall.

Tertius drew a chair up and invited his 'little brother' to sit down, which Trinket, wasting no words on courtesies, promptly did. Someone handed him a bowl of noodles and a cup of tea. He was feeling extremely hungry by now and quickly emptied the bowl. Big Beaver, Tertius, and the man they all called Brother Li sat and chatted with him while they were waiting, their attitude to him now a good deal politer than it had been to begin with.

In answering their questions, whether about his past life or about his recent experiences, Trinket concealed nothing from them. Although embroidered with an occasional boast and with a good deal more invective against the hated Oboi, the account he gave of himself was comparatively honest. He even told them about the way in which he had helped the young Emperor effect Oboi's arrest, merely suppressing the fact that he had been taught Martial Arts by Old Hai, and making no reference to the part that Kang Xi had played in the arrest by personally attacking Oboi with a dagger. Big Beaver and the others had heard that Oboi had been arrested by Kang Xi with the help of a team of little eunuchs and hearing Trinket's extremely graphic account of this same event were disposed to believe him.

When the questioning was over, Big Beaver sighed.

'So you not only killed him, it was you who arrested him as well, ' he said. The Manchu Champion. It must have been destiny.'

They had been talking now for something like half an hour. Big Beaver, Brother Li, and Tertius had all three of them knocked about the world a good deal and their years of experience had taught them to be shrewd judges of character. They could see that the boy was too glib to be wholly reliable; nevertheless in essentials his story seemed to be consistent.

Suddenly there was a sound of footsteps in the courtyard, the door of the hall was pushed open, and two big, strapping fellows came in, supporting a carrying-pole between them on their shoulders. They were closely followed by Scarface, who called out to announce the new arrival:

'Mr Mao Eighteen here to see you, brother-in-law.'

Trinket jumped up to look. Whiskers Mao was lying in a sort of hammock suspended from the pole. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes were deeply sunken, and he looked dreadfully pale and haggard.

'Oh, ' said Trinket with deep concern, 'you're ill.'

When they called to collect him, all that the men had told Whiskers was that the Green Wood Lodge of the Triad Society wanted to consult him about an important matter. They hadn't told him what it was. His joy at being unexpectedly confronted with Trinket was almost too much for him.

Trinket!" he cried. 'You! So you escaped. Oh, I'm glad. I've missed you, boy. I was looking forward to the time when my wounds had healed and I could go

and rescue you, but here you are. Oh, this is wonderful!'

His words instantly banished any remaining particle of doubt from the minds of the attentively listening men. This little eunuch was indeed Whiskers Mao's friend and had been captured at the same time as he was and taken into the Palace. Whiskers was not himself a member of the Triad Society, but he was well-known on River and Lake as a plain-spoken man of his word. Not only that, but during the past few years his arrests and imprisonments by the Manchus, dramatic escapes, and subsequent exploits had made him famous. If this lad was his friend, it followed that he could not really be a Palace Eunuch. And Whiskers had addressed the boy with such genuine warmth, it was clear that they must be very good friends indeed.

'Did you say you'd been wounded?' Trinket asked his friend.

Whiskers sighed.

That evening when I escaped from the Palace, I was just getting past the gate when I ran into some of the guards. It was five against one. I killed two of them, but I got a couple of nasty cuts myself. I managed—only just—to get out of the gate, when a whole lot more guards came running out of the Palace. I'd never have got away if it hadn't been for the lucky chance that some of these Triad friends happened to be there at the time and gave me a hand. They

saved my life. But what about you? Was it these Triad friends who helped you to escape too?'

This made Big Beaver and the other members of the Lodge feel extremely uncomfortable and for the first time it occurred to them that this whole affair had been somewhat mismanaged. To their surprise, however, Trinket made no reference to the true nature of his arrival.

'Yes,' he said. That old eunuch forced me to take the place of his eunuch house-boy; that's why I couldn't get away until now. It was lucky for me that I ran into these Triad ... er ... gentlemen.'

The assembled Triad heroes, grateful to him for saving their faces by this tactful cover-up, breathed a collective sigh of relief. A decent little kid, they thought; and in spite of his youth, they now looked on him as a friend.

Scarface invited Whiskers and Trinket to rest in a room on another side of the courtyard while members of the Green Wood Lodge continued to debate their important business in the hall.

Whiskers had been very severely wounded and even after months of convalescence his body was still very weak. The jolting to which he had been subjected on his way there had caused his wounds to start hurting again, leaving him so drained that, though he would dearly have liked to talk, he had not the energy to do so. For his part, Trinket decided that whatever happened now, at least they weren't going to kill him; so, relieved at last of that worry, he curled up in an armchair and promptly went to sleep. Some time later, in the midst of his slumbers, he was half-aware of someone gently picking him up, laying him down on a bed, and covering him with a quilt.

The Helmsman is Nigh

Next morning, while he was still recovering from his long sleep, a man brought him some water to wash with, some tea, and a large bowl of pork and noodles.

This is the life!' Trinket said to himself. 'I didn't expect this. They're treating me like a gent.'

But then he noticed that there were two men standing outside the door; and when he looked, he could see another two men outside the window. They were trying hard to look as if they were just standing around doing nothing in particular, but it was painfully obvious that they had been stationed there to guard him

and prevent him from running away. Though he no longer feared for his life, Trinket's worries returned.

'If they intend to treat me as an honoured guest,' he thought, 'why have they put four fellows here to guard me?'

But his sense of mischief soon triumphed over the worry.

'Huh,' he muttered, 'if you're planning to keep me prisoner here, you won't find it as easy as you think. I'll take a little stroll outside in a minute and we'll see what you four idiots can do to stop me.'

Having carefully sized up the situation and made his plan, he went up to the east-facing window and gave the casement a mighty push, so that it opened with the maximum amount of noise. Instantly the four pairs of eyes outside were focused on the window. While they were still looking at the window, he skipped over and gave another mighty push to the double doors. Then, with all possible speed, he dashed across the room and hid himself under the bed. When the four men, startled by this second bang, turned their heads to look, the doors were wide open and still swinging.

The men had, indeed, been ordered to keep an eye on Trinket, and their first thought on seeing the doors open was that he must already have escaped. With cries of dismay they rushed into the room. Sure enough, Whiskers still lay there sleeping soundly in his bed, but Trinket was nowhere to be seen.

'He can't have got far,' said one of them. 'You others run and look for him while I go and tell the boss.'

'Right,' said the others, and all four of them rushed outside again. Two of them went up on the roof. Trinket, with a self-important cough, got out from under the bed, walked out of the room, and strutted unconcernedly towards the hall. As he opened the door, he saw Big Beaver and Brother Li sitting there side by side while one of the four men who had been guarding him stood there breathlessly making his report.

That. . . that boy . . . has got away. We don't know . . . where . . . he's—'

Just at that moment he caught sight of Trinket.

'Oh!' The man's eyes became round with surprise and he seemed incapable of further speech.

Trinket stretched himself lazily.

'Good morning Brother Li, good morning Big Beaver, ' he said.

Big Beaver and Brother Li exchanged glances, then, turning to the wretched guard, 'Go away!' they said. 'You're useless.'

When the man had gone, they invited Trinket to come and sit with them.

'How did you sleep last night?' they asked him.

'Very well, thank you, ' said Trinket with a big grin as he sat beside them.

Suddenly one of the screen-doors of the hall burst open and two more of the men rushed in.

'Big Beaver,' one of them began, 'that boy . . . he's got away . . . we don't know—'

Then he caught sight of Trinket sitting there.

'Oh!' he said, startled. 'He . . . he . . . '

Trinket could contain himself no longer and burst out laughing.

'You're not much good, are you?' he said. 'Four big guys like you and you can't keep watch over one little kid. If I'd really wanted to escape, I'd have been away long ago.'

'How did you get out?' asked the other man, who had not yet spoken. He was a rather stupid-looking fellow. 'I don't know whether there's something wrong with my eyes or what, but I never got a glimpse of you. You were already gone before I noticed.'

'I can make myself invisible,' said Trinket, grinning. 'I'm not going to tell you how it's done though.'

Big Beaver frowned at the man and waved his hand dismissively.

'Go on, clear off!'

But the stupid-looking man persisted.

'Can you really make yourself invisible?' he asked. 'Oh well, no wonder.'

'I admire your sharpness,' Brother Li told Trinket. 'You've got a good head on your shoulders for one so young.'

Suddenly the three of them became aware of a sound borne in from the distance: the thudding of many hooves. Big Beaver and Brother Li simultaneously jumped to their feet.

Tartar soldiers?' said Brother Li in a low voice.

Big Beaver nodded; then, putting two fingers to his lips, he gave three piercing whistles. This brought five men running into the hall.

Tut everyone on the alert,' Big Beaver instructed them. 'And tell Scarface to pick a few men to help him take care of Mao Eighteen. If it's a big force of Tartars coming, we're not to give battle. We'll follow the same pattern that we did last time and disperse.'

CHAPtKu

The five men shouted their assent and went outside again to relay these orders. On every hand the members of the Triad Society could be heard preparing

themselves for action. Big Beaver turned to Trinket.

'Little brother,' he said, 'you'd better stick with me.'

At that moment a man came dashing into the hall, shouting at the top of his voice, 'The Helmsman is coming.'

'What?' cried Big Beaver and Brother Li in unison.

'The Helmsman is riding here with the nine Masters from the other Lodges,' said the man.

'How do you know?' the two men asked him, delighted but incredulous.

'I met them on the road and the Helmsman himself sent me ahead to tell you,' said the man.

Big Beaver could see that the man was exhausted.

'Good,' he said. 'You'd better go and rest.'

Once more he whistled for the men to come.

'It isn't the Tartars,' he told them, 'it's the Helmsman. Tell everyone they are to go outside to welcome him.'

There was tremendous excitement when this message was transmitted to the men.

Big Beaver took Trinket by the hand. (,

'Come, little brother,' he said. 'Our Helmsman will soon be arriving. We must go out to meet him too.'

CHAPTER 7

In which Trinket meets the Helmsman and becomes Master of the Green Wood Lodge

Trinket meets the Helmsman

Trinket accompanied Big Beaver, Brother Li, and the other leaders to the main gate. Outside they found the members of the Lodge already waiting, between two and three hundred of them, spread out in V-shaped formation on either

side of the gate, all with eager, expectant looks on their faces. After a while the same two big fellows came out carrying Whiskers between them in his hammock.

'Mao, old fellow, ' said Brother Li, 'you don't need to wait out here with us. You're our guest.'

'Just hearing about the Helmsman has always been an inspiration to me, ' said Whiskers. 'Now that there's a chance to actually see him, I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Because of his extreme weakness his voice was still faint, but there was a flush of excitement on his pallid cheeks.

Presently the sound of galloping grew nearer and a party of some ten or so horsemen could be seen approaching in a little cloud of dust. The three foremost of them jumped lightly from their horses while they were still at some distance from the gate. Brother Li and the other leaders went forward to meet them and there was

much exchange of handclasps and friendly greetings. Trinket overheard one of the horsemen saying that the Helmsman was waiting somewhere 'ahead' and wanted Brother Li, Big Beaver, and one or two other seniors to come and see him. After standing there some minutes in discussion, six leading members of the Lodge—Brother Li, Big Beaver, Tertius, Father Obscurus, and two others whom Trinket didn't know by name—got on to waiting horses and galloped off with the other riders.

'Isn't the Helmsman coming here then?' asked Whiskers, dreadfully disappointed.

None of those waiting had the heart to answer him, since they were all feeling equally disappointed.

'What's the matter with you all?' thought Trinket. 'Anyone would think someone had borrowed ten thousand taels off you and wouldn't pay it back, or you'd lost your wife's trousers gambling or something. What a miserable-looking lot!'

After a good while longer, another horseman arrived and read out the names of thirteen Lodge-members who were to go for interviews with the Helmsman. The thirteen men, with rapturous expressions on their faces, dashed to the ready-waiting horses, jumped into the saddle, and galloped away.

'Whiskers, ' Trinket asked his stricken friend, 'is this Helmsman a very old man?'

'I... I've never met him, ' said Whiskers. 'On River and Lake there's no one who doesn't look up to him, but I do know that to actually get to meet him is very, very difficult, '

Tamardy!' thought Trinket. 'What a big-head! Well, you don't impress me, Mr Big Shot Helmsman. It's all the same to me whether I see you or not, '

By this time it was beginning to look as if most members of the Lodge were definitely not going to get a glimpse of their beloved leader; nevertheless they continued to stand there outside the gate, nursing a faint hope that he might after all appear. Some of them, tired of standing, sat on the ground. One of them urged Whiskers to go indoors and rest.

'If the Helmsman does come, ' he told Whiskers, 'I promise to let you know straight away.'

But Whiskers shook his head.

'No, no, I'd rather wait here. If the Helmsman did come and I wasn't waiting here outside, it would be very—well, disrespectful.'

He sighed wistfully.

'I wonder if it will be my luck to see him before I die.'

In his conversations with Trinket on the long journey from Yangzhou to Peking there was hardly a well-known practitioner of the Martial Arts whom Whiskers had not at one time or other disparaged. Chen Jinnan, the Helmsman, appeared to be the only expert in these matters for whom he had unqualified respect. Listening to Whiskers now, Trinket could not help absorbing a little of his enthusiasm, to the extent that he now stopped thinking of rude things to say about this paragon who seemed so conscious of his own worth.

Suddenly there was a sound of hoofbeats once more and another party of horsemen came riding up. Those Triads who had been sitting on the ground leaped to their feet and everyone craned forward, hoping that this time the summons would be for him. There were four messengers this time. Their leader, having dismounted from his horse, clasped his hands together respectfully:

The Helmsman requests Mr Mao and Mr Wei to favour him with their

company.'

Whiskers leaped up with a joyful cry, then almost immediately sank back into the hammock with a groan.

'Let's go!' he said to his bearers. 'Hurry!'

Trinket, for his part, was extremely tickled to be called 'Mr Wei'. Even his surname—his mother's actually, since his paternity was unknown—was seldom used; but never in his life before had anyone called him 'Mr'.

Well!' he thought. 'I've heard plenty of "Goong-goongs" recently; but not "Mr". Ha ha! Now I'm "Mr Trinket Wei".'

Two of the mounted men took charge of Whiskers, supporting the ends of the carrying-pole from which his hammock was suspended on their saddle-bows and riding along in parallel very slowly and carefully. Another of them gave up his horse to Trinket and found himself another horse on which he rode along behind.

The little party of six walked their horses along the road for about a mile before taking a right-hand turn into a little side-road. Along this, every few hundred yards, were little knots of two or three men, some sitting, some walking to and fro, all evidently lookouts, since the leading horseman, on seeing them, would make a sign, stretching out the last three fingers of his right hand and pointing with them downwards, whereupon the men would nod and silently answer him with some mysterious signal of their own.

Trinket observed that the signals they made were all different, but was unable to guess their significance. After they had been riding along this side-road for about four miles, they came to a large farmhouse or grange.

As they arrived at the entrance, a guard on the door shouted to the people inside, 'The guests have arrived,' whereupon the door opened and out came Brother Li, Big Beaver, and two other men whom Trinket hadn't seen before. One of these last clasped his hands politely and welcomed them in:

'Mr Mao, Mr Wei, welcome! Our Society's Helmsman looks forward to meeting you.'

Trinket was thrilled. The 'Mr' seemed to be sticking.

Whiskers struggled to get up.

'I can't see the Helmsman like this. It's too . . . it's too . . .' but the effort to raise himself once more ended in a groan.

'You're a wounded man,' said Brother Li. 'You don't need to stand on ceremony.'

He ushered Trinket and Whiskers' bearers into the main reception room. A man offered Trinket some tea and asked him to wait there a while as the Helmsman wanted to speak to Mr Mao first. Whiskers was carried through an inner door for his interview.

While Trinket was drinking his cup of tea, a servant came in with four plates on which were various cakes and dimsum. His reaction on sampling these was unfavourable.

These aren't a patch on the ones they do in the Palace,' he thought. They're not even as good as the ones they used to serve in the brothel.'

His estimation of the Helmsman at once went down a couple of notches. However, he was feeling empty, and in quite a short time had made considerable inroads into the eatables on all four of the plates.

After about the time it would take to consume an average meal, Brother Li and the other three came in again, and one of the two Trinket didn't know by name, an old man with a grizzled beard, told him that the Helmsman was now ready to see him. At some risk of choking, he swallowed the large mouthful he had been chewing, brushed off the crumbs with his hands, and followed the four men into one of the wings of the building which, together with the main reception room, enclosed a large courtyard on three sides. There, stopping outside a doorway, the old man with the grizzled beard lifted up the door-curtain and announced them.

'Mr Trinket Wei, the Little White Dragon to see you.'

Trinket was surprised and a little flattered that they should somehow have got hold of his made-up nom de guerre. This must be Whiskers' doing, he concluded.

A man in his thirties dressed in the costume of a scholar rose to his feet as they entered, smiling a welcome. Trinket walked in and stood for a moment darting questioning glances around him.

This is the Helmsman,' said Big Beaver.

Trinket stole a glance at the scholar. He had a mild and gentle face, but there was a force in his flashing eyes which seemed to bore right through him and made him gasp. Almost unconsciously he sank to his knees and began to kowtow; but the scholar bent down to stop him.

'No, no, that's not necessary,' he said with a laugh.

Trinket could feel the scholar's strong hands on his arms. A warm sensation passed through his body, followed by a little tremor of excitement. He abandoned his kowtow and got up.

'By arresting and killing Oboi, the Manchu Champion,' said the scholar, speaking to the four older men but keeping his eyes on Trinket, 'our young hero here has avenged the deaths of countless numbers of our fellow-countrymen. In the course of a few days his name has become a household word. To have won such fame, and so early in life too, is an almost unparalleled achievement.'

Although Trinket had enough cheek to shame the devil and would normally, if anyone else had praised him like this, have treated it as an excuse to show off, he found himself, in the presence of this Helmsman with his gentleness and his air of quiet authority, completely tongue-tied.

'Sit down!' The Helmsman pointed to a chair and sat down himself.

Trinket followed his example but noticed that the four older men remained standing, their arms held respectfully at their sides.

'I gather that your career as a strategist began very early,' said the Helmsman, smiling. 'Mr Mao tells me that already, near Victory Hill, when you were still not far from Yangzhou, you killed a Manchu officer by means of a ruse. I still haven't heard how you managed to arrest Oboi though.'

Lifting his head slightly, Trinket caught a glimpse of those dazzling eyes and felt his heart beating faster. All desire to indulge in his customary trumpet-blowing drained from him on the instant and he found himself for once giving a completely honest account

of what he had done. He told the Helmsman how he had become Rang Xi's favourite; how Oboi had threatened and insulted the young Emperor; and how he and the Emperor had joined forces to take Oboi prisoner. Out of a sense of loyalty to Kang Xi, he said nothing about Kang Xi stabbing Oboi in the back; but he made no attempt to conceal the fact that he had blinded Oboi with incense-ash and then hit him on the head with a bronze brazier, although he was fully aware that to a man of honour like the Helmsman this would seem, if

not a third-rate, certainly a pretty second-rate way of overcoming an enemy.

The Helmsman listened to all that Trinket had to say without making a single interruption. When at last Trinket had finished, he

nodded.

'I see. Well, clearly you didn't learn your technique from Mr

Mao. Who was your teacher?'

'I've had a little training,' said Trinket, 'but I didn't have a proper teacher. What the Old Devil taught me wasn't real Martial Arts, it was just rubbish.' The Old Devil?'

The Helmsman's vast knowledge did not encompass any practitioner with that nom de guerre. Trinket burst out laughing.

'Old Devil is what I used to call the old eunuch Hai-goong— among other things. His real name was Hai Dafu. He's the one who captured me and Mao Eighteen and brought us into the Palace . . .' He suddenly realized that this flatly contradicted what he had said previously. He had told the Triad members that he and Mao Eighteen had been captured and taken into the Palace by Oboi. To a practised liar like Trinket, however, this presented little difficulty. The old eunuch was acting on Oboi's orders. I suppose Oboi, being so important, was too grand to do the dirty work himself.' But the Helmsman appeared to be deep in thought. 'Hai Dafu? Hai Dafu? Is there a eunuch with that name in the Tartar Palace?' He turned to Trinket. 'Show me a few of the things he taught you, little brother,' he said.

However immune to self-criticism Trinket might be, he knew that what he liked to call his Martial Arts training was really a joke. The Old Devil only pretended to teach me,' he said. 'He hated me because I made him blind, so he did everything in his power to harm me. The sort of things he taught me were not the sort of things you'd want anyone else to see.'

The Helmsman nodded and made a little gesture with his left hand. At once Big Beaver and the other three older men left the room, closing the door after them as they went.

'Now, ' said the Helmsman, 'what did you mean when you said you made the old eunuch go blind?'

In the presence of this heroic individual Trinket found it harder to tell his

habitual lies than to tell the truth—a sensation he had never experienced before. He now found himself telling the Helmsman how the massive dose of medicine he had put in the old eunuch's cup had caused him to go blind and how he had killed the little eunuch Laurie and taken his place.

The Helmsman, having heard this last piece of information with amusement and some surprise, felt with his left hand between Trinket's legs and satisfied himself that he was indeed equipped with those parts which eunuchs lack but ordinary little boys possess. Then he gave what to Trinket sounded very much like a sigh of relief.

'Good,' he said with a little smile. 'If you haven't been mutilated and you aren't a eunuch, this suggests a way out of a difficulty that has been bothering me for some time.'

He tapped the table lightly with his left hand and continued speaking, apparently to himself.

'Yes, of course. This is obviously the solution. It gives Brother Yin a successor and the Green Wood Lodge a Master.'

Trinket didn't understand what he was talking about, but he could tell from his pleased expression that some great weight had been lifted from his mind and couldn't help feeling pleased on his behalf.

The Helmsman walked to and fro in the room, his hands clasped behind him, muttering to himself.

'Everything this Society has ever done has been unprecedented. All innovation lies ultimately in the hands of the individual. We must be bold enough to ignore the censures of the vulgar and the loud outcries of those to whom every novelty is shocking.'

To Trinket this book-language of the Helmsman's was even more incomprehensible than what he had said before.

'Look,' said the Helmsman to Trinket, 'there are only two of us here now, so you've no need to feel embarrassed. Never mind whether what Hai Dafu taught you was the real thing or not; just give me a demonstration of what it was.'

Trinket now realized that it was to spare him the embarrass-

ment of making a fool of himself in front of the others that he had sent them out of the room. There seemed to be nothing for it but

to comply

'Well, it's what the Old Devil taught me, ' he said, 'so it's not my fault how bad it is. If it looks really ridiculous, you must put the blame on him.'

The Helmsman gave his little smile.

'Don't worry about that; just get on with it, '

So Trinket struck up an attitude and began to go through the motions of the Merciful Guanyin repertoire—the rather limited parts of it, that is, that the old eunuch had taught him. He had already forgotten some bits of it, but could remember enough to put on some sort of performance. The Helmsman watched him with fixed attention and nodded when he had finished.

'From what you've just been doing, ' he said, 'it looks as though you may have been taught a little bit of the Shaolin School of Catch-Can. Am I right?'

The Greater Catch-Can is what Trinket had learned first, before he even started on the Merciful Guanyin method of self-defence. He knew he must be even worse at Catch-Can than at the Merciful Guanyin stuff and had been hoping to conceal his inadequacy by keeping quiet about it; but there was no concealing anything from the Helmsman, who appeared to know everything: there was nothing for it but to go on making a fool of himself.

'Yes, ' he said. 'The Old Devil taught me a bit of Catch-Can to use in my wrestling-bouts with the Emperor.'

And he proceeded to demonstrate as much as he could remember of the Greater Catch-Can.

Once again the Helmsman gave his little smile.

'Not bad!'

'I knew all along it would only make you laugh, ' said Trinket.

'I wasn't laughing at you, ' said the Helmsman. 'I was smiling because I was pleased to see that your memory and comprehension are so good. That White Pony Kick you couldn't quite bring off I think Hai Dafu must have deliberately taught you incorrectly; but instead of letting it fluster you, you used your own imagination and initiative to develop it into a Carp-Fin Flick. I thought that was very good.'

Trinket guessed that the Helmsman was a far greater Master of the Martial Arts than the Old Devil had been and the thought suddenly struck him how wonderful it would be if the Helmsman

were willing to take him on as a disciple, to be his teacher, his Shifu. Then, surely, he could become a real hero, not the fake one he was at present. He glanced shyly in the Helmsman's direction and found that cold, electric gaze directed at him. Trinket was a shameless young blackguard and could look even the formidable Empress Dowager in the eye without blenching; but the Helmsman was somehow different. In the Helmsman's presence he had become suddenly terrified of misbehaving and as soon as their eyes met had quickly to avert his own.

'Do you know what the Triad Society is for?' the Helmsman asked him, speaking very slowly and deliberately.

'The Triad Society wants to drive out the Qing and restore the Ming,' said Trinket. 'It's for helping the Chinese and killing Tartars.'

The Helmsman nodded.

'Exactly. Would you like to join the Triad Society and become a Brother?'

That would be terrific,' said Trinket delightedly. In his mind every member of the Triad Society was a hero. It had not occurred to him that he might ever become one himself. But then he reflected that Whiskers wasn't a member, and it was absurd to imagine that he could be better-qualified than Whiskers; so he said, 'I'm afraid . . . I'm afraid I'm not good enough.' His eyes, which for a moment had been shining, were now full of disappointment. It was too much to hope that the Helmsman's offer had been serious. He must have been joking.

'If you want to be a member you can,' said the Helmsman, 'only you must remember that this is a very important business we are engaged in. We have to put our country first, even before our lives. Then again, the rules are very strict and the penalties for breaking them very heavy. You need to think carefully before you decide.'

'I don't need to think,' said Trinket. 'Whatever your rules are, I'll keep them. If you'll let me join, Helmsman, I'll be the happiest boy in the world.'

The Helmsman's smile gave way to a more grave expression.

'This is an extremely serious business, involving matters of life and death.

We're not talking about children's games.'

'I know that,' said Trinket. 'I've heard lots about the Triad Society. It fights for Honour and Justice. It does all sorts of amazing things. Of course it isn't a children's game.'

The Helmsman smiled.

'Well, as long as you know. There are thirty-six rules that everyone joining the Society must swear to follow. The rules include ten absolute prohibitions, each with a very severe punishment laid down for anyone who breaks it.'

His face became grave again.

'Some of the rules don't apply in your case yet, because you're too young; but there's one of them against dishonesty. It says, "Every Brother must be honest in all his dealings. He must not lie or cheat." Do you think you are capable of keeping that rule?'

Trinket was slightly taken aback.

'I'd never tell you a lie, Helmsman,' he said, 'but with the other Brothers, would I have to tell them the truth—all the time?'

'Perhaps not in minor matters,' said the Helmsman, 'but in important ones, yes.'

'Well that's all right,' said Trinket. 'What about gambling? If I'm gambling with other members of the Society, am I allowed to cheat a bit?'

The Helmsman was unprepared for a question of this nature.

'Gambling is not a good thing,' he said with the faintest of smiles, 'but there is nothing in the rules which forbids it. Of course, if you cheated them and they found out, they would probably beat you up, and there's no rule against that either: so you'd probably be well advised not to try.'

'They wouldn't find out,' said Trinket, grinning. 'Actually, though, I don't need to cheat. When I gamble, nine times out of ten I win anyway'

Since most members of the Society came from a travelling background in which gambling and drunken brawling were accepted as normal behaviour, the Helmsman was inclined to turn a blind eye on these matters. He looked at Trinket intently for some moments as if trying to make his mind up about

something.

'Would you like to be my apprentice?'

What happiness! Trinket fell at once to his knees and began kowtowing.

'Shifu!1

This time the Helmsman made no effort to raise him up, but let him knock his head a dozen or more times on the floor before he stopped him.

'All right, that's enough.'

Trinket got up again, smiling delightedly.

'Now that I have become your Shifu, you had better know my real name,' said the Helmsman, 'but you are not to tell anyone. My surname is Chen. I expect you know that already. But Chen Jinnan is only the name I am known by on River and Lake. It is not my real name. My real name is Chen Yonghua.'

'I'll remember that,' said Trinket. 'And I promise not to tell anyone.'

The Helmsman contemplated his new disciple for some moments in silence.

'Now that we are Shifu and apprentice, ' he said gravely 'we have to be completely open with each other. I don't mind telling you that I find you both glib-tongued and sly. Your nature is a very different one from my own, and I must admit that I am not at all happy about this. In taking you on as my apprentice, it's more the interests of the Society than anything else that I have in mind.'

'From now on I'll do my best to change,' said Trinket.

'It's easier for the earth to leave its moorings than for a man to change his nature,' said the Helmsman. 'You won't be able to change very much. On the other hand you're still young and comparatively unformed; and so far you don't seem to have done anything particularly bad. In future you'll just have to keep reminding yourself all the time to do as I tell you. I believe in being very strict with my apprentices, so if I find that you have been breaking the Society's rules or plotting mischief or doing anything really bad, I shall kill you without mercy. And remember: I can kill you any time, as easily as breaking an egg.'

As if to demonstrate, he tapped the table with his left hand and then seized the corner of it in his grasp. There was a crunching sound as it broke off. Then he

took the broken-off piece between his palms and rubbed it until it fell in a shower of tiny slivers on the floor. Trinket stuck his tongue out in amazement and it was some time before he could put it back in again. Yet his overriding feeling was not of amazement but of happiness that he had got this heroic strong man for his teacher.

'I promise you I won't ever do anything bad,' he said. 'I wouldn't want my Shifu to crunch my head up! And besides, if I did do a few bad things, and you did crunch me up, with me gone, who'd there be to pass on your secrets!'

'Not "a few bad things"!' said the Helmsman. 'One! Just one bad thing, and I shall no longer consider you my apprentice.'

'What about two bad things?' said Trinket.

The Helmsman's face looked stern.

'You're being flippant. When I say one bad thing I mean one. Do you think this is something you can haggle about?'

'No, sir,' said Trinket; but a rebellious little voice inside him was saying, 'What about half a bad thing?'

'You are my fourth apprentice,' said the Helmsman, 'and probably you will be my last. The Triad Society keeps me so busy that I don't have much time for apprentices. Of your three Brother-apprentices, two died fighting against the Tartars and the third was killed in Marshal Zheng's campaign to retake Taiwan. All three were brave young men who gave their lives for their country. Apart from that I have my own reputation to keep up and I don't want you disgracing me.'

'No, sir,' said Trinket. 'But. . . but—' 'But what?' said the Helmsman.

'Sometimes things that might disgrace you seem to happen to me when I can't help it,' said Trinket. 'Like being captured by someone bigger and stronger than me and shut up in a barrel of dates and pushed around like goods to market. You mustn't blame me for things like that.'

The Helmsman found he didn't quite know whether to be angry or amused. Finally he gave a sigh.

'I'm beginning to think that taking you on as my apprentice may prove to be the biggest mistake of my life. There's so much that hangs on this though, I just have to take the chance. Now listen, Trinket. There's going to be some

important business presently. Just keep quiet, do everything I tell you, and don't talk a lot of nonsense, and you'll be all right. Is that understood?' 'Yes, sir,' said Trinket.

Observing that Trinket appeared to be hesitating, the Helmsman asked him if there was something else he wanted to say.

'It's only that what I say always does seem sensible to me, ' said Trinket. 'I never mean to talk nonsense. So when you tell me I'm talking nonsense, it seems unfair.'

'In that case the best thing is not to talk at all,' said the Helmsman. But what he thought was, 'How many men of valour and reputation have I seen behaving like submissive flunkies and hardly daring to breathe in my presence, yet this two-faced, shifty little urchin can stand here and give me all this lip!' He got up and strode towards the door. 'Come on,' he said. 'Follow me.'

Trinket rushed to open it for him and held up the door-curtain for him to go through. Then he followed him to the hall.

The Initiation of Trinket

As the Helmsman entered, the score or so of men who had been seated along either side of the room rose respectfully to their feet. The Helmsman gave a nod, strode towards the three seats of honour at the top end of the hall and sat down in the left-hand one, leaving the principal seat and the right-hand one empty. Trinket felt sure that his Shifu was the most important person present and couldn't understand why he hadn't sat down in the centre chair.

'Brothers,' said the Helmsman, 'today I have decided to take on an apprentice.' He pointed to Trinket. 'Here he is.'

The men got up and crowded forward to congratulate the Helmsman, bowing and pumping their hands. Then, one by one, they congratulated Trinket. Some of them, as they did so, looked genuinely pleased, some looked surprised, a few looked frankly incredulous.

The Helmsman now told Trinket to greet his new 'uncles' and Trinket had to go up to each of them in turn and kowtow. Brother Li stood beside him as he did so and introduced each of them by name.

'This is Cai Dezhong, the Master of the Lotus Flower Lodge.'

'Uncle Cai,' said Trinket, kowtowing.

'This is Fang Dahong, the Master of the Obedience Lodge.'

'Uncle Fang.'

'This is Ma Chaoxing, the Master of the Clan Lodge.'

'Uncle Ma.'

Altogether there were nine Masters. After he had kowtowed to all of them, he had to kowtow to those next in rank to the Masters—the seconds-in-command. While he had been kowtowing to the Masters, he noticed that they only bowed in return, saying, as they did so, 'No, no, please get up!', but those of lower rank would not let him kowtow at all. As soon as he began to kneel, they put their hands out to stop him. Once or twice he was too quick for them and was on his knees before they could prevent him. In those cases they were obliged to kneel down themselves and return his kowtow.

'Brothers,' said the Helmsman when Trinket had finished his

bowings and kowtowings, 'now that this boy is my apprentice, I should like him to become a member of the Society.'

The Brothers unanimously proclaimed themselves delighted

with the idea.

Cai Dezhong, the Master of the Lotus Flower Lodge, an old man with white hair and a white beard, pronounced the sort of auspicious words that custom decrees on these occasions:

They always say that famous teachers have famous pupils, so we can be sure that any apprentice of our Helmsman is going to be a remarkable young fellow. This young man is bound to have lots of courage and lots and lots of brains and I've no doubt at all that our Society can expect great things from him in the

future.'

Ma Chaoxing, the Master of the Clan Lodge, was short, fat,

and jolly.

Today is our first meeting,' he said, 'but unfortunately I haven't got a First Meeting present to give him. Well, as you know, I've always been a great one

for economy, so what I propose is that Lodge Master Cai and I should be his sponsors and he should look on our sponsorship as our present. What do you think of the idea, Brother Cai?

Cai Dezhong seemed greatly amused by this. 'Old Ma always knows how to save the pennies,' he said, laughing. 'Yes, I'm certainly willing to go halves in this economical First Meeting present.'

The others present joined in the mirth; but while they were laughing, the Helmsman pointed out to Trinket that these two very senior persons were in fact doing him a great honour in offering to act as his sponsors.

'You'd better quickly show them your appreciation,' he said. So Trinket did some more kowtowing. 'According to the rules of the Society,' said the Helmsman, addressing the two sponsors, 'the conduct of any new entrant is very much the sponsors' concern. This young apprentice of mine is a very sharp lad—in fact, a bit too sharp at times. I'm afraid there may be times when he's liable to go a little too far and misbehave himself. I am looking to you, as his sponsors, to relieve me of some of the responsibility of keeping him out of mischief. If you should ever see him misbehaving, do, I beg you, discipline him straight away.'

'I haven't done anything wrong yet,' thought Trinket, 'so why

does he keep going on about me misbehaving? I know. It's because of what I told him about playing that trick on the Old Devil. He's afraid I might feel tempted to do something like that to him. But that's silly. The Old Devil was trying to kill me. And in any case, he wasn't my Shifu. And he didn't teach me properly either. Whereas you are my real Shifu and you are going to teach me the real thing. But now that you've said all this stuff about me and got all these people keeping an eye on me, I shan't be able to move without getting jumped on.'

While he was in the midst of these reflections, he heard the Helmsman asking Brother Li to prepare the Induction ceremony—the ceremony in which he would be initiated into full membership. Brother Li went off to make the arrangements.

'According to a rule we've always followed in the past,' said the Helmsman, 'a novice who has been presented to the Society by his sponsors has to undergo a probationary period of anything from six months to one or two years, and we don't hold the Induction ceremony until we are fully satisfied that there is nothing in his personality or past history which might disqualify him from becoming a full member. In Trinket's case though, because he is employed in

the Qing Palace and holds a position of trust there which brings him into close contact with the young Emperor, I think we have to make an exception. This is a matter of expediency, you understand. I'm not asking for an exception to be made simply on the grounds that he is my apprentice.'

The assembled leaders all indicated their approval and assured him that they understood. The Master of the Obedience Lodge, a giant of a man with a long, glossy black beard, was particularly emphatic.

'A chance like this, to have a young Brother we can trust working at the young Tartar Emperor's side,' he said in his powerful voice, 'it must be a sign that Heaven is on our side and that the Tartars' luck is running out. That means there's a real hope now of winning our country back for the Ming. They say if you know yourself and know your enemy you can win every battle: well, from now on we shall certainly know our enemy. I'm sure everyone here can understand what the Helmsman has in mind.'

••' 'I see,' Trinket said to himself. 'So that's why I'm being treated SO'well. You want me to spy on the Emperor for you. I'm not sure I want to do that.'

When he remembered how well Kang Xi had always treated

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him, he couldn't help having serious doubts about the whole business.

Cai Dezhong now undertook to tell Trinket something about the history and traditions of the Society. The founder of the Society, he explained, was Marshal Zheng, whom the foreigners called Coxinga. (Trinket had already heard about Coxinga from Whiskers. It was only a few years since his death, and his reputation was still strong throughout the southern regions of China.) Some twenty or so years earlier Coxinga had led a patriot army South of the River to besiege Nanking, but in a heroic struggle, after coming within an ace of victory, he had been defeated and forced to fall back on Taiwan. He had founded the Society before leaving for Taiwan, adopting a plan presented to him by his military adviser Chen Jinnan, or the Helmsman as they now called him. Cai himself, the other Masters (including Brother Yin, the late Master of the Green Wood Lodge), and most of the senior members of the Society like Brother Li had been officers in the Marshal's Grand Army.

Of the large number of soldiers of the Grand Army left behind on the mainland, only a fraction made their way down to Xiamen. The Helmsman had the Marshal's orders to contact these old soldiers of the Grand Army and recruit them into the Society. Anyone who had been in the Grand Army could become

a member automatically. Anyone else wishing to join had to be first introduced by sponsors and then undergo a period of probation during which he was carefully investigated. This was a precaution against letting in Government spies.

The old man paused for a moment; then suddenly his face lit up and he continued more animatedly:

'I remember when the Grand Army set sail from Taiwan, a hundred and seventy thousand of them. Magnificent! Fifty thousand marines, fifty thousand cavalry, fifty thousand infantry, ten thousand light support troops, and ten thousand "Ironclads". The Ironclads were completely covered from head to foot in plate armour. Not a blade or an arrow could touch them. They carried very long halberds designed for cutting the legs of the Tartars' horses. At Zhenjiang, in the battle of the Yang Peng Mountain, the Helmsman led a force of only two thousand against an army of eighteen thousand Tartars and completely smashed them. That was a sight! Awe-inspiring! Our men had murder in their eyes. I was in charge of the Eighth Brigade then under the Helmsman's command.

When we charged, we could hear the Tartars shouting to each other, "Maloo, malool Cheehoo, cheehooY"

Trinket was beginning to quite enjoy his indoctrination. 'What does that mean?' he asked.

'Maloo is the Tartar word for "mother", ' said old Cai. 'Cheehoo

means run.

At this point everyone started laughing.

'When Brother Cai gets going on the Zhenjiang campaign and how they killed the Tartars,' said Ma Chaoxing, laughing with the rest, 'there's no holding him back. He'll go on for three days and three nights without stopping if you give him the chance. Come on, old Cai, if this is your idea of what a sponsor ought to say about our traditions, the boy 11 have a beard as long as your own before you've finished instructing him!'

He stopped rather abruptly and darted a nervous look at Trinket, having just remembered that Trinket was a eunuch (or so he thought) and could never grow a beard. He was relieved to see that Trinket appeared unconcerned.

Brother Li now came in again and announced that everything was ready for the

ceremony. The Helmsman led them all into a second hall farther back in the building. There was an altar-like table at one end of it on which were two spirit tablets, the central one representing the Ming Emperor, the one beside it representing the Founder, Marshal Zheng, who had died two years previously. In front of the tablets were four plates of offerings: a pig's head on one, a sheep's head on the second, a cock on the third, and a fish on the fourth. In the middle of the table there was a burner in which were stuck seven burning sticks of incense. Everyone knelt down facing the altar, and when they had kowtowed to the tablets, Cai Dezhong picked up a sheet of paper from it and read out the Induction oath in a loud, clear voice.

Apart from what it said about the Great Ming being the rightful rulers and expelling the foreign foe, there wasn't a great deal in it that Trinket could understand. It seemed that they all belonged to a family called 'Hong' in which Heaven was their father, Earth was their mother, the sun was their brother, and the moon was their sister. Apart from the surname 'Hong', each of them, on entering the Society, acquired the secret name 'Jinlan' — meaning Golden Orchid. ('What's the good of a name,' thought Trinket, 'if everyone's got the same one?'). They kowtowed when old Cai read out the words 'Heaven my father' and 'Earth my mother' and once

more for someone called 'Dragon Brother' whom Trinket had heard mentioned a couple of times the day before. They were all supposed to have been born on the same day. Old Cai even read out the date. (Trinket knew this didn't make sense, but decided he'd better not ask about it.) They prayed 'in the words of the oath made in the Peach Tree Garden' that they might all be on the same day. And there was more besides.

When he had finished reading the oath, Cai Dezhong asked Trinket if he understood the bit about the Peach Tree Garden. Trinket knew about this from the stories in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, all of which he had heard many times over at storytellers' sessions in Yangzhou.

'It was the oath taken by the three heroes Liu, Guan, and Zhang when they became blood-brothers,' he said. 'Though they hadn't all been born on the same day, they prayed that they might all die on the same day, so that they could say they had lived and died together.'

'That's right,' said old Cai. 'When you enter the Triad Society, you become one of the Brothers. We're all Brothers. The Helmsman's a Brother too, just like the rest of us. A Shifu is like a father, so when you became the Helmsman's apprentice, we all became your uncles. That's why you had to kowtow to us. But from now on we're your Brothers, so you won't have to kowtow to us any more.'

'Right,' said Trinket. ('And a good job too,' he thought.)

Old Cai then explained that Dragon Brother was what they called Marshal Zheng, their Founder. This was a secret he must never, never tell anyone, not even his friend Mao Eighteen. This was because the political connections of the Society must at all costs be concealed from their enemies. Trinket took advantage of this reference to Mao Eighteen to say how much Whiskers longed to become a Triad and to ask what chance there was of his being made a member. Cai Dezhong said that, after a suitable interval, Trinket would be able to sponsor Mao Eighteen himself and, provided that those appointed by the Society to investigate him found no impediment, he would of course be welcome to join.

After explaining a few more puzzling bits of the oath, old Cai got on to the thirty-six rules and the various prohibitions and penalties. For offences like lying, revealing secrets, betraying friends, surrendering to Government forces, embezzling the Society's funds, or oppressing the widow and the orphan the penalties ranged from

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flogging and cutting an ear off to beheading and dividing the body into eight pieces.

Trinket swore to abide by all these rules, and it has to be said that at the actual moment of swearing he sincerely intended to do

so.

Ma Chaoxing fetched a large bowlful of wine, pricked the middle finger of his left hand with a large needle, and let some drops of blood from it fall into the wine. The Helmsman did the same after him and then all the others followed suit until finally it was Trinket's turn to prick his finger and add a few drops to the mixture. Then, when they had all drunk from the bowl, the ceremony was over. The Brothers all clustered round Trinket, clasping his hands and embracing him in affectionate congratulation. A wonderfully warm sensation seemed to envelop his body and he began to feel that, with all these loving Brothers to support him, he would never be alone in the world again.

Master of the Green Wood Lodge

The Helmsman began telling Trinket about the Society's structure.

The Triad Society is organized in ten Lodges. We call them the Five Forward

Lodges and the Five Rear Lodges. Lotus Flower, Obedience, Clan, Unity, and Transformation are the names of the Five Forward Lodges. Green Wood, Red Fire, White Metal, Black Water, and Yellow Earth are the names of the Five Rear Lodges. Apart from the Green Wood Lodge, each of the ten Lodges has a Master. The Master of the Green Wood Lodge, Brother Yin, was killed by Oboi two years ago and since then the Lodge has been without one. Some time ago the Brothers of the Green Wood Lodge swore an oath in front of the spirit tablets of Dragon Brother and Brother Yin that whoever could avenge Brother Yin's murder by killing Oboi should become Master of the Lodge and would be recognized as such by all the Brothers.'

He looked round at the assembled men. 'Is that correct?'

Unanimously they confirmed that such an oath had indeed been taken.

The Helmsman's piercing glance swept in an arc from left to right of the hall, resting momentarily on each of their faces. He continued, weighing each word carefully as he spoke.

'I understand that there has been a certain amount of dis-

agreement among our good Brothers of the Green Wood Lodge about who should be their next Master. Although they are much too sensible and have too much respect for the common good of the Society to allow real ill-feeling to develop as a consequence of this disagreement, unless it can be satisfactorily resolved, it will continue to be a hidden source of unease. The Green Wood Lodge is one of the Society's most important Lodges. Its original sphere of operations was North and South of the River, but during the last year or two this has extended to include Shandong and Hebei, and in this last successful raid it has struck at a target inside the Capital itself. Whether or not the Green Wood Lodge gets the right person for their new Master has a bearing on the future well-being of our Society and the success or failure of its great mission. If the Brothers of the Green Wood Lodge cannot agree and cannot work together, that great mission cannot be fulfilled.'

The Helmsman paused for a moment.

The person who killed Oboi was Trinket Wei,' he said. 'Our Brothers of the Green Wood Lodge actually saw him do it. Is that

correct?'

'It is,' Brother Li and Big Beaver replied in unison. The oath we all swore in front of the spirit tablets of Dragon Brother and Brother Yin cannot be set

aside,' Brother Li added. 'If we are going to treat a solemn oath like that as if it meant no more than a dog's fart (excuse my bluntness), what would be the value of any promises we made in the future? Although Brother Wei is only a boy, I am willing to give him my support as Master of the Green Wood Lodge.'

Big Beaver saw that he had allowed Brother Li to steal a march on him and wondered what he ought to say himself.

This boy is the Helmsman's own apprentice,' he reflected. 'He's no ordinary boy, that's clear. And from the way the Helmsman's been speaking, it's pretty obvious that he wants his new apprentice to be Master. As long as Old Li was in the running for the Mastership, there was never any likelihood of one of us giving in to the other, so I suppose we might just as well both of us give up the fight. And since Li's already made up his mind to pull out— and put himself in the Helmsman's good graces by speaking up first—it'll look pretty bad if I don't do the same.'

'Brother Li is absolutely right,' he said, having now made his mind up. 'Brother Wei is an exceptionally bright young fellow, and by the time the Helmsman has finished training him, I'm sure he'll

turn out to be a true hero of River and Lake. Yes, definitely. He has my support too, as Master of the Green Wood Lodge.'

Trinket was in a panic.

'No! No!' he shouted, gesturing wildly with both hands. 'I can't do it. I don't want to be a blinking Master.'

The Helmsman stared at him angrily.

'Don't talk nonsense, boy!' he shouted.

Trinket fell silent.

This boy killed Oboi with his own hands,' said the Helmsman. 'That is an unalterable fact. The only reason we're making him Master of the Green Wood Lodge is because we can't set aside the oath that was made in front of Dragon Brother's spirit tablet. But we shall have fulfilled the promise made in that oath even if he's only Master for a day. If the day after becoming Master he starts playing up, upsetting the Lodge's routines or hindering the Society in its mission, we shall have no compunction whatever about calling an assembly and getting rid of him. I've already asked Brother Li and Brother Guan if they will do their best to help him. If the boy should prove unreliable in any way, I

must beg them to report the facts to me immediately, without concealment.'

Brother Li and Big Beaver bowed their assent to his request. The Helmsman turned from them towards the altar and knelt down in front of the spirit tablets; then, taking three of the burning joss-sticks from the incense-burner and raising them in both hands, in a loud, clear voice that all could hear, he delivered himself of the following oath:

'I, Chen Jinnan, solemnly swear before the spirit tablet of Dragon Brother that if my apprentice Trinket Wei should transgress the rules of the Society or in other ways prove unworthy, I will immediately, without prejudice or partiality, dismiss him from the position of Master of the Green Wood Lodge. Even as it is in fulfilment of an oath that we now appoint him, so it will be in fulfilment of this oath I now swear that we shall dismiss him. And if I should fail so to do, may the spirit of Dragon Brother looking down from Heaven cause my body to be struck by lightning or torn in pieces by horses or trampled under the feet of the Tartars.'

Having finished his oath, he lifted up the joss-sticks, bowed his head several times, replaced them in the incense-burner, then knelt down again and kowtowed. The others present expressed their satisfaction and praised the Helmsman for his fairness and

impartiality. All, that is, except Trinket, who took a very different view of the proceedings.

That's just great, isn't it!' he thought. 'Here's me thinking you really wanted me to be the Master, and all along all you wanted was a plank to get you across me stream. Once you're over, you can throw away the plank. Thank you, plank, we don't need you any more.' Today you make me a Master so you don't have to break your oath. Tomorrow you pick on some little fault and get rid of me. Fine. You haven't broken your oath. After that, whether it's Brother Li or Big Beaver for Master, you haven't broken any rules and everything's hunky-dory.'

'Shifu,' he shouted, 'I'm not doing it!' 'What?' said the Helmsman, aghast. 'I can't do it,' said Trinket, 'and I don't want to do it.' 'If you can't do it,' said the Helmsman, 'you can learn. It's just a question of time. You've got me to teach you, and Brother Li and Brother Guan have promised to help you. But why don't you want to? Being a Master is the highest you can get to in the Society.' Trinket shook his head.

'If I take it on today, you'll be throwing me out tomorrow. That means shaming me in front of all the others. Why should I let myself in for that? If I don't take it on, I can get by somehow or other the way I am. But once I've taken it on,

everyone'll be looking for bones in the egg; then, in no time at all, it'll be goodbye egg and so long Trinket.'

There aren't any bones in an egg,' said the Helmsman. 'How can anyone find any if there aren't any there?'

'Eggs turn into chicks, and they have bones,' said Trinket.

'Even if there aren't any bones yet, if people are trying to find some, they'll be breaking the eggshell to have a look, and where will I be then, with my yolk and white all mixed up together on the floor?'

This raised a laugh from the assembled men.

'Do you think the Triad Society is a children's game?' said the Helmsman. 'As long as you don't do anything bad, you'll be respected by everybody as Master of the Lodge. No one is going to find fault with you. Even if they don't respect you for your own sake, they will respect you because you are my apprentice.'

'All right,' said Trinket after a moment or two of reflection. 'Only let's make one thing clear from the start. If at some time in the future you don't want me to be Master, I'll just stop being Master, and that'll be the end of it. I don't want anyone pinning

charges on me so that they can beat me and curse me or cut my ears off or chop my head off or cut me up into eight pieces or any of that stuff.'

The Helmsman frowned.

'Why do you always want to make bargains about everything? Provided you don't do anything you shouldn't, nobody is going to beat you or kill you. And if the Tartars beat you or kill you, all of us here will make it our duty to avenge you.'

He paused for a moment, then speaking very earnestly he said:

'Look, Trinket. A man of honour is someone who is prepared to take risks,

someone with the courage not to flinch from doing what is right. Now that you are a member of the Triad Society, you are supposed to be foremost in the fight to deliver our people from their sufferings, not always selfishly calculating how to save your own skin. That's no way to be a hero.'

Hero. The word made Trinket think of those paragons he had so often heard about in storytelling sessions in Yangzhou. It rekindled a secret ambition to become like one of them himself.

'You're right, Shifu,' he said. Thank you for reminding me. The worst that can happen is beheading, and that's only a neck-sized wound, isn't it? Eighteen years from now, look out for a brave young man!'

This last was hardly a suitable thing to say under the circumstances, since it was the kind of thing that condemned bandits shouted on their way to execution, hoping to be born again; nevertheless it earned him a round of applause from the men.

The Helmsman smiled a trifle wryly.

'Becoming a Master is something to be cheerful about. You're not about to be beheaded,' he said. 'Look at the other nine Masters: they all seem to be happy enough. You should try to be like them.'

Big Beaver stepped up to Trinket, clasped his hands ceremoniously and bowed.

'Guan Anji, presenting his respects, Master.' Trinket turned helplessly to the Helmsman. 'What am I supposed to do?' 'Greet him back,' said the Helmsman. Trinket clasped his hands and bowed. Thank you, Big Beaver. How do you do?' The Helmsman smiled.

'Big Beaver is his nickname for everyday use. You must call him Brother Guan if you want to be polite.'

Thank you, Brother Guan,' said Trinket. 'How do you do?' This time Big Beaver had stolen a march on Brother Li, who hastened to follow his example. He was followed in turn by each of the Masters, after which most of those present returned to the main hall, leaving only Trinket and the other nine Masters to discuss Society matters with the Helmsman.

The High Council

As first of the Five Rear Lodges, Green Wood Lodge ranked sixth among the ten Lodges of the Society. Trinket's place was therefore at the head of the row

of five Masters who sat along the right-hand side of the hall. This meant that he took precedence over the Master of the Red Fire Lodge, a venerable gentleman with white hair and a long white beard who sat on the seat next to him. Brother Li and Big Beaver had, of course, left the room. This was the Triad Society's innermost council: just the Helmsman and the ten Masters.

The Helmsman was seated on the left-hand of the three chairs placed along the end of the hall at the opposite end to the altar and at right-angles to the two facing rows of chairs on which the Masters sat. He pointed to the central chair next to him.

This is the Third Prince's place,' he said. The Third Prince is the rightful heir to the Ming Imperial throne.'

Then he pointed to the one beyond it, nearest the seat on which Trinket was sitting.

This is where Prince Zheng would sit if he were present. Prince Zheng spends most of his time in Taiwan. He is Marshal Zheng's son. We call him Prince Zheng because the Ming Emperor made his father the Marshal Prince of Yanping and he inherited the title on his father's death. Whenever we hold a council, we always leave spare seats for the Third Prince and Prince Zheng, even if they aren't present.'

After these preliminary words of explanation, spoken solely for Trinket's benefit, the Helmsman formally opened the meeting.

'Now, Brothers, let us have the reports from the different provinces.'

The Triad Society had divided the whole country into ten

spheres of activity each assigned to one of the ten Lodges, as follows:

1

2

3

4 5

The Five Forward Lodges and their Provinces

Lotus Flower Lodge: Fujian Obedience Lodge: Guangdong Clan Lodge:

Guangxi Unity Lodge: Hunan & Hubei Transformation Lodge: Zhejiang

The Five Rear Lodges and their Provinces

6 Green Wood Lodge: Jiangsu

7 Red Fire Lodge: Guizhou

8 White Metal Lodge: Sichuan

9 Black Water Lodge: Yunnan

10 Yellow Earth Lodge: Henan & Central Provinces

When the Triad Society was founded by Marshal Zheng, the largest concentration of ex-Grand Army soldiers (who made up the original membership) was in Fujian. This was why the Lotus Flower Lodge was the senior and, in terms of manpower, the largest of the ten Lodges. After Fujian, the provinces most strongly represented by Triad Society membership were, in order of strength, the two Guangs, the two Hus, and, on about equal footing, Zhejiang and Jiangsu. These were the Five Forward Lodges.

Cai Dezhong, Master of the most senior Lodge, now began his report on Triad activities in Fujian. Trinket listened for a while, but, finding he could understand little of what was said and that what little he could understand was totally lacking in interest, he soon gave up listening and occupied his mind with thoughts of gambling and related matters. When it came to his turn to speak, the Helmsman did the speaking for him.

'Green Wood Lodge's original sphere of operations was South of the River,' said the Helmsman, 'and most of their fighting was done in the Nanking-Suzhou area. Later, though, when Brother Yin moved his headquarters to Xuzhou, North of the River, their sphere of operations was gradually extended to include Shandong, then the Metropolitan Area, then finally the Capital itself. After that long run of successes, his tragic death at the hands of Oboi came as a very serious set-back.'

He paused for a moment before continuing.

'Yesterday in the course of the Green Wood Brothers' very

courageous attack on the residence of Prince Kang, young Trinket here, by a sort of lucky coincidence, avenged the death of Brother Yin by stabbing Oboi to death. Following this tremendous achievement by the Lodge, the Tartars will

no doubt be in a state of panic. That is good news; but it also means, of course, that they are now going to be doubly on their guard. And that means that we, too, will from now on have to be doubly careful.' The Masters murmured their agreement. The Master of the Red Fire Lodge was the next to report and after him the Master of the White Metal Lodge, the first for Guizhou Province, the second for Sichuan. Trinket could feel an irrepressible yawn coming and hastily covered his lower face with his hand. When it came to the turn of Lin Yongchao, the Master of the Black Water Lodge, to talk about Triad affairs in Yunnan, however, things began to liven up a little. Lin Yongchao was a very excitable man and used a lot of bad language. Trinket began listening quite attentively to what he was saying.

'Everywhere we find ourselves up against that filthy traitor Wu Sangui,' he was saying. 'During this past ten months alone no less than seventy-nine—seventy-nine—of our Brothers have lost their lives, thanks to that stinking turtle's-egg. There's no sharing the same sky with the murderous bastard. Unfortunately, though we've already made three attempts to knife him, the bugger is so well guarded that each of them has been a failure.'

He pointed to his withered arm and forearm that hung like a talisman from his shoulder.

'Look at this, dammit! I lost this in last month's attempt! There's no end to the harm done by that treacherous bastard. Sooner or later our Society is going to have to turn him and his family into mincemeat.'

The mention of Wu Sangui provoked a surge of anger in the breasts of all those present. Back in Yangzhou Trinket had long since heard about him—how he had let the Qing army inside the Great Wall and allowed them to take over China. When the Tartars were raping and burning and massacring in Yangzhou, he was the one, they said, more responsible than anyone else for the atrocities. And this man, having helped the Manchus to conquer China, had now, as a reward for his treachery, been given the governorship of Yunnan Province with the grandiose title of 'Satrap of the West'. Trinket had noticed in the past that when anyone mentioned the name 'Wu Sangui' it was through clenched teeth and with the most

vehement expressions of hatred and revulsion. He was therefore not surprised to hear Lodge Master Lin using such intemperate language in his report.

Once Lin Yongchao had started, the other eight Masters all began swearing and cursing as well. Being all of them ex-soldiers who had, moreover, spent the last few years of their lives on River and Lake, they were accustomed to using bad language. Normally it was only in the Helmsman's presence that they made a

conscious effort to suppress it. But now that the ice had been broken, their usual inhibitions were forgotten. Hearing bad language all round him, Trinket began to feel quite cheerful. At last he was in his element again and couldn't resist making a few contributions of his own. In fact, when it came to swearing, the nine other Masters were no match for him. The imaginative variety and blistering venom of his invective made theirs seem repetitive and pale by comparison. The Helmsman gestured for silence.

'All right, that's enough! There are millions of other people cursing Wu Sangui besides you, but it doesn't make a blind bit of difference: the wretched fellow is still Satrap of the West. Cursing never killed anyone. In any case, assassination is not the answer.' In the silence that followed, Li Shikai, the Master of the Transformation Lodge, a small, thin, soft-voiced little man, who had contributed least to the outburst of swearing, was the only one who spoke.

'As I see it,' he said, 'even if we were to organize a large-scale raid into Yunnan and succeeded in killing Wu Sangui, the general situation would not be very much improved. The Tartars would simply appoint a Military Governor and a Civil Governor in his place and the people of Yunnan would be just as badly oppressed as they were before. In any case, the evil done by that wicked traitor is so great that assassination would be letting him off too lightly.' The Helmsman nodded approvingly. That's very true. What in your opinion ought to be done?' This is such an important matter that I think it needs a lot more discussion by all of us,' said Li Shikai. 'I haven't myself any useful suggestion to make, but I should very much like to hear what the Helmsman has to say on the subject.'

'Brother Li has just said that an important matter like this needs a lot more discussion by all of us,' said the Helmsman. Those are very wise words. Two heads are better than one' and we are ten heads—no, I'm sorry, eleven. If we all stay calm and give

our minds to it, we are sure to come up with some good ideas. Remember that by killing Wu Sangui we should be avenging not only those of our Brothers whose lives he has taken but all those millions of our fellow-countrymen whom he has betrayed. I have been considering this matter for a long time now. The problem is that Wu Sangui is so firmly entrenched in Yunnan and wields so much power that I don't think even the combined strength of the whole Triad Society would be sufficient to bring him down.'

'We must bring him down,' cried Lin Yongchao excitably. 'Even if it means death by a thousand cuts, it will be worth it.'

'You've had a go already,' said Cai Dezhong drily. The only thing that got

brought down was your arm.'

'Don't mock me,' said Lin Yongchao angrily. Cai Dezhong at once regretted his pleasantry. 'I was only joking, ' he said with a conciliatory smile. 'Don't be angry, Brother.'

The Helmsman could see that Lin Yongchao's ire was unabated and sought emollient words to calm him.

There isn't a brave man alive who doesn't dream of killing Wu Sangui,' he said, 'but why should the burden of so great an undertaking rest on the shoulders of Brother Lin and the Black Water Lodge alone when, as we've already agreed, it's doubtful whether even the combined forces of the whole Society would be enough to shift him?'

That's true,' said Lin Yongchao, mollified. 'As I see it,' said the Helmsman, 'we must look to the whole underworld to help us. We need to make contact with every association, every guild, every kungfu fraternity on River and Lake that might be willing to join with us in planning this great enterprise. Wu Sangui has got tens of thousands of highly-trained troops down there in Yunnan. It's not going to be easy. If it were just a question of killing Wu Sangui and no one else, it might not be all that difficult; but to take out not only Wu Sangui but his family and the whole tribe of villains and traitors who work for him would be well beyond the capacity of the Triad Society alone.'

'It's true,' cried Lin Yongchao, quite convinced now and slapping his thigh to prove it. 'So many of our Brothers have lost their lives because of him, even if we could assassinate him, his life alone couldn't pay for theirs.'

All now set their minds to work to think of some master-plan for eliminating Wu Sangui together with his whole family and all

his evil henchmen; but after sitting for a considerable time in silent cogitation, they found themselves looking at each other helplessly. The same unspoken conclusion was in every mind: 'This is going to be much more difficult than we thought.'

'Among the Martial Arts fraternity the Shaolin people and the Wudang people have got the biggest membership and the highest standards,' said Cai Dezhong. 'I certainly think we ought to contact them.'

Yao Bida, the Master of the Yellow Earth Lodge, was not so sure.

'Father Wisdom, the abbot of the Shaolin Monastery, is the most influential of

the Shaolin High Masters,' he said, 'but he's gone very respectable in his old age and scared of doing anything that might offend the authorities. These last few years, in order to avoid incidents, he's made it a rule that no monk, not even a lay brother, may leave the monastery except on the most urgent business. If we did get in touch with the Shaolin people, I think we'd find ourselves up against a lot of difficulties.'

Hu Dedi, Master of the Unity Lodge which controlled Triad operations in the Hunan and Hubei area, nodded in agreement.

'I think you'd find that much the same sort of thing is true of the Wudang people,' he said. The Taoist Father Snowgoose, who is priest-in-charge of the Wudang Temple, has a long-standing feud with Father Crane. Although the two of them originally trained under the same master, they are constantly plotting against each other and finding fault with each other's pupils and that sort of thing. If you're talking about a dangerous job like taking on Wu Sangui, well. . .'

He didn't finish what he was saying, but from what he had said already it was pretty obvious to everyone present that probably neither Snowgoose nor Crane would be willing to join them.

'If we can't get either the Shaolin or the Wudang lot to join us,' said Lin Yongchao, 'we'll just have to go ahead on our own.' 'Let's not be hasty,' said the Helmsman. 'Shaolin and Wudang aren't the only fraternities that offer training in the Martial Arts.'

A long discussion ensued. Some thought the Emei fraternity might be willing to join them. Some suggested the Beggars Guild on the grounds that quite a few Triads were former members. The Helmsman listened to their discussion for some time before intervening.

'There's only one thing,' he said. 'We must be absolutely certain that they are reliable before we breathe a word to anyone else of what we are up to.'

'Of course,' said Fang Dahong. To come away with egg on your face because you'd told someone about it and then found they didn't want to take part would be bad for the reputation of our

Society.'

'Never mind about our reputation,' said the Helmsman. The secret would be out and Wu Sangui would be warned. That would make things even more difficult for us.'

'For safety's sake,' said Li Shikai, 'I think before any of us approaches any other association about this matter, we ought first to get the nod from the Helmsman to confirm that it's all right for us to do so. None of us should act in this on his own initiative.'

This met with the unanimous approval of those present.

After a little more discussion the Helmsman suggested that as they were obviously not yet in a position to formulate a plan, they should meet again in three months' time at Changsha in Hunan Province.

Trinket,' he said, 'you'd better go back to the Palace now. For the time being the Green Wood Lodge's affairs can be handled by Brother Li and Brother Guan. There'll be no need for you to come to the Changsha meeting.'

'Right,' said Trinket; but he was thinking: Thank you, plank, we don't need you any more!'

Last Words for Master Trinket

When the other Masters had gone, the Helmsman took Trinket by the hand and led him back to the room where he had had his interview.

'In the Bridge of Heaven district of Peking,' he told Trinket when they were alone together, 'there is an old man called Xu who sells medicated plasters. You can tell him apart from the other plaster-sellers because they all have a black plaster displayed on their flags, but the one on his flag is red and green. If you ever want to get in touch with me about anything, go to the Bridge of Heaven and look for this old man. When you've found him, you must say, "Have you got anything for tartar poisoning?" You know, "tartar" as in tartar emetic—the stuff they use in medicine. He'll say, "Yes, but it's very expensive. Three taels of gold and three taels of silver."

Then if you say, "Would you take five taels of gold and five taels of silver for it?" he'll know who you are.' Trinket was intrigued.

That's a funny sort of bargaining—offering five taels when the price is only three,' said Trinket laughing.

'It's a safeguard,' said the Helmsman with his little smile. 'Just in case someone did, by pure coincidence, ask for a cure for tartar poisoning. When he hears you offering five taels of gold and five taels of silver, he'll ask you why you want to pay so much, and you must say, "It's not a lot. I'd do anything at all to get rid of the Tartar poison." Then he'll ask you, "Which Lodge beside the Red

Flower Pavilion?" and you must say, "The Green Wood one." Then he'll ask you, "Who burns the joss-sticks in the Lodge?" and you say, "The Master." The old man is a member of the Green Wood Lodge and under your command. Just tell him whatever it is you want done, and he will do it.'

The Helmsman took Trinket through these questions and responses two or three times so that he could remember them.

'Although this old chap Xu is under your command, ' said the Helmsman, you must be careful not to take any liberties with him. He is a first-rate fighter, '

'I won't, ' said Trinket.

Trinket, ' said the Helmsman, 'the Tartars are sure to have mounted patrols out by now scouring the countryside for a trace of the raiders of Prince Kang's residence. I shan't be able to stay here much longer. When you get back to the Palace today, you can say that you were carried off by the gang who raided the residence but that during the night you managed by some trick or other to kill the man who was guarding you and escape. If they send you out with troops to try and find where you were taken to, you can lead them here. We shall bury Oboi's body and his head in the vegetable garden behind this grange. You can get the soldiers to dig them up. That should prevent them being suspicious.'

'What about the others?' said Trinket. They won't still be here, will they?

They'll be off shortly after you've gone, ' said the Helmsman. 'Don't worry about them. In three days' time I'll be coming to Peking myself to begin your training. Go to Sweet Water Lane in the East City. You'll find some of the Brothers waiting for you at the entrance to the lane. They'll bring you to me, '

He patted Trinket lightly on the head.

'Off you go, then!' he said gently.

Before leaving, Trinket went inside to say goodbye to Whiskers. Whiskers knew nothing about his joining the Triad Society or becoming a Master. He was in fact very concerned about him and asked a lot of questions which Trinket was unable to give a straight answer to because of his vow of secrecy. His dagger and the other things that had been taken from him were now restored to him. The Helmsman had ordered someone to get a horse ready for him. He insisted on accompanying him outside to see him off and walked with him as far as the outer gate. Brother Li, Big Beaver, and the other members of the Green Wood Lodge rode with him for the first mile of the journey before finally taking their leave.

Having first made sure of the route to be taken, Trinket rode off at a brisk trot on the way back to Peking. It was already drawing towards evening when he entered the Palace. The first thing he did on entering was to go in and see the Emperor.

Laurel back at Court

The news that Oboi had been killed by Trinket in his cell in Prince Kang's residence had been transmitted to Kang Xi soon after the event. Kang Xi was therefore inclined to think that it was supporters of Oboi who had captured him, in which case there was little prospect of his survival. As soon as news of the raid reached the Palace, warrants had been sent out for the arrest and interrogation of members of Oboi's faction; but though large numbers had been brought in, the most rigorous questioning had failed to elicit a shred of information about the identity or whereabouts of the raiders. Just as Kang Xi's anxiety was at its height, it was announced, to his surprise and delight, that Trinket had returned. At once he ordered him to be admitted.

'Laurie!' he said, as Trinket entered the Upper Library. 'You! How did you manage to escape?'

Trinket had had plenty of time on the journey to think up a story. He had been carried off by the raiders and conveyed out of the city in a barrel of dates. For that part of the story he was able to stick to the facts. The people who had captured him were evidently Oboi supporters, because they had set up an altar with Oboi's spirit tablet on it and were preparing to sacrifice him in front of it. The ceremony was postponed because they were waiting for someone important to arrive—their leader, he supposed—so for the

time being they had thrown him, still bound, into a darkened room. There, in the middle of the night, he had finally succeeded in rubbing through the rope that bound him and in killing the man who had been left to guard him. He had escaped and hidden himself in some bushes from the horsemen who rode out to look for him, had stolen a horse and, by a long, circuitous route, had made his way back to the city. All this he told so vividly and with such a wealth of detail that Kang Xi could almost imagine he had been there himself. Having listened with fascination to this pack of lies, he slapped Trinket repeatedly on the back and praised him for his resourcefulness.

'Laurie, you're a marvel!' he said. Then, a moment later, he added, 'This last service has meant a lot of hardship for you, Laurie. Thank you.'

'Your Majesty,' said Trinket, 'these supporters of Oboi's are still quite powerful.'

After escaping from them, I took care to memorize the route I took on my way back. Shouldn't we send troops there as soon as possible to try and catch them?'

'Excellent idea!' said Kang Xi delightedly. Tell Songgotu to get three thousand troops ready immediately and go with you to arrest them.'

Trinket took his leave of the Emperor and sent someone to pass on the order to Songgotu.

For Songgotu the news that his friend Laurie had been carried off by supporters of Oboi had been a source of deep concern. With Laurie no longer there, he would lose the great advantage of a friend in the Palace. He would, of course, be able to pocket the half million taels he had been holding for Laurie, but on the whole the losses outweighed the gains. When it was suddenly announced that young Laurie had escaped and was back in the Palace, his spirits rose and he enthusiastically set about getting a troop of armed horsemen together and setting off, with Trinket to guide him, to arrest these remaining active members of Oboi's party.

While they were on their way they were overtaken by someone from Prince Kang's leading Jade Flower on a rein and Trinket exchanged the mount he was riding for the dappled grey. Looking round to left and right of him from the high saddle of this magnificent horse, he experienced a wonderful feeling of superiority.

When they got to the place where the members of the Triad Society had held their meeting, it was, needless to say, totally

deserted. Songgotu ordered the soldiers to search the place, and before long signs of hasty burial were detected in the kitchen garden and Oboi's decapitated head and headless body were excavated. They found a board on which were written the words 'Spirit Tablet of the Lord Regent Oboi, Nobleman of the First Rank, Duke of the Great Qing Empire.' And they also discovered a number of funerary scrolls, thoughtfully planted there by the Helmsman, Chen Jinnan.

Returning to Peking, Trinket and Songgotu submitted the spirit tablet and funerary scrolls for Kang Xi's inspection. Trinket's face, as they did so, glowed with modest triumph. The Emperor uttered some words of praise and encouragement, gave orders for Oboi's remains to be properly interred, and dismissed them with instructions to continue their investigations with all care.

The look on Trinket's face as he took his leave was all that could be expected of

a loyal and conscientious courtier; but inside he was laughing.

CHAPTER 8

In which Trinket becomes better acquainted with the Factions of the Resistance

Treatment for the Poison

Three days later, having first given Kang Xi notice that he was going to look for remnants of Oboi's faction, Trinket made his way to Sweet Water Lane in the East City. Twenty yards or so from the entrance to the lane there was a wonton stall whose stallholder, when he saw Trinket coming, picked up one of the long chopsticks he used for fishing out boiling wontons from his cauldron and beat a rhythm with it on the side of the bamboo cylinder he kept his money in: three taps, pause, two taps, pause, three taps. A few yards farther on a radish-seller who carried his wares suspended from the ends of a carrying-pole drummed the same rhythm on his carrying-pole with a knife. Realizing that this must be one of the Triads' secret signals, like the ones he had seen them using a few days previously, he followed a toffee-apple seller into the lane. Some way down it the man halted momentarily by a house with a black-lacquered door outside which squatted three men whitewashing a wall. One of them, when he saw Trinket, picked up the

lime-knife and banged the same rhythm with it on the wall. At once the house-door opened.

Trinket walked inside, crossed the courtyard and climbed up the steps to the main reception hall, where the Helmsman sat ready waiting. He went straight up to him and kowtowed. The Helmsman seemed very pleased to see him.

'You're early, Trinket, that's excellent,' he said. 'I'd been hoping to stay here a few days longer so that I could begin your training, but I've just had news from Fujian that there's some important business there they want me to sort out for them. So this time I can only stay one day.'

Trinket was rather pleased.

'If you haven't got time to teach me,' he thought, 'it won't be my fault if next time you see me I'm not much good.' But he tried to look disappointed.

The Helmsman took a thin booklet from the inner pocket of

his gown.

'This is our school's basic training manual, showing the exercises we use for strengthening our Inner Force,' he said. 'You must practise these every day.'

He opened the booklet, and began going through it. On each page there was a picture of a little man doing one of the Inner Force exercises and some lines of verse explaining the purpose of the exercise and the correct way of doing it. The Helmsman read these out aloud for the benefit of his new disciple. Trinket could not understand all of the verses but memorized as many of them as he could. The Helmsman spent the better part of two hours going over them all and explaining them.

'Our School of Martial Arts sets great store on will-power and the ability to concentrate the mind,' he said. 'You're rather a butterfly-minded boy and power of concentration is precisely what you haven't got, so training will be doubly difficult in your case and you'll need to make twice as much effort as is normally needed for these exercises. But always remember this: if, when you are doing them, your mind begins to wander or you start feeling dizzy, stop at once, wait until you feel calmer and can concentrate your thoughts, and start all over again. Not to do so can be very

dangerous.'

Promising to do as the Helmsman said, Trinket received the manual from him respectfully, with both his hands, and stowed it away in the inner pocket of his gown.

The Helmsman now questioned him once more about the Martial Arts training he had received from Hai Dafu. After listening to his description and watching him mime some of the movements, he looked puzzled.

'You already know yourself that this stuff he taught you is all bogus,' he said. 'It would be completely useless against an enemy. What I can't understand is why the Tartar Empress Dowager should have taught bogus self-defence methods to the Tartar Emperor.'

'She isn't the Emperor's real mother, ' said Trinket, 'she's an Old Whore. She's not a good person at all. In fact, she's very, very bad.'

It occurred to him that some of the things he had learnt about the Empress Dowager, like the fact that she had murdered the little Emperor's real mother, were of too great consequence to be told his Shifu and were not, in any case, his Shifu's business.

The Helmsman nodded and asked some more questions about Hai Dafu—the sort of person he was and the way he behaved. The more he heard about this old eunuch, the more he got the impression that some sinister mystery surrounded him. They were still talking about him when Trinket surprised the Helmsman by suddenly uttering a loud wail and bursting into tears. The Helmsman asked him kindly what the matter was and Trinket, his whole body shaking with sobs, told him about the systematic way in which Old Hai had been poisoning him.

There isn't an antidote,' he said. 'And besides, when I die, the Brothers in Green Wood Lodge won't be able to follow the rule.' 'What rule?' asked the Helmsman, puzzled. 'Well, Oboi killed Brother Yin,' said Trinket, 'and I killed Oboi, so the Brothers made me Master of the Lodge. When I die it will be because of Old Hai; but Old Hai has already been killed by the Old Whore and they can't very well make her Master.'

The Helmsman laughed out loud. Then he very carefully took Trinket's pulse and felt all over his abdomen, varying the pressure of his fingers on the vital points and telling him to say when it hurt. After muttering to himself for a minute or two, he assured Trinket that he had no need to worry.

'It may be that there is no known antidote,' he said, 'but I can use my inner power to expel it.'

Trinket's cheerfulness returned.

'Can you, Shifu?' he said. 'Oh, thank you. Thank you very much.'

The Helmsman led him into a bedroom and made him lie down on the bed; then he placed his left hand over the Middle Fetid point on his lower abdomen and his right hand over the Major Vertebral point on his back and held them there under gentle pressure. After a while Trinket could feel two channels of warmth moving downwards through his insides and an indescribable sense of well-being suffusing his whole body. A great drowsiness came over him, and very soon he dropped off to sleep. It was a sleep troubled by dreams, however, in one of which he experienced a sudden pain in his insides, so intense that he cried out and woke himself with his cry.

'Shifu,' he shouted, 'I... I need to shit.'

The Helmsman led him to the door of the latrine. He barely had time to get his trousers down before the explosion of liquid faeces burst from his insides,

accompanied by a most dreadful stench. After that he was very sick. On the way back to the bedroom his legs were so weak and wobbly that they could barely support him.

The Helmsman smiled his little smile.

'That's good. That will have got rid of most of the poison, and what's left shouldn't do you any harm. I've got twelve pills here I'm going to give you which contain a powerful dispersant. I want you to take one of them every day for twelve days. That should clear your body completely of whatever remains of the

poison.'

He extracted a small porcelain bottle from the inside breast pocket of his gown and handed it to Trinket. Trinket's gratitude made him considerate.

'But Shifu,' he said, 'have you got any more of these pills? If these are all you've got, what will you do if someone tries to poison you?'

The Helmsman smiled a trifle grimly. 'Anyone trying to poison me won't find it so easy.' As it was getting late, the Helmsman ordered a meal to be brought and invited Trinket to sit with him and share it. There were only four bowls of very plain fare to go with the rice. Trinket could not understand why his heroic Shifu should be so indifferent about what he ate, but the relief he felt now that he knew his body was almost completely free of the deadly poison was so great that

nothing could diminish his cheerfulness, and all the time he was eating or helping his Shifu to more rice there was a happy smile on his face.

When they had finished eating, Trinket poured the Helmsman some tea and the Helmsman sat sipping it for a while.

'You know, Trinket, ' he said musingly, 'you could be a good lad if you chose. As soon as I have the time, I'll come back to Peking and begin your training.' 'Yes sir, ' said Trinket.

'All right, then, ' said the Helmsman, 'you'd better be getting back to the Palace. The Tartars are a crafty lot. I know you're an intelligent boy, but you're still young. You need to be very, very careful.'

'Shifu, ' said Trinket, 'I get so bored in the Palace. When shall I be able to travel around with you?'

The Helmsman looked at him hard.

'You'll have to be patient for a few years yet, ' he said. 'Wait until you've distinguished yourself by carrying out one or two important assignments for the Society. Wait until—well, until your voice starts to break and you begin growing hair on your face, so that it's no longer possible for you to pretend that you're a eunuch. That will be the time to leave the Palace.'

'While I'm in the Palace none of you has any means of knowing what I'm getting up to, ' thought Trinket. 'And if you don't know what I'm getting up to, you won't have any grounds for taking my Mastership away from me—even if you want to. By the time I'm grown up and properly trained, perhaps you won't want me to stop being Master anyway.'

Consoled somewhat by these calculations, he regained his cheerfulness.

'All right, Shifu, ' he said. 'I'll be off, then.' The Helmsman stood up and took Trinket's hand in his own. Trinket, ' he said, 'as things are at present, it looks as if the Tartars have got everything going their way. The great task we have set ourselves, of overthrowing them and bringing back the Ming, is going to be extremely difficult. Living in the midst of them in the Imperial Palace, you are liable at any moment to find yourself in the most terrible danger. And you're still so young and haven't yet had any real training in self-defence. I can't help feeling worried about you. Of course, when we enter the Society our lives are no longer ours and we have to do whatever we know will advance the

cause, even if it means throwing ourselves into a pit of fire. Still— I really am sorry that I can't always be at your side, to teach you all the things you ought to know about. I only hope the time will come when we can spend a bit more time together. At present the Brothers only respect you because of me, but the time will come when I'm no longer there to look after you. When that time comes, it will be up to you whether the Brothers still respect you or not.'

'I know, Shifu, ' said Trinket. 'It doesn't matter if I disgrace myself, but I mustn't disgrace you.'

The Helmsman shook his head.

'No, Trinket, ' he said. 'Your honour is just as important as mine, '

'All right, ' said Trinket. 'Let's say it doesn't matter if Laurie disgraces himself

then. Laurie is a Tartar eunuch, so his honour doesn't matter. By disgracing Laurie, I'll be disgracing the Tartars. That will be my way of helping the great cause.'

The Helmsman sighed. He was beginning to wonder if he would ever succeed in teaching this wayward boy some sense.

Trinket visits a Sorely Wounded Brother

When Trinket got back to the Palace and was in his own room again, he had another look at the banknotes that Songgotu had sent him. There were about fifty in all, representing a total of four hundred and sixty-six thousand, five hundred taels of silver. Counting and recounting them gave him a great thrill of pleasure. The sum that Songgotu, in the hope that it would buy him an influential ally in the Palace, had originally promised was four hundred and fifty thousand (half a million, less fifty thousand taels distributed in tips). This had been augmented by an additional sixteen thousand, five hundred because the sale of Oboi's estate had realized an amount considerably greater than had been estimated.

After looking at the banknotes for quite a while, Trinket put them away, got out the Inner Force training manual that the Helmsman had given him, assumed the cross-legged attitude indicated and embarked on the first lesson. But for some reason, though he had felt full of beans when he was studying his banknotes— working out the figures and examining the red imprints on them— as soon as he set eyes on the manual his spirits sank. The pictures were dull and uninspiring and, to make matters worse, there were all these hundreds of characters only one or two of which he could

manage. Less than half an hour he was feeling tired and muzzy, and when he abandoned the exercises and flopped down on the bed, he dropped off almost immediately and slept through until the next morning.

Later that morning, when his hours of duty in the Upper Library were finished and he was back in his own room, he had another shot at beginning his training. But it was only to fall asleep once more. The fact is that the Helmsman's system of Martial Arts training required, especially in the initial stages, an extraordinary amount of will-power, and for all his intelligence and quickness of wit, Trinket simply did not have enough of that commodity to get over the first hurdle. For him, the meditation and breathing exercises with which the course began were an insuperable difficulty. They simply made him feel sleepy. This time when he woke up it was after midnight.

'It's all very fine for Shifu to tell me I must practise this stuff,' he thought, 'but

it's so boring. Still, if I don't persevere, he'll be able to tell at a glance that I'm not any better next time I see him, and he's not going to like that at all. Probably he'll take away my job as Master of the Green Wood Lodge, I shouldn't wonder.'

He got up, had another look at the manual, and sat himself down again in the prescribed attitude, but it was no good: his eyelids were soon drooping once more and it was a struggle to keep awake.

'Dammit!' he thought. 'I'm just a bridge for these people, to get them over their difficulty. What difference does it make whether I'm a bridge of granite or just a rotten old plank? They're going to get rid of me anyway, whether I do all this training or not.'

Greatly relieved to have found an excuse for not practising, he lay down on the bed again and was soon fast asleep.

Now that he had abandoned his training, the days passed extremely pleasantly. He had finished the twelve pills that the Helmsman had given him and his stomach was completely free from pain. Every day he had only to wait on the Emperor for a few hours in the Upper Library; after that he was free to spend all his time at dice with the Wen brothers and their friends. He was now a semi-millionaire and did not need to cheat; but what seasoned gambler playing with donkeys who are waiting to be relieved of their money can resist cheating a little bit when cheating is half the fun? The Wen brothers and the other gamblers, Fat Ping, Wu and the rest, continued to get deeper and deeper in his debt, but since

Trinket never asked them for the money and they no longer had Old Hai to worry about, they had long since ceased to care.

As for his managerial duties in the Imperial Catering Department, these were taken care of for him by the Eunuch Supervisors, who, regular as clockwork, delivered four hundred taels of silver to his quarters on the second and sixteenth of each month, so that all he had to do was receive the money. And Songgotu, acting on his behalf, had by now distributed some tens of thousands of taels among the ladies-in-waiting, members of the Palace Guard, and all the most influential eunuchs. This, together with the fact that Trinket always knew what to say to people to keep them happy and the fact that he was known to be a great favourite of the Emperor, meant that wherever he went in the Palace he met smiling faces.

One day, as autumn was drawing towards winter and the weather was beginning to grow colder, a thought suddenly struck him as he was coming off

duty in the Upper Library:

'Shifu told me that if there was ever anything I needed to consult him about I should get in touch with some old fogey called Xu who sells plasters near the Bridge of Heaven. I haven't got anything to consult him about, but it would be fun to go there and try out that mumbo-jumbo he taught me. "Did you say three taels of gold and three taels of silver for that plaster? Too dear, too dear! What about five taels of gold and five taels of silver?" Ha ha ha!'

Walking through the Palace gates and along the main thoroughfare outside, he turned off after a while and wandered for a bit through the side-streets. Presently he came to a tea-house where a storyteller was holding forth to an attentive audience. He strolled inside, ordered a pot of tea, and sat down at one of the tables. The storyteller was reciting an excerpt from Heroes of the Ming. He had just reached the passage describing the great naval battle between Zhu Yuanzhang and Chen Youliang on Lake Poyang—the bit where Zhou Dian carries Zhu Yuanzhang into another ship not long before a cannon-shot from Chen Youliang's vessel lands on the ship that Zhu Yuanzhang had just left and blows it to smithereens.

Trinket had heard this tale many times before and the storyteller wasn't telling it very well; nevertheless he sat there listening for a good three-quarters of an hour before continuing on his way; but his progress was so leisurely and so full of distractions that long before he reached the Bridge of Heaven district it was getting dark and he had to hurry back to the Palace. ...

Next day and the day after that he didn't go out at all, though on each of those days he told himself at bedtime that on the morrow he really must go and try to find old Xu. He continued to make this resolution on many subsequent nights as well, but invariably next day would find him either dicing and gambling in the Palace or else outside in the city, listening to some storyteller or wandering through the streets and markets, spending his money on unnecessary trifles. It was such a relaxed, enjoyable life he led now. Being a eunuch was, he had to admit, much more agreeable than being the Master of a Lodge. He knew this was an unworthy thought and tried to suppress it; yet even when it wouldn't be suppressed, there were ways he found of solacing his conscience.

'After all,' he told himself, 'I haven't got any business to report, so what would I be contacting the old bloke for? And suppose while I was looking for him I was being shadowed and the Palace got to find out who I really was? Old Trink's little life might be unimportant, but what about the others? The whole Triad Society would be at risk.'

More than a month passed by in this manner; then a day came when he found

himself once more in the tea-house to hear another instalment of Heroes of the Ming. The waiter, knowing that this was a Palace Eunuch who gave generous tips, led him to one of the reserved tables and served him with the highest grade of jasmine-scented tea. These days Trinket was accustomed to preferential treatment and took the flattering attentions of the waiter more or less for granted; still, the man's deferential way of speaking was very agreeable to the ear.

The storyteller on his little platform had reached the point in the story where the great General Xu Da takes command and drives the Tartars back into Mongolia. Since this was Peking, the Capital of the Manchu Empire, there were many Manchus in the audience, so the storyteller dared not use the word 'Tartar' when referring to the Mongols. But this had not prevented him from working himself up into a fine frenzy of excitement. The listeners at the nearer tables were in serious danger of being hit by flying spittle.

Just as Trinket was beginning to get carried away by the performance, a voice beside him suddenly said 'May I?' and a man sat down at his table. Trinket frowned crossly at the interruption, but instead of being discouraged, the man leaned over and addressed him in a low voice:

'I've got a very good plaster here I'd like to sell you, Goong-goong. Would you care to have a look at it?'

Trinket turned his head and glanced down at the plaster that the man had laid on the table. He gave a start. It was in two colours: one half was red and one half was green.

'What sort of plaster is that?' he asked.

'It's a cure for tartar poisoning,' the man said. He dropped his voice even lower: To drive out the Tartar. Full restoration guaranteed.'

Trinket glanced up at the speaker, a young man of thirty or so, bursting with health and vigour: certainly not the elderly Mr Xu that the Helmsman had led him to expect. He became suspicious.

'How much are you asking for it?'

Three taels of silver and three taels of gold,' said the man.

'Would you take five taels of silver and five taels of gold?' Trinket asked him.

'Isn't that too much?' said the man.

'It's not a lot,' said Trinket. 'I'd give anything at all to get rid of the Tartar poison.'

The man pushed the plaster towards him.

'Can I have a word with you outside, Goong-goong?' he said, and without waiting for a reply, he rose to his feet and made his way out of the tea-house.

Trinket threw down two hundred pennyworth of copper cash on the table as a tip for the waiter, picked up the plaster, and followed him. The man was waiting for him outside the tea-house. When he saw Trinket coming, he started walking in an easterly direction and presently turned a corner into one of the side lanes leading off the street. Then he stopped again and waited for Trinket to catch up with him.

'Which Lodge beside the Red Flower Pavilion?' he asked, as Trinket joined him.

The Green Wood one.' :: - 'Who burns the joss-sticks in the Lodge?' ..., The Master.'

'I'm Gao Yanchao,' said the man, 'one of the Brothers under your command. Very pleased to meet you, Master.'

Trinket felt a glow of pride at being so addressed, but did his best to conceal it.

'Pleased to meet you too, Brother Gao. But we're all Brothers: forget about the Master bit.'

'There's a Brother Xu in our Lodge who sells medicines near the Bridge of Heaven,' said Brother Gao. 'He got very badly beaten up today. That's what I wanted to see you about.'

'Oh?' said Trinket, startled. 'I've had so much to do in the Palace lately, I haven't had a chance to meet Brother Xu yet. How come he got beaten up? Who did it?'

'I can't go into details here,' said Brother Gao. 'Would you mind just following me?'

He began walking off at a brisk pace and Trinket followed him some way behind. After seven or eight turns in the little back streets, Brother Gao disappeared inside a shop. Trinket couldn't read any of the characters on the sign, but he could see that it was an apothecary's. He walked inside. The

apothecary, an enormously fat man, was sitting behind the counter. Trinket saw Brother Gao go up to him and whisper something in his ear.

'Yes, yes. Of course,' said the fat man.

He got up and nodded in Trinket's direction.

'If it's best quality herbs you're looking for, sir, may I ask you to step inside?'

He led Brother Gao and Trinket into a room behind the shop and closed the door after them. Then he bent down and raised a square section of the flooring, revealing a flight of stone steps leading down into a passage. The passage was very dark and Trinket once more became suspicious.

'Are these two characters really Triads?' he wondered. There's something a bit fishy about all this. Suppose they've got a Carve Up Trinket room down there? That wouldn't be very funny.'

But Brother Gao was standing close behind him, so he had no choice but to follow the fat apothecary down the steps. Fortunately the passage was a short one, for after they had gone only about ten steps along it, the apothecary pushed open a wooden door and a flood of light streamed out through the opening. Trinket found himself walking into an underground chamber that was barely ten-feet square. There were already five men sitting in it and there was another man lying on a low truckle-bed along one of its sides. By the time the three of them had entered, there was hardly enough room to turn round in. It was a good thing that the fat apothecary left almost immediately.

'Brothers,' Gao Yanchao announced, 'the Master has come to see us.'

Pretenders and Supporters

The five men rose to their feet with cries of welcome, bowing and pumping their hands and nearly bumping into one another as they did so because of the smallness of the room.

Trinket examined their faces as he returned their greeting. One of them, a Taoist, he recognized as the Father Obscurus who, on the occasion when he last saw him, had jokingly advised Big Beaver to divorce his wife. Another of them he remembered on the same occasion being referred to by the other Triads as Brother Fan. Seeing these familiar faces, he felt reassured.

Brother Gao pointed to the man lying on the bed.

'Brother Xu can't get up to welcome you,' he said. 'He's too badly hurt.'

'No, no, of course not,' said Trinket, and went over to have a closer look.

The old man's wrinkled face was deathly pale. His eyes were tightly closed, his breathing was faint, and his white beard was streaked and matted with blood.

'Who did this to Brother Xu?' he asked. 'Was it... was it Tartar agents?'

Brother Gao shook his head.

'No. Duke Mu's people. From Yunnan.'

'Duke Mu's people from Yunnan?' Trinket echoed in some surprise. 'I thought they were on our side.'

Again Brother Gao shook his head, this time more slowly.

'When Brother Xu dragged himself back to the shop this morning he could barely speak, but from what we could make out it was two young Mu followers called Bo-something-or-other who beat him up. They—'

'Wasn't one of Old Duke Mu's Four Paladins called Bo?' said Trinket, interrupting. 'It must be the same family.'

'Like enough,' said Brother Gao. 'It was probably the Bo brothers, Pine and Maple. The Bo Family Trees they call them.'

'Pretty rotten wood, if you ask me,' said Trinket.

'From what Brother Xu said,' Brother Gao went on, 'it seems that they got into an argument with him about the rightful succession. The argument got more and more heated, and they ended up by having a fight. And as it was only one pair of hands against the two of them, he got the worst of it. That's why he came to be hurt so badly.'

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THE DEER AND THE CAULDRON

'Two against one, ' said Trinket. 'That doesn't sound like the way men of Honour ought to fight. But what's this about the "rightful succession"? Do you mean . . .'

For a moment he wondered if it had something to do with his being appointed Master of the Lodge; but then he thought no, surely it couldn't be that, and forebore to ask.

'Duke Mu's people are Gui supporters, but we Triads have always maintained that Prince Tang was the rightful Heir to the throne,' said Brother Gao. That's what they were arguing about. They couldn't agree to differ.'

Trinket was still none the wiser.

Father Obscurus, who knew something about Trinket's background and the very limited extent of his general knowledge, ventured to intervene.

'It's like this, Master. When the rebel Li Zicheng fought his way into Peking and forced the Ming Emperor Chong Zhen to hang himself on Coal Hill, and then Wu Sangui let the Tartars in through the Wall and helped them take over China, all those patriots who wanted to resist began looking around for a member of the Imperial family to be their leader. The first one chosen was Prince Fu, who was raised up as Emperor in Nanking. Then, after the Tartars killed Prince Fu, Prince Tang was proclaimed Emperor in Fujian. He was acknowledged by our Founder, Marshal Zheng, along with many others, to be the rightful heir, so of course we Triads have always considered that he was the true Emperor. Unfortunately there was another group in the Guangxi-Yunnan area who recognized Prince Gui as Emperor, and yet another lot in Zhejiang who recognized Prince Lu. But we don't consider either of them to have been the true Emperor.'

Trinket nodded and said wisely:

'One sun to rule the sky above, One Emperor for the folk below.

Once Prince Tang was made Emperor, how could Prince Gui and Prince Lu be Emperors too?'

That's right, ' said Brother Gao. 'You're absolutely right, Master.'

'But those folk in Guangxi and Yunnan and Zhejiang didn't see it that way, ' said Father Obscurus. They continued to support their own choice out of greed or ambition, knowing how much they would stand to lose if they didn't. So there was a great deal of quarrelling among the different factions, often leading to very great bitterness.' He sighed.

'Prince Tang, Prince Lu, and Prince Gui one after another met their deaths, but the leaders of the Resistance didn't want people to forget about the House of

Ming, so during these past few years they've sought out the heirs of these Princes among the younger generation and made them their leaders. Those who support the heirs of Prince Gui are called the "Gui faction", those who support the heirs of Prince Lu are called the "Lu faction", while they call us Triads the "Tang faction". We all share the anti-Qing pro-Ming policy of the Resistance, but only we Triads follow the correct line on legitimacy. We consider the Princes supported by the Lu and Gui factions to be usurpers.' Trinket nodded.

'I see. And Duke Mu's lot are Gui supporters, is that right?' That's right, ' said Father Obscurus. The quarrel between the three factions about legitimacy has gone on for more than twelve years now.'

Trinket remembered the arrogance and rudeness of the Duke Mu follower, also called Bo, whom he and Whiskers had met on their journey from Yangzhou and wondered if he was one of the Bo Family Trees. The thought of Whiskers' cringing deference to that unpleasing individual still made him feel indignant.

'If Prince Tang was the rightful Emperor, ' he said, 'they had nothing to quarrel about. Everyone says the Young Duke Mu was a good man, so it can't have been him who started the quarrel. I suppose it must have been his followers, after his death, that got the whole thing going, '

This view was unanimously approved by those present. 'Yes, ' said Father Obscurus. 'It's out of respect for Young Duke Mu's memory—because of his loyalty and the heroic way he died—that members of the Brotherhood go out of their way to be especially polite to his followers. Unfortunately the only effect it has is to make all of them, down to their cats and dogs, behave as if they owned the earth. This Brother Xu here is the mildest of men, but he used once to be in the service of Prince Tang. He's always been very loyal to the Prince. Even now just the mention of Prince Tang will bring tears into his eyes. I'm quite sure that what happened is that these two fellows from Duke Mu's household were making a lot of frivolous remarks about this and that and happened

to say something derogatory about Prince Tang. It's inconceivable that Brother Xu would have got into a fight with people from Duke Mu's household for any other reason.'

'Just before noon, ' said Brother Gao, 'when Brother Xu came to himself for a while, he said he wanted the Brothers to avenge him. Now according to the rules of the Society, a matter of this importance has first got to be reported to a Master, and you're the only Master in this area, so we had to wait to see you before we could do anything. Of course, if it was just a question of dealing with Tartar agents or collaborators, it would be a different matter. Even if we ended

up getting killed ourselves, we'd be dying for the cause. But these people of Duke Mu's are highly thought of everywhere on River and Lake, and they are, after all, supposed to be on our side. Besides, if we do take them on, there's likely to be serious fighting and the outcome would be very far from certain.' Trinket looked more than usually thoughtful. 'Hm.'

'Brother Xu says he's been expecting a visit from you for months now,' said Brother Gao. 'He says he's seen you sometimes in the street or in the market buying things, or listening to storytellers in the tea-houses.'

Trinket reddened.

'So he's already seen me?'

'Yes,' said Brother Gao, 'but he didn't like to go up to you and introduce himself because he says the Helmsman told him that you would seek him out when you needed, and not before.' Trinket nodded.

'So the old fox has been secretly trailing me,' he thought, darting a not too kindly look at the recumbent figure on the bed. 'He's been taking a good look at me chucking my money around and buying stuff to eat at street stalls and all the rest of it. Tamardy! I bet next time Shifu comes this way he'll make trouble for me. Let's hope the old fox is hurt so badly that he'll kick the bucket!'

'We thought the matter over carefully,' said Father Obscurus, 'and we came to the conclusion that there was nothing for it but to call on you, as Master, to take command of the situation.'

Take command of the situation?' thought Trinket. 'Come on, I'm only a kid.'

All the same, he couldn't help feeling proud that these grown men should be treating him so respectfully. Since becoming a member of the Triad Society, the only other members he had so far

had anything much to do with, apart from the Helmsman himself, had been the other nine Masters, all of them middle-aged or elderly men with years of experience behind them. It gave him an intoxicating feeling of superiority to be with men amongst whom, for once, in terms of status at any rate, he was the most senior.

A brawny, thickset fellow in his mid-thirties spoke up now, his voice shaking with indignation.

'It's out of respect for Duke Mu's memory that we defer to these Mu folk,' said

the man. 'But although the Young Duke was so loyal and died like a hero and all that, he didn't achieve anything particularly world-shaking. In terms of achievement our Marshal Zheng was ten times more worthy of respect.'

'In any case,' said Brother Fan, 'when you show respect to people they ought by rights to show twice as much respect in return; but when you show respect to these Mu fellows, they behave as if it was their natural right. If we don't sort this out properly now, they'll be getting so uppity that we Triads won't be able to hold our heads up in front of them. I personally don't see what we're waiting for.'

Several contributions followed from the others present, all in the same angry vein.

'How we are to deal with this matter is for the Master to decide,' said Father Obscure. 'Whatever we do, we must follow his decision.'

Now if Trinket had been asked for advice about carrying out some small-scale operation like stealing a chicken or cheating someone at cards, he might have known what to say, but faced with an important matter like this he was totally at a loss; in fact, by asking him for a decision, they were simply inviting him to make a fool of himself—to demonstrate just how hopelessly inadequate he was for the job. Yet he was the Helmsman's apprentice, he was one of the Triad Society's Ten Masters, he was head of all the Society's members in the Metropolitan Area, and this old fellow Xu and all the others present were his subordinates, for whose fate he was personally responsible. When he saw the eyes of all those present focused on him expectantly, an intense feeling of helplessness came over him and he began cursing inwardly.

'Hot-piece mamma! What the hell am I going to do?' In his desperation he began looking from one to another of their faces in search of inspiration. As his glance fell on the thickset fellow who had spoken a few moments previously, he was

struck by the man's expression. A faint smile seemed to curve the corners of his mouth and there was a gleam of sly satisfaction in his eyes. Why should he be looking so pleased, thought Trinket, when only a few moments ago he had been shouting angrily, apparently overcome with passion? It dawned on him why after a moment or two of reflection.

'Hot-piece mamma! These bastards are setting me up! They want to go and sort out the Mu gang, but they're shit scared that if Shifu finds out he won't like it, so they want me to carry the can.'

The more he thought about it the more convinced he became that this was the case.

'I'm only a kid,' he thought. 'Although I'm Master, how could I possibly be better at planning things than they are? They just want me for a fall guy. If they carry this off, well and good. But if things go wrong, they'll just put the blame on to me. "This was Lodge Master Wei's idea. He gives the orders. We were only doing what we were told." Oh yes. They've all along been looking for bones in the egg, so that they can have an excuse to get rid of me, and if I take responsibility for getting them into a fight with the Mu lot, that'll count as a whopping great bone against me, whatever happens. Hot-piece momma! I'm not falling for that one!'

He bowed his head and pretended to be deep in thought. After what seemed an appropriate pause, he said:

'Look here, Brothers, I may be Master of this Lodge, but it's only because I killed Oboi by a lucky accident. I've got no real qualifications. I'm certainly not good in the planning department. I'm sure if Father Obscurus were to make a suggestion it would be very much better than anything I could say.'

This is what old hands call 'pushing the boat with the stream'. In plain language, Trinket was simply passing on the can for Father Obscurus to carry.

Father Obscurus laughed and turned towards Brother Fan.

'You've got a better head for these things than I have, Brother Fan. What do you think we ought to do?'

Brother Fan was a straightforward, no-nonsense sort of fellow.

'It seems to me obvious what we ought to do,' he said. 'We find out where these Bos are staying, then we go round there and tell them that if they are prepared to kowtow to Brother Xu and offer him a formal apology, we are prepared to let the matter drop.'

If not—well, too bad. We shall have tried peaceful means, so we'll have to see what a bit of force can do.'

This was precisely the view that the others all secretly shared but had so far refrained from expressing, partly because of the great prestige the Mu Family enjoyed on River and Lake, and partly because the Family shared the Triads' own commitment to the cause of anti-Manchu Resistance. Now the idea had been given voice to, all but two of them chimed in eagerly with their support.

'Yes, yes, Brother Fan is absolutely right. If we can avoid fighting, so much the better; but people mustn't be allowed to think they can mess around with us as they like. When one of us is beaten up like this, we can't just stand by and do nothing.'

Trinket turned to Father Obscurus and the other man who had not yet spoken.

'What do you two think?'

'They've forced our hand,' said the other man. 'Nothing else for it. We can't help ourselves.'

Father Obscurus merely smiled and nodded. He wasn't going to be drawn. Trinket knew he was refusing to say anything so that later on he would be able to deny responsibility for what happened. He decided that he was not going to let this slippery Taoist get away with it.

'What about you, Father Obscurus?' he asked. 'You don't think what Brother Fan suggests is quite such a good idea, do you?'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Father Obscurus. 'But this is a pretty serious business. If we are going to try consequences with the Mu people, there are two things we must make sure of. One is, we must make sure that we win. The other one is, we mustn't kill anybody. If we kill anyone, this will become a very serious business indeed.'

That's all very well,' said Brother Fan, 'but suppose Brother Xu doesn't recover?'

Father Obscurus nodded his head.

'Well, it's up to you all to decide exactly what it is you want to do,' said Trinket. 'You've all had lots of experience. You've probably eaten more salt in your lives than I've eaten boiled rice and crossed more bridges than I've done miles of walking, so I'm sure any suggestions you make are going to be much better than anything I could come up with.'

Father Obscurus gave Trinket a somewhat old-fashioned look.

'There are no flies on you, Master,' he said drily.

'Inere are no flies on you, Father Obscurus, ' said Trinket, grinning back at him.

After some discussion, it was decided to adopt what was essentially the strategy suggested by Brother Fan: that is to say, there was to be a punitive expedition against the Mu people under Trinket's leadership; arms would be concealed about their persons, but their attitude, to start with, would be peaceable; and every effort would be made not to put themselves in the wrong. Ideally it would be the Mu people who would be seen as having begun hostilities: then, by retaliating, they would simply be acting in self-defence.

'It would be a good idea to invite one or two well-known Peking Martial Arts specialists to go with us as witnesses,' said Father Obscurus, 'just to make sure the story doesn't get about that we Triads went around to the Mu place deliberately looking for trouble. We don't want some garbled account of what happened reaching the ears of the Helmsman and putting us all in the wrong.'

'Good idea,' said Trinket. 'But why just one or two? The more the merrier.'

Trinket retained a vivid impression of the young man called Bo disabling several of Satrap Wu's men in the inn merely by flicking chopsticks at them. If these people were so lethal with chopsticks, what couldn't they do with an Elephant Brigade like the one in the early history of the Mus he had himself, with a few trimmings of his own, narrated to Whiskers on that same occasion? Perhaps Peking was not a suitable terrain for the deployment of elephants, but even an army of mice, he thought, would be more than a match for the Master of the Green Wood Lodge. He had been on the point of excusing himself from leading this expedition; but when Father Obscurus suggested inviting some leading Peking specialists in the Martial Arts to go along with them, he changed his mind.

Father Obscurus guessed what he was thinking and smiled.

'One or two men of known reputation is what we are looking for,' he said. 'They will be there as witnesses, not to do any fighting. Whether they are good fighters or not is of secondary importance.'

'If they're of known reputation, they're probably good at fighting anyway,' said Gao Yanchao in support of Trinket, whose view he shared.

'Well, who shall we ask?' said Brother Fan.

After some discussion it was decided that the specialists they invited must meet three requirements: they must have a high standing in the profession; they must have had no dealings whatever with officialdom; and they must have had some sort of friendly contact in the past with a member or members of the Triad Society.

They had finished their discussion and were about to go their separate ways to interview the persons it had been decided to invite when there was a faint murmuring sound from Brother Xu on the bed.

'You . . . you . . . you can't invite anyone ... to go ... with you.'

'What did you say, Brother Xu?' asked Brother Fan. 'Did you say we can't invite anyone to go with us?'

The Master,' quavered old Xu, 'he ... he works in the Palace. It's very im . . . important there shouldn't be ... a leak.'

They all understood what he meant and knew that he was right. Trinket was working in the Palace as a eunuch on the Helmsman's orders. Whatever plan underlay this arrangement, it was obviously of vital importance that his identity should remain unknown. Once outsiders were brought in, there was always the risk of a leak.

'Of course, the Master doesn't have to come with us,' said Brother Fan. 'As long as we report back to him when we know the outcome, we can sort out these Bo characters by ourselves.'

Trinket had started off being rather scared of the Mu mob, but when it was proposed to invite some of the city's leading Martial Arts experts to go with them, he decided that victory was a hundred per cent certain. It would be like playing against donkeys with loaded dice. He couldn't bear to miss it.

'Oh, but if I don't go I'll miss all the fun,' he said. 'You don't have to tell anyone who I am or what I do.'

'I suppose the Master could go in disguise,' said Father Obscurus. 'No one would know then that he worked in the Palace.'

'Yes, yes!' Trinket was clapping his hands delightedly almost before Father Obscurus had finished speaking.

Visiting a strange house with a view to creating a disturbance was Trinket's idea of fun. But to be able to dress up as well—that was really something!

The others had been thinking that to go without Trinket as their leader would be taking too much responsibility on themselves,

.- so when they saw him so determined to go, they felt little inclined to dissuade

him. But old Xu still seemed dubious.

Tor God's sake all of you ... be careful. What will you ... be disguised . . . as?

The others all looked at Trinket to hear what he would say. Either a rich boy or a little beggar-boy, he thought. It would have to be one or the other. When he was a lad in the brothel he had often admired the flashy outfits of the rich young toffs who came to visit the girls, but had never had a chance to wear anything like that himself. It didn't take him long to decide.

'Here's fifteen hundred taels, ' he said, fishing three banknotes out of his inside pocket. 'Will one of you Brothers take this and buy some clothes for me?'

A little shock of surprise ran through the men. 'But you don't need all that much,' several of them cried out simultaneously.

'I've got plenty of money, ' said Trinket. The more expensive the clothes are the better. You can buy a bit of jewellery for me as well. If I dress like a young swell, no one's going to guess that I'm a ... a eunuch.' (The word still stuck in his throat.)

The Master's right,' said Father Obscurus. 'Brother Gao, why don't you buy the Master's disguise for him?'

Trinket took out another banknote, this time for a thousand taels.

'Spend a bit more if you like. It doesn't matter.' The men all secretly marvelled that a mere boy should have so much money on him. Little could they have guessed that he had another four hundred thousand taels' worth or more of banknotes stashed away in his room.

Trinket was a natural spender, one who, even if he had only one or two coppers on him, would not feel happy until he had spent them. How he was ever going to get through so vast a sum as four hundred thousand taels was a question that had frequently worried him. The opportunity that now presented itself of spending lavishly on an expensive outfit to show off in was not to be missed and he seized on it delightedly.

'Here,' he said to the goggling men, thrusting his hand once more into the bosom of his gown and pulling out a fistful of banknotes, this time to the value of three thousand five hundred taels. He held them out for Father Obscurus to take.

'You're all my elders and I'm meeting most of you for the first

time. This money is all I've got to offer by way of a First Meeting present. It comes from the Tartars' ill-gotten . . . thingummy.' (He couldn't remember the word.) 'I'd be glad if you'd help me spend

it.'

Strictly forbidden by their rules to enrich themselves by theft or extortion or other unlawful means, Triads like Gao and Fan were habitually short of money. Seeing so much of it now on offer and being assured that it was money taken from the Tartars, who had no right to it (there was no reason to disbelieve this, since Trinket worked in the Palace), they could scarce restrain a cheer.

'We've got to split up now and invite the people we want as our witnesses,' said Father Obscurus. There won't be time for anything else today. So can we look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, Master? What time will you be able to come?'

'I'm on duty in the mornings,' said Trinket, 'but I can definitely come any time in the afternoon.'

'Very well then, some time after midday,' said Father Obscurus. 'We'll all meet here first and then we'll go along to sort out those Bo characters.'

Willow Lane

That night Trinket could hardly sleep for excitement. He was hopping and jumping about in his room all the evening or strutting and swaggering in imitation of the young toff he planned to impersonate on the morrow. He hurried off next day, as soon as his duties in the Upper Library were over, to a jeweller's shop in the city where he bought a large jadeite ring. He also bought a large piece of white jade and four round pearls which he got the jeweller's assistant to inset for him, while he waited, in the headband of a black satin cap. In this way he was able to dispose of rather more than four thousand taels. The jeweller was not in the least surprised to see his young customer spend so much money. It was not unusual for eunuchs making purchases on behalf of inmates of the Inner Palace to spend ten times as much in a single visit.

Hurrying on to his appointment in the apothecary's, Trinket found the Triads of the previous day's meeting already waiting for him. They told him that they had arranged for four well-known Peking Martial Arts professionals to accompany them as witnesses and that they had paid them two hundred taels in advance for their

services.

'A well-paid hand is a helping hand, ' thought Trinket, 'and we want to make sure that these pros are going to help us. Pity they only gave them two hundred each. Five hundred would have been more like it. And they ought to have invited sixteen of them, not just four.'

But he didn't say anything.

Brother Gao now brought out the gear he had purchased for him to change into. It was as expensive-looking as he could have wished. There was a long gown with a lining of sleekest red fox doubled over at the neck and cuffs. He had had it altered overnight to fit a person of Trinket's size, he said, at an additional cost of three taels and six pennyweights of silver—That's not much, ' said Trinket—and there was a loose outer jacket of rust-tinged black satin to go over it. The ten buttons on the jacket were of real gold. Even so, he had succeeded in spending only half the money that Trinket had given him.

Nurture is a great transformer, they say, and the year—it was nearly a year now—that Trinket had spent in the Palace had not only nourished his skinny frame but broadened his mental horizon as well. Moreover, since becoming head of the Imperial Catering Department six months previously with a staff of a hundred or more eunuchs at his beck and call, he had grown used to commanding others. It is perhaps not surprising then that, when dressed up in his new finery, he should, in spite of his diminutive size and the flashiness of the clothes, have cut a stylish, even quite impressive figure, setting him in a class apart from the homespun heroes who accompanied him.

They had hired a closed chair for his conveyance so that there would be no risk of his being seen on the street while in his disguise and recognized by a eunuch or by some official from the Palace. It was now waiting at the door for him and they invited him to get in.

The little procession, led by the chair and its two bearers, made its way to the Victory Security Agency in the East City where the four Martial Arts professionals were already waiting for them. The first of these was a grizzled old warrior called Ma Boren who was Warden of the Watergate district and a member of the Golden Lotus sect. The second, Yao Chun, was one of the foremost exponents of the Close Combat branch of Catch-Can. He was also well-known as an expert wound-doctor and bone-setter, in which capacity he had already been called in by the Triads to treat Brother

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Xu. The third, Lei Yixiao, was known in the profession as Tiger Face. The Martial Art he professed went by the name of Iron Shirt from the alleged invulnerability to sharp-edged weapons it bestowed on its practitioners. The fourth was the manager of the Agency himself, Wang Wutong or Gold Spear.

These four professionals had been told in advance that the Triads' Master of the Green Wood Lodge was very young, but nothing had prepared them for the sight that now presented itself to their astonished eyes. They treated their young visitor respectfully however, reflecting that if this preposterous little swell was a disciple of the great Helmsman—whose name they revered though they had never met him—he must presumably, in spite of his extreme youth, be endowed with remarkable proficiency in one or other of the arts of self-defence.

After taking tea together, the company set off for Willow Lane, where the two Bo brothers, the Family Trees, had their temporary residence in the Capital. Trinket, Ma Boren, and Yao Chun went in sedan chairs, Lei Yixiao and Wang Wutong on horseback; the rest followed on foot. Wang Wutong had wanted Father Obscurus and Brother Fan, who both had some standing in the profession, to ride as well, and would have lent them horses; but Father Obscurus insisted that four people on horseback would make their party too conspicuous and resolutely declined the offer.

They had finally halted outside the red-lacquered portal of the house in Willow Lane and Brother Gao already had his hand on the knocker when suddenly a faint sound of weeping was heard from inside the house. They listened in surprise and, as they did so, the significance of the two large white lanterns hanging one on each side of the entrance, which they had previously ignored, now dawned on them. This was a house of mourning. Brother Gao again lifted the knocker and knocked, very restrainedly, on the door. After a minute or so the door opened and an elderly steward came out. Brother Gao handed him five large visiting-cards.

'Some friends from the Victory Security Agency, the Watergate district, and the Triad Society, ' he said, 'come to see the two

Mr Bos, '

At the mention of the Triad Society the steward's eyebrows shot up angrily. He glared at the little party, took the cards in silence, and disappeared into the house.

Old Ma Boren's fiery temper, which age had done nothing to sweeten, was instantly provoked by the steward's rudeness.

'insolent lackey!' he growled.

"I totally agree with you, Mr Ma, ' said Trinket. He was still much in awe of Duke Mu's people and anxious to have old Ma and the other professionals on his side, so that if there was any fighting he could rely on them to do more than just stand by.

After a considerable wait a young man in his late twenties came to the door, a tall young man dressed in white mourning garments. His eyes were red and swollen and his cheeks still wet from recent weeping. He clasped his hands in greeting.

'Mr Wei, Mr Ma, Mr Wang. Forgive me for not receiving you more formally, but I wasn't expecting your visit. Bo Hanfeng at your service.'

When the others had clasped their hands and returned his greeting, he conducted them towards the reception hall inside.

'I see you are in mourning,' Ma Boren said, brushing aside the preliminary courtesies. 'Might we ask which member of your family you have lost?'

'My elder brother,' said Young Bo.

Old Ma stamped his foot sympathetically.

'What a loss! The Bo Family Trees are famous everywhere as the star officers of the late Duke Mu's establishment. But he was a young man still, in his prime. What did he die of?'

They had only just entered the room and not even had time to sit down. Young Bo, who had been leading them, swung round abruptly when he heard this question, his eyes blazing with anger.

'Now look here, Mr Ma,' he said fiercely, 'I've received you courteously because you're an old man and well known in your profession. I see no reason why you should mock me by asking me a question when you perfectly well know the answer.'

Startled by this sudden explosion of anger, Trinket involuntarily stepped back a pace; but old Ma merely fondled his white beard.

'This is very strange,' he said. 'It was because I didn't know that I asked the question. I don't know what you mean, asking a question when I know the answer. I quite understand that you're upset because you've lost your brother,

but that's no excuse for taking it out on an old man.'

Young Bo snorted. w 'Well, won't you sit down?'

'Maybe I will,' old Ma muttered to himself; 'but you needn't

think I'm scared of a young puppy like you. Mr Wei,' he said, turning to Trinket, 'you ought to sit in this chair.'

'No, no,' said Trinket. 'You're the senior one here, Mr Ma.'

From having seen the visiting-cards, Young Bo knew that one of his visitors was a Mr Wei who was Master of the Green Wood Lodge of the Triad Society, but it had not for a moment entered his head that this young boy was the one. Surprised and angry, he shot out his hand and grasped Trinket by the left wrist.

'So you are the Master from the Triad Society?'

This was no ordinary grasp but a vice-like grip which sent a thrill of anguish through Trinket's very bones. He let out a loud 'Ow!'. At the same time, two fat tears coursed down his cheeks.

'This is no way to treat a guest, ' said Father Obscurus and made a jab with his fingers towards Young Bo's ribs which would have immobilized him if it had struck home; but Young Bo parried with his left hand, simultaneously releasing Trinket's wrist and stepping back a pace.

'I'm sorry, ' he said, but Trinket, still grimacing with the pain, was wiping the tears away on his sleeve and made no reply.

The four professionals and the Triads looked at him in amazement. Young Bo's grab at his wrist had been sudden and unexpected, but anyone skilled in the Martial Arts could have parried it quite easily. Yet this Lodge Master Wei, this apprentice of the great Helmsman, had not only failed to parry it, but had cried out in pain; and not only that, but had shed tears as well. Among professional fighting men such a thing was unheard of. Father Obscurus and the other Triads blushed to the tips of their ears and felt utterly humiliated.

'I'm sorry, ' Young Bo repeated, 'but it was the Triads who foully murdered my brother and in my grief—'

'What?'

'Murdered? By the Triads?'

'No, no, impossible!'

That can't be right.'

Whatever Young Bo had been going to say was drowned in their cries of protest. His voice now rose to a shout:

'You say it's impossible. Are you going to tell me my brother isn't dead? Come inside, then. Come and see with your own eyes.'

He made another grab at Trinket's left wrist, but this time Father Obscurus and Brother Fan were ready for him. As soon as he stretched his right arm out they were aiming at him with their

stabbing fingers, one at his chest, the other at his back. Young Bo twisted, side-stepped, and lashed out with both hands to left and right. One of his hands met Brother Fan's half way. He changed his position and went for Father Obscurus's throat.

'You killed my brother,' he shouted. 'I don't want to live any more. Come on, you Triad swine, I'll take on the lot of you!'

The bone-setter Yao Chun flung out his arms and stepped forward to separate them.

'Not so fast!' he said. 'I think there's some mistake here. You say the Triads murdered your brother; those were your words. I think you owe it to us to explain exactly what happened.'

'All right, come inside,' said Young Bo and strode off towards the inner hall of the house, which was separated from the reception room by a courtyard.

The others, judging their number sufficient to be proof against a trap, followed him into the courtyard. As they entered the inner hall they saw that it had been turned into a funeral chamber. Behind the white funeral hangings was a coffin on top of which, under a coverlet which left only the feet and the upper half of the head exposed, lay the body of a dead man. Young Bo drew back the coverlet and addressed the corpse in a loud, wailing voice.

'You died with your eyes open, brother, you're not at rest. But don't worry. I'll kill some of these Triad swine. You'll be revenged, I promise.'

His voice sounded cracked and hoarse. They could tell he must have been

weeping a great deal before they arrived.

When Trinket looked at the dead man's face, he got a big surprise. It was the man that he and Whiskers had met in the inn on their journey from Yangzhou, the one who had shot down Satrap Wu's soldiers by flicking chopsticks. Once he had got over the shock of seeing this dangerous person dead in front of him, however, he felt rather comforted by the thought that he was now one powerful enemy the less.

The four Martial Arts professionals approached the coffin.

'Yes, he's dead all right, ' said Wang Wutong, who had had a slight acquaintance with the elder Bo brother in the past.

Yao Chun was a careful man, however, and felt the dead man's pulse, just in case.

'If you think you can cure my brother,' said Young Bo sarcastically, 'I'm willing to make you twelve thousand extra hard kowtows.'

Yao Chun sighed.

There's no way to bring the dead back to life, Mr Bo. You must try to moderate your grief. But was it really the Triads who killed your brother? Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?

'Made a mistake?' Young Bo was shouting once more. 'How could I have made a mistake?'

Seeing how deeply upset he was, the others realized the extent of his devotion to his dead brother and began to feel quite sorry for him. Even Brother Fan forgot his anger, reflecting that a man who has lost his elder brother might well be unaware just how hard he was hitting you.

Young Bo stood with his arms akimbo before the coffin.

The man who murdered my brother was that old villain who sells plasters near the Bridge of Heaven. His name is Xu Tianchuan, but he's often called by his nickname, the Eight-Armed Ape. That man is an office-holding member of the Triad Society. You're not going to deny that, are you? Come on now, is he or isn't he?

Brother Fan, Father Obscurus, and the other Triads exchanged glances. They had come to Willow Lane to complain about the wounding of Brother Xu by the

two brothers, but now the tables were turned: one of the brothers was dead and Brother Xu appeared to have been the killer. Brother Fan sighed unhappily.

'It's true, Mr Bo. Xu Tianchuan is a Triad. But he . . . he . . .'

'He what?' said Young Bo sharply.

The two of you beat him up so badly that by the time you had finished with him his life was hanging by a thread,' said Brother Fan. 'He was half-dead when we left him just now. For all we know he may already be dead. The fact of the matter is, we came here today to ask you and your brother why you left him in such a state. We didn't expect... we didn't think ... oh dear!'

'Half-dead?' said Young Bo angrily. 'Even if he's dead, the life of that old pig would be no compensation for the life of my poor brother.'

It was Brother Fan's turn to be angry.

'Watch your language!' he said. 'What kind of way is that for a professional fighting man to talk? So what sort of compensation are you looking for?'

'I don't know,' said Young Bo brokenly. 'I'd like to kill all of you Triad swine, every one of you, and chop you up into little bits. And then die myself. That would wipe the slate clean

He turned to the coffin, snatched up a sword that was lying

at his dead brother's side, and began jumping about like a madman, whirling it round so that it made swishing sounds in the air.

Father Obscurus, Brother Fan, and the other Triads took out the weapons they had been concealing and prepared to defend themselves. Trinket dodged behind Brother Gao's back for safety. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, there was a great roar that made their ears tingle. 'Hold it!'

It was Tiger Face, Lei Yixiao, whose voice matched his nom de guerre. Holding up both his arms, he stood in front of the Triads and faced the enraged young man.

'If you want to kill anyone, you can kill me first.' Already half-crazed with grief, Young Bo seemed, during the past few moments, to have gone totally berserk. The sudden shout pulled him up short and did something to clear his brain.

'Why should I kill you?' he asked. 'You didn't kill my brother.'

'Neither did any of these Triad friends here, ' said Tiger Face.

'And in any case, the Triad Society has branches all over the country. Altogether it must have somewhere between twenty and thirty thousand members. Are you proposing to kill all of them?'

Young Bo was somewhat taken aback by this, but was not yet prepared to climb down. 'I can make a start.'

Just at that moment a faint sound of horses' hooves could be heard. It sounded as if ten or more riders were approaching.

Tartar soldiers, probably. Hide your weapons everybody!' said Yao Chun.

With Tiger Face standing between them, the Triads judged it unlikely that Young Bo would make a rush and began putting away the assorted knives and daggers they had been holding. Young Bo, however, continued to shout defiantly:

'I don't care if it's the King of Heaven. I'm not afraid!'

The Story of Maple and Pine

The sound of hooves grew louder as the riders entered the lane, then stopped abruptly as they arrived outside the house. Immediately there was a hammering at the door and the sound of a man's voice shouting.

'Maple! It's me!'

A moment later a man of forty or so came rushing into the

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hall. He had slipped over the outside wall, impatient of the doorman's delay. Though formidably warlike in appearance, he seemed greatly affected by what he saw and when he spoke his voice was trembling.

'So it's true, Maple: your brother. . .'

Young Bo threw down the sword he was holding and stepped forward to meet him. 'Su! He . . . he . . .'

He broke down and began weeping noisily. Father Obscurus and the others guessed that this Su must be Su Gang, alias Su the Magic Hand, a distinguished member of Duke Mu's establishment.

By now the street door had been opened and a dozen or more people of both sexes came streaming into the hall. The women among them, who included Young Bo's wife and the dead man's widow, began a pitiful wailing as soon as they saw the corpse. The Triads looked on uncomfortably, aware that, by their continued presence, they were inviting physical or, at the very least, verbal assault as soon as the lamentation ceased.

Trinket, whose wrist still hurt from the mauling Young Bo had given it, had been planning, before the appearance of these new arrivals, to get his own back on Young Bo by asking the Triads to overpower him so that he could give him a good kicking; but now that the Triads were themselves outnumbered, his heart beat faster at the thought that if there were to be any encounter now, it was more likely they who would be overpowered. He was grateful, therefore, when he saw Father Obscurus signalling to him that they should slip quietly away, and responded by at once leading a retreat

from the hall.

'Come on, everybody,' he said, by way of excusing their exit, 'let's go and buy some candles and paper ingots. We'll come back here to kowtow and make an offering when we've got the

necessary.'

'Running away?' Young Bo shouted after them. 'You're not getting off that easily.'

He came dashing after them and aimed a savage blow with his fist at Brother Fan's back.

'Who's running away?' said Brother Fan angrily. He turned and parried the blow with his left arm but made no attempt to return it.

Father Obscurus and the others stopped in their tracks, but

Trinket, who had already reached the doorway, made sure that he had one foot over the threshold before waiting to see what would happen.

'Tell me, Maple, who are these people?' said Su Gang. 'I don't think I know any of them.'

'These are the Triad swine who murdered my brother,' said Young Bo.

At these words the men, who up to that moment had been on their knees weeping and lamenting round the coffin, leapt to their feet and there was a swish of metal and a flash of steel as they drew their swords from their scabbards. In a trice they had the Triads surrounded. The four Martial Arts professionals found themselves trapped in a little knot in their midst.

Wang Wutong diplomatically insisted on treating this as a joke.

'I don't recollect ever having joined the Triad Society, do you Mr Ma? or you, Mr Lei? or you, Dr Yao? I doubt, in any case, whether they'd allow four old buffers like us to join. I doubt they'd think us worthy even to carry their shoes for them.'

Su Gang clasped his hands politely.

'So you gentlemen are not Triads then? No, I've heard of Dr Yao. It's Yao Chun, isn't it? My name is Su Gang. We were in Wanping when we got the sad news about Mr Bo and came here immediately. I'm afraid we were all so upset when we got here that we neglected to introduce ourselves. It was very discourteous of

us.

'Not at all, not at all,' said Wang Wutong, bowing and smiling in response. 'I've long heard about the Magic Hand and now that I have met him I find him to be exactly the understanding, gentlemanly person I had been led to expect.'

He went on to introduce the others, beginning with Trinket.

This is Mr Wei, the Master of the Triad Society's Green Wood Lodge.'

Su Gang knew that the Triad Society was divided into ten Lodges, each of them presided over by a Master who, he had been led to believe, was invariably a person of great presence and exceptional ability; yet this Mr Wei was manifestly some pampered rich boy whose mother's milk was scarcely dry on his lips. However, if he was puzzled, he betrayed no sign of it as he clasped his

hands and gravely bowed to the young Master. 'I am honoured.'

Trinket returned his salutation with a giggle and sauntered over from the doorway.

'Why are you honoured?'

Su Gang looked somewhat taken aback.

The Ten Masters of the Triad Society are men of known valour,' he said. 'It is an honour to meet any of them.'

Trinket grinned and nodded.

'I see.'

This unseemly levity on Trinket's part left Su Gang feeling even more nonplussed.

Wang Wutong now introduced all the other members of the Triads' party, and Su Gang, in turn, introduced the men who had accompanied him from Wanping. Three of them had trained under the same teacher of Martial Arts as the Bo brothers and himself and several of the others were former apprentices of his own. The dead man's widow, meanwhile, continued to cling to his body, weeping bitterly, while her sister-in-law, Young Bo's wife, though weeping herself, endeavoured to comfort her. Neither they nor any of the other women made any effort to come over and be introduced.

'Mr Bo,' said Yao Chun, 'won't you tell us what the quarrel between the Triads and your brother was about?' He coughed before continuing. 'Duke Mu's people of Yunnan are respected among professional fighting men everywhere, while the Triads for their part are known to have very strict rules of conduct. Neither of them is given to acting unreasonably; and Reason, as we know, is a lady who is very hard to shift. Whatever is at the bottom of this business is not going to be resolved by fighting. Old Ma and Lei and Wang here and my humble self are none of us connected with either party, although we are great admirers of both. So, Mr Bo, won't you, just for our sakes, try to tell us how all this

started?'

'I can give you my word that our Triad friends really didn't know that the elder Mr Bo had passed away,' Wang Wutong added. They would never have come here and put themselves in this embarrassing situation if they had.'

'Perhaps you can tell me why Mr Wei and his friends did come here then,' said Su Gang.

'I won't attempt to deceive you,' said Wang Wutong. 'According to what our Triad friends here have told us, it was because their Brother Xu Tianchuan was beaten up by some of Duke Mu's people—beaten up so badly that he couldn't speak. They felt that

they had no alternative but to get a few old fellows like me to come along with them and find out exactly what it was all about.'

'It sounds to me like a punitive expedition,' said Su Gang somewhat frostily.

'No, no, not at all, ' said Wang Wutong. 'Old River and Lake folk like us rely on the little bit of reputation we have to make a living. We depend entirely on the good opinion of our friends. The only way to decide what the rights and wrongs are in a case like this is by open discussion, we're not going to endanger the little bit of reputation we have by taking sides.'

Su Gang nodded. 'You're right. Let's all go into the other hall where we can talk.'

When they had all trooped into the reception hall, Su Gang told his companions to put up their weapons. All complied except Young Bo, who still clung obstinately to his sword.

Su Gang invited everyone to sit.

'Now, Maple, tell us, ' he said. 'What exactly happened?'

Young Bo sighed.

The day before yesterday, in the afternoon, ' he began; but at the mere recollection the anger flared up inside him and he once more began waving his sword. Trinket flinched back in alarm, whereupon even Young Bo seemed to become aware that he was behaving boorishly, for he flung the sword down then, with such force that he broke two of the floor-tiles. After breathing heavily for a moment or two, he began again.

The day before yesterday, in the afternoon, my brother and I were drinking upstairs in a wine-shop in the Bridge of Heaven district when suddenly an official came in attended by four men-servants. The menservants immediately began shouting for service and generally behaving in a thoroughly

objectionable manner; but what really struck us about these people was the fact that they were talking in Yunnan dialect, '

This brought an 'Oh' from Su Gang.

When my brother noticed this, he began listening more carefully, ' said Young Bo.

The Triads and their four invited companions all knew that, like other retainers of the Mu family (which had virtually ruled Yunnan for generations), Su Gang and the Bo brothers had been born and bred in that province and, when they were in Peking, would naturally take a more than usual interest in anyone speaking their own dialect.

'After listening for a bit, ' Young Bo continued, 'my brother exchanged a few words with this official across the room. When he heard that we were Yunnanese too, the official invited us to come over and join him. Well, having been away from home for quite a long time, my brother was longing to hear some local news, and it seemed that this official had only just arrived from Yunnan, so we went over and sat at his table. In the course of conversation it turned out that his name was Lu Yifeng and that he'd been appointed by Satrap Wu to be District Magistrate of Qujing prefecture. He came from Dali in Yunnan. According to the rules a person can't be made a D.M. in his own province, but this Lu Yifeng assured us that anyone appointed by Satrap Wu could forget about all that stuff, ' Brother Fan could not contain his indignation. 'Grandmother's! A pseudo-magistrate appointed by that filthy traitor Wu Sangui? What a nerve!'

Young Bo stared at him for a moment and then nodded. This Fan—er, Mr Fan is right. I thought so myself at the time; but my brother was so keen to get some local news out of him that he decided, for the time being at any rate, to go along with him and pretended to be impressed. That made this Lu Yifeng really happy. He told us that they've even got a special name now for officials appointed by the Satrap. "Western appointments" they call them. He told us that not only are all new officials in Yunnan "western appointments" nowadays, but even in Sichuan, Guangxi, and Guizhou officials appointed by the Satrap are more highly thought of than those appointed by the Emperor.'

Su Gang observed that Young Bo had begun panting asth-matically, and tactfully intervened.

When there's a vacancy and the Court in Peking and Wu Sangui both have their own appointee, the convention is that whichever of them gets there first has first right to the post. But as Kunming naturally gets to hear about vacancies in

Yunnan or any of the other three south-western provinces first, the Court's appointees are invariably beaten to it by the so-called "western appointments".'

Young Bo took a big breath and continued. This Lu Yifeng said the Manchus appreciated how much Wu Sangui had done for them. They realized that if it hadn't been for him, they'd never have been able to take over China, consequently they give him a lot of face. Whatever he asks the Court for gets approved. No proposal coming from him has ever been vetoed.'

'It's true, ' said Wang Wutong. 'I've been to all the southwestern provinces on security jobs, so I've seen with my own eyes. The only government the folk down that way know about is Satrap Wu's. They've never even heard of the Emperor.'

'This Lu Yifeng said that according to the rules every newly appointed magistrate is supposed to go to Court to receive his commission from the Emperor,' Young Bo continued, 'and that was why he was in Peking. He was waiting for an audience. But he said that in his case, because he'd already received his commission from the Satrap, this coming to Peking for an audience with the Emperor was merely a formality. "Well," said my brother then, "you're a Yunnan man yourself and Qujing prefecture is in Yunnan: as a fellow-countryman you'll be well placed to do the people there some good." This Lu fellow laughed loudly at that. "Exactly," he said. But just as he said that, someone chipped in from one of the other tables. It was that. . . that old ... oh, I hate that old man!'

This is the "Eight-Armed Ape", Xu Tianchuan, you are referring to, is it?' said Su Gang. 'Ec . . . ec . . . '

Rage seemed to have deprived him temporarily of speech; but after a moment or two he was able to go on.

'Exactly. He was sitting drinking on his own at a little table by the window. Then suddenly he chipped in. "As a fellow-countryman you'll be well placed to bleed them dry," he said. Wretched old man! We were all minding our own business. What did he have to butt in for?'

'Mr Bo,' said Father Obscurus very drily, 'what Brother Xu said was correct.'

Young Bo snorted and paused a moment before replying. 'Well yes, it was. I didn't say it wasn't. But. . . but. . . why couldn't he mind his own business? If it hadn't been for that one remark, none of this would have happened.'

Father Obscurus could see that he was flustered and thought it best not to

argue with him.

'When Lu Yifeng heard this,' Young Bo continued, 'he flew into a towering rage and began thumping the table; but when he turned to look, what he saw was this humpbacked, feeble-looking old plaster-seller, sitting there with his medicine chest beside him on the table and the flag with his business name on it propped against the chair. "What was that you said?" he shouted. "Stupid old fool!" By that time his four menservants were already on top of

the old man, banging on his table and swearing at him, and one of them had grabbed hold of him by the collar. I must have been blind not to see that the old devil was perfectly capable of looking after himself, but I thought at the time that he was some poor old chap who'd got carried away by his righteous indignation and blurted out something that he might later on regret. I didn't want him to get hurt, so on pretence of going over to reason with them, I managed to get the four menservants off his back.'

'It shows that your heart is in the right place, Mr Bo,' said Father Obscurus. 'I would say that you acted like a gentleman.'

He was anxious to seem conciliatory, for with the elder Bo already dead but Brother Xu, though badly wounded, likely to survive, it looked as if the Triads had come out of this comparatively lightly and he was hoping that a little mild flattery might calm the young man down. But Young Bo wasn't having any and glared

back scornfully.

'A gentleman? No,' he said, 'I acted like a fool. I ought to have had the wit to see that this wasn't a good man at all but a murderous, calculating old villain. Anyway, Lu Yifeng began getting on his official high horse then, shouting at him and calling him every name under the sun. "This is rebellion," he said. "Peking is full of cunning rascals like you masquerading as honest citizens. It's high time someone dealt firmly with you!"'

'What a swine!' said Brother Fan, interrupting. 'Not enough for him to bully the poor people in Yunnan: he has to come to Peking and do his bullying here.'

'I don't know about that,' said Young Bo. 'I don't think he found it quite so easy here. While he was hollering away at his servants to tie the old man up and take him to the authorities to be given forty strokes of the heavy bamboo and put in the pillory as an example, all the old villain did was laugh.

' "Aren't you tiring yourself with all this shouting, Your Honour?" he said. "Let

me sell you a plaster to build up your strength." Then he took a plaster out of his medicine chest and began working it between his palms to flatten out the ointment.

'Well, I'd already had my suspicions about him when I saw how unafraid he was of those thuggish menservants, but when I saw the way he handled that plaster, I exchanged a look with my brother, because I was sure now that he wasn't the feeble old man he appeared to be.

'As you well know, the way they make these plasters is to

fold the ointment in a lump in the middle, which is so hard by the time you buy the plaster that normally you have to heat it for quite a while before you can open it out for use; but all this old man did was to work it for half a minute between his palms. It must have taken incredible inner power to generate the amount of heat needed to soften it.

'Anyway there the old villain was now, with the plaster opened out all steaming hot in his hand while that Lu Yifeng, still quite unaware of what the old villain was up to, went on bawling to his manservants to arrest him. This time I did nothing to hinder them. I thought to myself, if they were looking for trouble, I wasn't going to stand in their way. One of those thugs saw that I wasn't going to stop them and made a dash at him.

"Oh, do you want the plaster?" said the old villain, and he placed it in the fellow's hand.

The man swore at him: "Old dog!" he said. "What do you think you're doing?"

Then somehow—I don't quite know how he did it—the old villain gave the manservant a little push so that he swivelled round and clapped the steaming hot plaster right over his master's mouth.' Trinket could no longer contain his laughter and clapped his hands delightedly, but when Young Bo snorted and glanced murderously in his direction he immediately fell silent. 'Yes?' said Su Gang. Then what?'

Then, while Lu Yifeng tried to tear the plaster off his mouth,' Young Bo went on, 'the old villain began urging the menservants to do something. "Go on!" he said. "Go and help His Honour!" and the next thing we heard was "slap, slap, slap, slap, slap, slap": the four of them looked as if they were playing some sort of game, taking it in turns to slap their master's face. It was the old villain, of course, with his diabolical skill, manipulating them from behind like puppets. Within a very short time the wretched man's face was red and swollen.'

Once more Trinket burst out laughing; but this time he turned away to do so and was careful to avoid Young Bo's eye. Su Gang nodded.

'You can understand why this old Xu came to be nicknamed the Eight-Armed Ape, ' he said. 'In the "fancy" branch of Catch-Can wrestling he's reckoned to be the greatest living Master.'

Whether or not this was strictly true, it seemed obvious to him that the old man must have had considerable martial skill to

have caused the elder Bo's death, and he hoped that by praising his skill he would make the brothers' defeat seem less humiliating.

'We couldn't help laughing, ' said Young Bo. 'Lu Yifeng stood there with blood trickling down both sides of his face, surrounded by customers from other parts of the shop who'd come to watch the fun, while the old villain kept shouting, "Don't hit him! Don't hit His Honour! You mustn't lay hands on your own master!" and all the time dancing round like a big monkey, giving a little push here and a little push there to the arm or hand of one or other of the four thuggish menservants, yet managing to look as if he was trying to dodge out of their way, so that none of the bystanders was aware that he was responsible for their movements. He kept this game up until Lu Yifeng fell down unconscious on the floor, then he quietly slipped back and sat down again at his own table.

The four menservants thought they'd been bewitched. They couldn't for the life of them make out how they had come to be hitting their own master; yet the blood on their hands was real enough. For a while they stood staring at it stupidly, then finally they picked him up and carried him away.'

'Very good! I like that!' said Brother Fan. 'It's a pity all those pseudo-officials of Wu Bangui's can't be dealt with in the same way. What Brother Xu did struck a blow for all our poor oppressed countrymen. I wonder you didn't feel like helping him, Mr Bo.'

Young Bo's anger returned.

'Why should I?' he said loudly. 'He was only showing off his skill. In any case, he was the one doing the hitting; no one was

hitting him, '

That's right, ' said Father Obscurus. 'Before he realized that Brother Xu was a trained fighter, Mr Bo did go to help him. He went to save him from those four thugs, like a true gentleman, '

Young Bo made a little humph-like sound before continuing.

'After Lu Yifeng and his four menservants had gone, my brother called the proprietor of the wine-shop to him and told him that he would pay for any damage. He also said he would pay the old villain's bill. The old villain laughed then and thanked him and my brother invited him to come and sit with us at our table.

' "I've heard a lot about the famous brothers Pine and Maple," the old villain said, speaking in a low voice so as not to be overheard. "It's a great honour to meet you." It gave us a shock to find out that he had known who we were all along, although we hadn't the faintest idea who he was. "I'm ashamed not to know it, but I'm

going to have to ask you what your name is," said my brother. The old villain laughed again. "Xu Tianchuan at your service," he said. "I must apologize for making an exhibition of myself just now in front of the real experts. I got a bit carried away."

'At the time we knew nothing about Xu Tianchuan, but we thought that anyone who'd done what he'd just done must be on our side, for if he hadn't beaten up that bogus official, we would have given him a good thrashing ourselves. Anyway, the three of us sat there talking and drinking for a bit and we seemed to be getting on very well together; but it wasn't very convenient talking to him in the wine-shop, so we invited him to come with us and have a meal here.'

'Oh,' said Brother Fan, 'so Brother Xu came here? Is this where you started fighting then?'

'Certainly not!' said Young Bo indignantly. 'He was our guest here. We wouldn't fight an invited guest under our own roof.' Father Obscure nodded.

'Of course not. Men of Honour like the Bo brothers? It's inconceivable that they would do such a thing.'

This was the third or fourth time he had spoken in commendation of the brothers. His efforts at conciliation were beginning to have some effect, for this time Young Bo nodded to him in gratitude for the confirmation.

'We treated the old man with great respect when we got here,' he continued. 'When we asked him how he came to know who we were, he no longer concealed from us the fact that he was a member of the Triad Society. He said that the Society had had advance information of our coming to Peking and that

he had wanted to meet us ever since he heard the news. He said that when he beat up that bogus official in the wine-shop it was partly because he detested Wu Sanguai and all his works, but also as a means of getting to know us. The old villain certainly knew how to talk. He had the two of us thinking he must be a really nice old man.

'Gradually the conversation got round to the Resistance movement and the three of us—no, not the three of us, the two of us and that vile dog—found ourselves in complete agreement—'

Two men and a dog in complete agreement, ' Trinket chipped in. That must have been interesting.'

The others present could not help smiling at this but refrained from laughing out loud for fear of upsetting Young Bo. Young Bo, notwithstanding, was extremely angry.

'Hold your tongue, you little brat!'

'Mr Bo,' Brother Fan expostulated, 'this is the Master of the Green Wood Lodge of the Triad Society you are addressing, whom everyone in our Society, high and low, treats with respect.'

'What of it?' said Young Bo.

Su Gang hurriedly interrupted.

'My friend Bo has been greatly upset by the death of his brother. I must ask you all to be indulgent if he speaks a little wildly sometimes. Please excuse him, Mr Wei.'

He knew that the status of Master in the Triad Society was very considerable and that to call one of them a 'brat' was to put oneself seriously in the wrong.

Young Bo was no fool and knew that he had gone too far. When he continued he was careful to avoid Trinket's eye.

The three of us—'

'No,' said Trinket, 'the two of you and the dog.'

'You . . . you . . . ' Young Bo shouted angrily, but managed, with some difficulty, to swallow whatever it was he had been going

to call him.

'From discussing the Resistance we got on to the subject of what we should do when we had finished wiping out the Tartars,' he said after taking a big breath. 'I mean, which of the Ming Founder's descendants should sit once again on the Dragon Throne.

"When His Imperial Majesty died in Burma," said my brother, "his only surviving heir was a little boy. At present he's living in hiding in the hills." "But the true Ming Emperor is alive and well in Taiwan," said the old villain.'

As soon as they heard that, Su Gang and the four Martial Arts professionals knew what the Triads had long since surmised: that the quarrel between old Xu and the Bo brothers had been over the Ming succession and the rivalry between the four claimants to the throne and their supporters.

The dispute is ancient history,' said Yao Chun. 'It is not worth fighting about.'

'Where Honour or Loyalty is at stake,' said Su Gang, 'a quarrel must be pursued to its end.' He turned once more to Young Bo. 'So what happened next?'

'Naturally my brother and I were anxious to put the old villain right. The argument got a bit noisy, but neither side would give way, and in the end my brother got so angry that he smashed up a tea-table with a single blow of his hand. The old villain gave a

sort of sneering laugh. "If you can't win the argument with words," he said, "do you think you can win it by brute force? Duke Mu's two Family Trees may be world-renowned fighters and I may be only a nobody from the Triad Society, but you don't scare me that way." Well of course, this was tantamount to saying that the most insignificant member of the Triad Society was better than the most distinguished member of Duke Mu's establishment. "I don't see that it's any concern of yours what I do with my own furniture," said my brother, "but I'd like to know on what authority you think you can insult the memory of Duke Mu." They went at it a bit longer after that, but they'd soon reached a point of no return and neither of them would budge, so it ended up with our arranging to meet him at midnight that night at the Altar of Heaven for a duel.' Su Gang sighed.

'So that's how it all started, ' he said, half speaking to himself.

'We said very little when we turned up at the Altar of Heaven that night,' Young

Bo continued. 'We just started fighting straight away.'

There were two of you and only one of him,' said Trinket, 'so was it your brother who fought him first or was it you?'

Young Bo turned very red and started shouting.

'My brother and I always fought as a team. Whether it was one man we were fighting or a hundred, it was always the two of us.'

Trinket nodded.

'I see. So if it was a little kid like me you were fighting, it would still be the two of you?'

Young Bo let out a bellow of rage and raised his hand in the air intending to bring it down on Trinket's head, but Su Gang's own hand shot out and seized him by the wrist.

'No, Maple, you mustn't!'

This . . . this brat is insulting my dead brother,' Young Bo cried.

Trinket had aimed his quip at the living brother, not thinking about the dead one. Seeing Young Bo once again half demented with grief and rage, he became afraid and decided not to open his mouth again.

'Maple, ' said Su Gang, 'the person who gives offence is the one who has to pay. It's Xu Tianchuan who murdered your brother. He is the one you have to settle accounts with. You mustn't keep going for other people.'

Young Bo eyed Trinket murderously.

'One of these days I'm going to skin you alive and tear out your sinews, ' he snarled.

Trinket stuck his tongue out. As long as Su Gang was there, he calculated, Young Bo couldn't touch him. If he was going to skin him alive and tear his sinews out, it wouldn't be today at any rate.

'Mr Su, ' said Brother Fan, 'you said a moment ago that Mr Bo was "murdered" by our Brother Xu. Surely "murder" isn't quite the word? Young Mr Bo himself has just told us that the two parties met by appointment and that Brother Xu was fighting on his own against the two of them: there was no secret plotting or

surprise ambush and you certainly couldn't say that Mr Bo was outnumbered. It was open combat. How can you call that murder?'

'Of course he was murdered, ' said Young Bo angrily. 'Before we went to keep this appointment, my brother and I had already talked it over and decided what we would do. My brother said that although the person we were going to fight was a stupid, wrong-headed old man who didn't understand about things like divine right and the will of heaven, he was after all one of us in so far as he was a member of the Resistance and working, like us, towards a Ming restoration. Out of respect for the Triad Society, he said, we ought to agree in advance that a touch on one of the vital points would count as a win. We wouldn't actually hurt him. So in this duel we were deliberately holding back. We weren't expecting him to take advantage of that and strike to kill. That's why I call it murder.'

'So how did he do that?' Su Gang asked him.

'After we'd each delivered and parried about forty attacks without either side gaining any definite advantage, ' said Young Bo, 'the old villain jumped clear of us, clasped his hands and bowed. "I'm truly impressed," he said. "Neither side is winning. Let's call it quits and not fight any more. It's no wonder Duke Mu's people are famous throughout China," he said. "You're brilliant fighters.'"

'Why, that was excellent, ' said Brother Fan. 'No need to fight any more. You could have parted then with no ill feelings. What was wrong with that?'

'You didn't see the expression on his face while he was saying it, ' said Young Bo angrily. 'You don't think he really meant it, do you? He'd got a little smile on his face as much as to say, "If two of Duke Mu's people fighting against one old man can't get the better of him, all that talk about being famous throughout China is

a lot of empty boasting." Naturally I was angry. I said, "If neither of us is winning, we'd better go on fighting until one of us is." Although he was so light on his feet, his strength wasn't equal to the combined strength of the two of us and he knew that in the long run he was bound to lose. That's the only reason he wanted to stop fighting. It was just an excuse to get away.

'Anyway, we went on fighting then for quite a while until I did a Tiger's Leap and came down on him from above. That fooled him, because as he ducked aside to avoid me, my brother simultaneously did a Two Way Sweep. We'd practised this together many times in the past. In the Two Way Sweep you swing your left leg to the right at the same time as you swing your right hand towards the left, so that your opponent has no means of avoiding you.' He

demonstrated it for them. Father Obscurus nodded.

'Hm. Yes. Striking from both sides. I can see there's no getting away from that one. Very neat.'

The old villain seemed to crumple up and fall towards my brother,' Young Bo continued. This was just as we'd planned. As he fell, my brother's two hands were ready to thrust against his chest. My brother laughed. "Ha ha!" he said. "You've lost!"; but even while he was saying it there was a sickening thump as the old villain hit him a murderous double body-blow. I could see that something was wrong and did a Cataract on the old villain's back—one wo, one two in rapid succession—which made him stagger. But my brother was already on his knees on the ground, vomiting blood. I rushed in a panic to lift him up, while the old villain laughed and went limping slowly away. I could easily have run after him and given him a few more hacks to finish him off, but I was too worried about my brother, who seemed to be seriously wounded, to bother about anything else. My brother died in my arms on the way back home. All he managed to say before he died were the words "Avenge my death." If I don't avenge him, Su, I shan't be able to call myself a man.'

At this point he burst into a flood of tears. Father Obscurus turned to address the Triad who stood beside him.

'Brother Feng, what about you and me trying to demonstrate those last few movements that Mr Bo has just described to us?'

The person thus addressed was an unprepossessing, somewhat oafish-looking individual whom Trinket had not heard utter

a single word since the time he was introduced to him in the underground chamber at the apothecary's and whose presence he had up to now barely noticed. Brother Feng nodded wordlessly, rose to his feet, and made a light feint at Father Obscurus, who, having first parried it with his left hand, assumed a hunched-up, crouching attitude, arms held out widely from his sides and fingers curled into claws, in exact imitation of the ape-like posture that had earned Brother Xu his nickname. With a stamp of his left foot Brother Feng now launched himself into a parabolic leap, so high that he appeared to be diving down on Father Obscurus's head.

That's the Tiger's Leap,' said Yao Chun approvingly. 'A good one.'

Father Obscurus had meanwhile dodged aside to avoid this human projectile,

but the latter had miraculously righted himself and now stood in front of him, executing, with left leg and right arm, the Two Way Sweep that Young Bo had himself been demonstrating a few moments previously. The speed and agility with which this bumpkin-like individual had moved from the Tiger's Leap of the younger brother to the Two Way Sweep of the elder was so fantastic that it was easy for the spectators to imagine them being performed not by one man in succession but by two men simultaneously. Even as they were applauding, Father Obscurus seemed to shrink in on himself and fall towards Brother Feng's body. Brother Feng thrust his hands out against his chest, somewhat woodenly uttering the first words he had spoken yet: 'Ha ha! You've lost!' But as he did so, Father Obscurus's right fist shot out to his midriff and his left fist lower down to his belly. For a few moments the two men stood frozen in that position, each having both hands in contact with his opponent's body.

'Is this right, Mr Bo?' said Father Obscurus. 'Is this how it

was?'

But before Young Bo could answer, Brother Feng jumped clear, slipped with lightning speed behind Father Obscurus and, with palms held vertical and parallel to the right of his own face, proceeded to make successive karate-chops on his back, saying, by way of explanation, The Cataract.' The chops were, needless to say, only simulated and barely touched Father Obscurus's body. Then once again, with a speed that made the onlookers feel dizzy, he jumped back to his former position, both hands on Father Obscurus's chest, while Father Obscurus placed his fists exactly as before against Brother Feng's midriff and belly.

Apart from Trinket, all those present were highly skilled, experienced men who had seen a great deal of fighting in their time, but never in their lives had they witnessed anything to match the uncanny agility and artistry of Brother Feng. It took them a few moments to recover from their wonderment before they realized what the real purpose of this demonstration was: fighting alone against two such opponents, Brother Xu, at the moment he dealt the elder Bo his death-blow, was in an impossibly dangerous situation. There could have been no question of his 'holding back', as Young Bo claimed he ought to have been doing. If he had, Young Bo would undoubtedly have finished him off with his Cataract. Father Obscurus now repeated his question. 'Is this right, Mr Bo? Is this how it was?' Young Bo, ashen-faced now, nodded reluctantly. It was not just the dazzling skill of the demonstration but the fact that Brother Feng had executed these movements in exactly the way, down to the minutest detail, that Young Bo and his brother had been taught them by their Martial Arts instructor. The Tiger's Leap, the Cataract, and the Two Way Sweep belonged, all three, to a style of fighting developed in the household of Duke Mu. The 'Mu

Family Style' was known to connoisseurs of all-in wrestling all over China and had many imitators. There was nothing unusual in Brother Feng being familiar with these movements. What shook Young Bo was the fact that he had been able to perform them with a textbook precision and at a speed that he and his brother, who had practised them all their lives, could probably not have equalled.

Brother Feng dropped his hands to his sides and addressed Father Obscurus.

'Sorry, Father. Would you mind taking off your gown?' Father Obscurus was somewhat startled by this request, but complied with it none the less. He took off his Taoist robe and gave it a shake. As he did so, two pieces of cloth fluttered from it to the floor, and when he held up the gown to look, there were two large holes in it where Brother Feng's hands had been thrust against his chest. He felt his chest in some alarm. A force sufficient to make holes in his gown must surely have caused considerable internal injury. But he appeared to be unhurt.

'Mr Bo's strike would have had more force in it than mine,' said Brother Feng. 'After two such blows to the chest and the Cataract on top of that I doubt the old man will live,'

Brother Feng's demonstration of an Inner Force so intense that it could make holes in clothing without damaging the body beneath it impressed the onlookers even more than his single-handed enactment of the simultaneous movements of the two brothers. So astonished were they in fact, that they forgot to applaud. Trinket was reminded of the holes that had appeared in his own gown the morning after his battering by the old eunuch. What had then seemed supernatural must evidently have been caused by some secret art known also to Brother Feng.

Su Gang and Young Bo exchanged glances, both looking extremely glum. It was obvious that Brother Feng's martial skill greatly exceeded their own. It was also obvious that the double blow which had proved fatal to the elder Bo had been struck by old Brother Xu in self-defence, when he was caught between the deadly pounding of the two brothers: a desperate reaction to a desperate situation for which he could not reasonably be blamed.

There's no doubt about it, this Mr Feng is a real master,' said Su Gang. 'It's certainly been an eye-opener for me, what I've just seen. I'm sure if my friend Bo had had such skill, he would still be alive today.'

'You're just being polite, Mr Su,' said Trinket. 'Everyone knows that the elder Mr Bo's fighting skills were first-class.'

Young Bo glared at him murderously, but could scarcely object to his own brother being praised.

'And everyone knows that the younger Mr Bo's fighting skills are first-class,' Trinket added.

Brother Fan, afraid that he was about to make some provocative remark that would create further complications, hastily intervened.

'I think we've already caused you enough trouble for one day, ' he said, clasping his hands and bowing politely to Su Gang and Young Bo. 'I think we had better be going.'

'Hold on a minute!' said Father Obscurus. 'Shouldn't we first make our kowtows to the dead? This business—oh dear!—it's all very distressing. But we mustn't allow it to damage the good relations between Duke Mu's people and our Society.'

As he said this he began moving towards the inner hall, but was halted by Young Bo, who barred the way with his arms.

'My brother is still waiting to be revenged, ' he said fiercely. 'He doesn't need your false sympathy.'

'Look, Mr Bo, ' said Father Obscurus, 'I'm not going to argue

that your brother's death was one of those unfortunate accidents that sometimes happen in fights when a blow lands in the wrong place. But even if Brother Xu intended your brother's death as you say he did, you can't make out that the whole Triad Society is to blame. We only want to pay him our respects. It's the least we can do, as fellow-soldiers in the same cause.'

'Father Obscurus is right, Maple,' said Su Gang. 'We mustn't refuse a courtesy.'

So Trinket, Father Obscurus, Brother Fan, Brother Feng, Dr Yao, old Ma, and the rest went into the other hall, knelt down in front of the coffin and made their kowtows,

Young Bo observed that Trinket was muttering to himself all the time he was on his knees. When, after the third kowtow, he got up, he asked him suspiciously what he had been saying.

'I was praying,' said Trinket. 'I was talking to your brother's soul in Heaven.'

What business is it of yours what I was saying?' 'Praying?' said Young Bo. 'It didn't sound like it.' 'I told your brother not to worry,' said Trinket. 'I said, "Your younger brother has beaten me black and blue all over, I'm probably not going to live much longer. Just a day or two more," I told him, "and I'll be keeping you company up there."' 'When did I ever beat you?' said Young Bo. Trinket rolled back his left sleeve and showed a bruised and swollen wrist on which the finger-marks of the hand which had gripped it were still distinctly visible. 'What's this then?' he said.

Su Gang glanced at Young Bo. His face assumed a reproachful expression when the latter made no attempt to disown his handiwork.

'Mr Wei,' he said apologetically, 'this matter obviously needs looking into. Do you think we could discuss it at a later date?'

'I think I'm too badly hurt to get better,' said Trinket. 'At a later date I probably shan't be alive to discuss it.'

He was talking in a normal tone of voice and didn't sound at all like a person who had been seriously injured. Su Gang concluded that he was merely playing with them and asked himself, not for the first time, how on earth the Triads had come to choose this juvenile delinquent for their Master.

'I'm sure you'll outlive us all, Mr Wei,' he said. 'You have at least forty or fifty years ahead of you.'

'I've got a terrible pain in my belly and my insides feel as if

they've been turned inside out and twisted upside down,' said Trinket. 'I feel at the moment that I'll be lucky if I last till tomorrow. Father Obscurus, Brother Feng, if I should die, don't try to avenge my death on Mr Bo. It's our cause that matters. I don't want you to do anything that might spoil things between Duke Mu's lot and the Triads.'

Su Gang frowned and hurriedly conducted Trinket and his party to the door. When they were outside, Father Obscurus thanked Ma Boren and the other professionals for their trouble and then the two parties, Triads and professional witnesses, went their separate ways.

Three Corpses and a Kidnapping

When they got back to the apothecary's shop, the Triads could see, as soon as they opened the door, that something was wrong. The counter had collapsed under some heavy weight and the hundreds of little drawers in which the drugs

were stored had been emptied and lay amidst their scattered contents in promiscuous confusion on the floor. They rushed inside the shop shouting, but there was no reply from the fat apothecary or his two assistants. They found all three of them lying dead in the inner room.

The shop was in a quiet, out-of-the-way area, otherwise there would have been a crowd of onlookers by now; but just in case someone should arrive and try to get in, Father Obscurus told Brother Gao to bar the door on the inside before they went to look for Brother Xu. That done, they took up the cover of the secret stairway and rushed to the underground chamber, shouting as they went. But Brother Xu had disappeared without trace.

'Bastards!' Brother Fan shouted furiously. 'What bastards those Mu turtles are! Back we go, then! And this time it's a fight to the finish.'

'No, just a minute,' said Father Obscurus. 'Let's think. If they'd been going to kill him, they'd have done it here. The fact that they've kidnapped him means that they can't be intending to kill him—not just yet, anyway.'

He turned to another of the Triads: 'Hurry, quick as you can to the Agency. Tell Wang Wutong and the other three that we need them again as witnesses.'

The four professionals arrived in due course and inspected the shambles. They were appalled by what they saw and very angry.

All agreed that they should go back to Young Bo's place without delay and insist that Brother Xu be delivered up to them.

And so the Triads and their four witnesses set out once more for Willow Lane.

This time it was Young Bo himself who opened the door to them.

'So what do you want now?' he asked them coldly. 'Why ask, when you know the answer?' Brother Fan bellowed back at him. 'This job you've just done is disgusting. I didn't think you people could stoop so low.'

'Stoop so low?' said Young Bo angrily. 'I don't understand you. What job are you talking about?'

'Where's Brother Xu?' said Brother Fan. 'Hand him over to us at once! Sneaking over to our apothecary's and killing our employees when you knew we wouldn't be there: I call that really low.'

'Don't talk nonsense!' Young Bo shouted back at him. 'I don't know anything

about your apothecary or your employees.'

Su Gang appeared now, drawn by the noise of the shouting. 'Ah, you're back again, gentlemen. What can we do for you?' he asked the Triads.

'Mr Su,' said Tiger Face Lei gravely, 'I suppose it's for some other judgement to decide, but I must say I think in this case you people really are in the wrong. I can understand your wanting revenge, but to wantonly kill innocent people, and in the Capital too—the consequences are liable to be very serious.' Su Gang turned to Young Bo in perplexity. 'What is he talking about?'

'Don't ask me,' said Young Bo. 'I haven't the faintest idea.' 'Mr Su, Mr Bo,' said Wang Wutong, 'three employees have been killed at the apothecary's shop which is the Triad Society's safe house in the Capital and Xu Tianchuan, who was hidden there, has been kidnapped. Let's for the moment forget about the rights and wrongs of this business: they can be discussed later. All I'm asking now, as a personal favour to me and my three colleagues, is that you should release Mr Xu and hand him back to the Triads.'

'Are you saying that Xu Tianchuan has been kidnapped?' Su Gang asked in some surprise. 'How extraordinary! I can see that you would naturally suspect us first, but don't forget that we were here all the time with you when this is supposed to have happened. We could hardly be in two places at once.'

'No, but there was nothing to stop you sending someone to do the job for you,' said Brother Fan.

'I can't help it if you don't believe me,' said Su Gang. 'You are welcome to come inside and search the house if you like.'

'Magic Hand has always been a man of his word,' said Young Bo loudly. 'If he says the old man isn't here, that ought to be enough for you. For my part, I don't mind telling you that if the old villain ever did fall into my hands, I'd chop him in half immediately. I wouldn't waste good food on keeping him a prisoner.'

There must be something else behind this,' said Su Gang musingly. 'I'd like to suggest that you allow us to come over to this safe house of yours and have a look. Do you think we could?'

The Triads were now in something of a quandary. It looked as if Su Gang and Young Bo were innocent of the kidnapping, but they weren't quite sure.

'Look, Mr Su, ' said Brother Fan, 'I think we'd feel happier if you could give us

some sort of definite assurance that Xu Tianchuan is not in your hands.'

'He's not,' said Su Gang. 'I give you my solemn word for it. And I give you my word that Mr Bo has nothing to do with this

kidnapping either.'

Su Gang was a man of honour whose honesty was a byword among professional fighting men. If he gave his word that Brother Xu was not being held at Willow Lane, the Triads felt pretty confident that he was not there.

'In that case,' said Father Obscurus, 'please do come to our place and have a look.' He turned to Trinket. That's all right,

Master, isn't it?

'Why ask me?' thought Trinket. 'You've already invited them.' 'If you say so, Father Obscurus,' he said. 'Anyway, three of

our people have been killed so while they're about it they'll be able

to make a few kowtows to them to show us that they're sorry. It's

only right they should.'

Su Gang and Young Bo stared at him indignantly. The

unspeakable brat was as good as accusing them of the three

murders.

So they all trooped back to the apothecary's, accompanied this time by the two from Willow Lane, who made a careful inspection of the corpses. They could see that the bodies of all three, the fat apothecary and his two assistants, had been brutally assaulted, their ribs broken, and their chests stoved in towards the spine. It

was the work of crude assassins, not of anyone properly trained in the Martial Arts.

'We must definitely get to the bottom of this,' said Young Bo. 'It's not right that we should be blamed for it.'

'Never mind who is to blame,' said Su Gang. 'No doubt the truth will emerge

eventually but it will take some time. The important thing now is that Xu Tianchuan is in enemy hands. We must find a way of rescuing him as soon as possible.'

They combed through the shop from front to back without finding anything, then went down below into the secret chamber, but still they could find no clue. As it was getting late, the two from Willow Lane and the four professionals began their leave-taking, arranging before they went each to carry out investigations in different parts of the city.

Brother Fan asked Su Gang and Young Bo if they had seen all they wanted to see.

'Make sure you have, ' he said. 'As there's no one living nearby, we'll be setting fire to this place some time round about midnight to get rid of the bodies. We don't want the authorities nosing in on this.'

As soon as Su Gang and Young Bo had gone, a long discussion began among the Triads about what had happened. All agreed that Brother Xu's kidnapping was almost certainly the work of the Mu faction, otherwise his disappearance at precisely the time when the shop was ransacked and the apothecary and his assistants killed made no sort of sense. The most that could be said in Su Gang and Young Bo's defence was that it could have been done by other members of the Mu clan without their connivance. Having dealt with that question, they began discussing the means they would employ to burn down the shop. Here was a matter to engage Trinket's excited attention; but Father Obscurus warned him against taking part.

'It's getting late, Master, ' he said. 'You'd better be getting back to the Palace. There's not much to it really, burning a shop down. We ought to be able to manage it all right ourselves without your supervision.'

Trinket laughed.

'Come on, Father Obscurus, you don't have to pretend with me. I've only got this tamardy Master's job because I was made to; I'm not an experienced fighter like the rest of you. The only reason I wanted to stay was to join in the fun.'

Up to now the Triads' attitude to Trinket had superficially been polite and courteous, but because of his extreme youth and the fact that he had let them down so badly in the Willow Lane encounter, they were secretly contemptuous of him. In contrast, the boyish frankness of what he had just said struck them as strangely touching; and though they felt no more respect for their little

Master now than they had done previously, they began to look on him with a new-found warmth.

'We shan't set fire to this place until well after midnight, ' said Father Obscurus smiling, 'and even after that we shall have to hang around a long time to make sure it doesn't spread. It might be a bit awkward if you were to spend the whole night outside the Palace.'

Trinket knew he was right. The Palace gates were closed at nightfall and after that no one could get in or out. He was the Emperor's favourite and for that very reason conspicuous, and spending the night outside without permission was an offence carrying the direst penalties. He yielded with a sigh.

'What a pity! I'd so like to have been the one to start the fire.'

Brother Gao, in a softly spoken aside, did his best to comfort him.

'If we ever have to burn a house down in daylight, Master, '

he said, 'we'll definitely ask you to start it.'

Trinket brightened immediately and grasped his hand.

'Promise, Brother Gao? On your face and troth? Mind you don't forget!'

'Your wish is our command.'

'Couldn't we go to Willow Lane tomorrow then, and burn down Young Bo's place?'

Brother Gao was alarmed. This was more than he had bargained for.

'Not tomorrow, ' he said hurriedly. 'That's something that would need a lot of thinking about. Anyway, the Helmsman probably wouldn't be too pleased if he got to hear about it.'

Trinket's elation quickly vanished and he went off disconsolately to change back into his eunuch's uniform. When he had done so, Brother Gao collected together the clothes, shoes, and other items of his disguise and made them up into a bundle which he carried for him. The Triads, having first made a quick reconnaissance of the neighbourhood to make sure that none of Duke Mu's people were spying on them, grouped themselves round him in a protective

knot and escorted him up to the main road, where they

hired a closed chair that would take him back to the Palace. He got

in, nodding his farewell to the Brothers, and when he was settled, Brother Gao handed in his bundle. Just before the bearers started, another Triad thrust his head inside the chair.

'Master,' said this individual, keeping his voice down low, 'it would be a good idea if you were to take a look in the Imperial Catering Department's kitchens first thing tomorrow morning.' Take a look at what?' Trinket asked him. 'Nothing,' said the man, and withdrew his head. Trinket couldn't put a name to the man's face. It was a sly, ferrety face with a wispy moustache: the sort of face you might expect to find behind a market stall. Its owner hadn't been one of the party which went to Willow Lane, and Trinket had up to now assumed that he was one of the apothecary's assistants. He wondered what reason he could possibly have for wanting him to visit the Imperial kitchens next day. • • •

A Strange Delivery of Pork

Inspection of the Imperial Catering Department's kitchens was, of course, nominally part of Trinket's job, so when he went there bright and early next morning to have a look, the appearance on the scene of their supreme commander had all the staff, from the Eunuch Supervisor of Kitchens downwards, on their toes, and a succession of them came rushing up to serve him with tea and a selection of their finest delicacies.

These little cakes you make are very good,' said Trinket after sampling a few different kinds, 'but you ought to get a Yangzhou cook to give you a few tips when you're making stuff like this.'

'We shall indeed, Goong-goong,' said the Eunuch Supervisor. Thank you for mentioning it, Goong-goong. This is just the sort of thing we like to be told.'

Trinket couldn't see anything unusual in the kitchens and was about to return to his own room when one of the two Eunuch Buyers, the Meats and Victuals one, arrived back from the market, followed by a man holding a big steelyard who laughed and nodded his head obsequiously as he answered whatever it was the Eunuch Buyer had just been saying.

'Ha ha! Yes, Goong-goong. I'll do exactly as you say. No problem at all.'

Trinket recognized the man with a start. It was the one who

had told him the day before that he ought to visit the kitchens. The Eunuch Buyer came hurrying over to Trinket to pay his respects.

'Who is this with you?' Trinket asked him.

This is Butcher Qian from the North City,' said the Eunuch Buyer, smiling. 'We're being specially privileged this morning: he's delivering the dozen pig carcasses we ordered from him in person.' He turned to address the man. Today must be your lucky day, Qian. This Laurie Goong-goong is the Manager of the whole Imperial Catering Department. He is also the number one favourite of His Imperial Majesty the Emperor. Even we don't get to see him all that easily. You must have worn your prayer-mat out in three past lives to have earned a chance like this!

Butcher Qian immediately dropped to his knees and began knocking his head on the floor.

The Goong-goong who feeds and clothes me, who is father and mother to me!' he said between bumps. 'What an honour to meet you! I bless my ancestors that I have lived to see this day!'

'All right,' said Trinket. 'No need to overdo it.' But while he said this, he was thinking, 'I wonder what he's got himself into the Palace for. I wish he'd let me know beforehand.'

Butcher Qian was now on his feet again, his face all wreathed in smiles.

'I owe everything I have to you Goong-goongs in the Palace,' he said. 'Not that the prices I charge you aren't very reasonable— in fact I hardly make a profit. But the prestige I get from being pork-butcher to the Emperor and the Princes and Princesses is a guarantee to the public outside that my meat is the best to be had. No other butcher can compete with me. In less than a year I've doubled my business several times over. And all thanks to you Goong-goongs.'

He concluded with a whole series of bowings and hand-pumpings.

Trinket nodded.

'You must be pretty well off then.' •• • . ! .

Thanks to you,' said Butcher Qian. 'Here,' he said, fishing two banknotes from an inside pocket, 'a little token of my esteem. It's nothing. You can use it when you want to give someone else a tip.'

He delivered the notes respectfully with both his hands.

Trinket looked at them. Two banknotes for five hundred taels each. A thousand taels. With a slight start he recognized them as

two of the banknotes he had handed to Brother Gao a couple of days previously. Butcher Qian looked at him and gestured towards the Eunuch Buyer with his lips. Immediately Trinket understood.

'Thank you,' he said. 'You're very kind.' He turned to the Eunuch Buyer with a smile and handed him the notes. 'Why don't you share Butcher Qian's present with the others?' he said. 'I shan't be wanting any of it myself.'

There was excitement among the other eunuchs when they caught sight of the notes. A thousand taels was far beyond any amount that normally came their way. It was a general rule that suppliers of meat, poultry, fish, or vegetables should give a small commission on each delivery, and there were regular presents at the New Year and seasonal festivals; but these were never more than four or five hundred taels. And even then the Manager of the Imperial Catering Department invariably kept half back for himself. This time not only was the present an unusually large one, but Laurie Goong-goong had expressly renounced his claim to any part of it. When they calculated what each of them would get, it came to quite a tidy little sum.

But the Eunuch Buyer thought differently. He assumed that Trinket was only acting generous because there were others present and would expect his Manager's share of it when the time came. In his calculation a major part would have to be set aside for Trinket and given to him later.

There can't be many people who are as kind and considerate to their subordinates as you are, Goong-goong,' said Butcher Qian. 'But if you won't accept my little present for yourself, you put me in a bit of a dilemma. Now let me see. I tell you what. I've got a couple of China-root pigs I've been fattening up specially which are just about ready for slaughtering. I've been planning to present one of them to the Emperor and the Empress Dowager. Why don't I have the other carcass delivered to your place so that you can have a taste of it yourself from time to time?'

'China-root pig is a funny sort of name,' said Trinket. 'I've never heard of a pig called that before.'

The recipe for fattening them is a secret in my family, ' said Butcher Qian. 'You take a couple of weaners from the very best stock and feed them a mixture of China-root, codonopsis, and medlars. Apart from that mix, the only other thing

they have to eat is hen's eggs. For drink you give them the very best Shaoxing wine . . .'

Before he could finish, the eunuchs had all burst out

laughing.

That's crazy, ' said one of them. 'It would cost hundreds just

to fatten one pig.'

'Oh, it's not just the money, ' said Butcher Qian. There's a great deal of work involved as well, '

'All right, ' said Trinket. 'It certainly sounds special, this China-root pork. Yes, I'd like to try it.'

'When will you be free, Goong-goong?' said Butcher Qian. 'If you tell me when, I'll deliver the carcass myself.'

Trinket calculated that he ought to be finished in the Upper Library by eleven.

'Any time between eleven and twelve I should be free, ' he

said.

'Very good, ' said Butcher Qian, and with more hand-pumpings and bows he took his leave.

'Laurie Goong-goong, ' said the Eunuch Buyer after the butcher had gone, 'when you see His Imperial Majesty presently, you won't tell him anything about this, will you?'

'Why not?' said Trinket.

'It's one of the rules of the Palace, ' said the eunuch. 'No rare or unusual food must be offered to the Empress Dowager or the Emperor or the Princes and Princesses of the Imperial family, the reason being that if one of them were to suffer the slightest little sickness after eating it, it would be off with our heads.'

Trinket nodded.

'Of course, '

'His Imperial Majesty is young, ' continued the Eunuch Buyer. 'He has the curiosity of youth. If he hears that there's a rare animal called a China-root pig and says he wants to try the meat, we have a problem. Besides, look at all the trouble and expense involved in producing this kind of pork: it's not a type of meat you can come by easily. Suppose His Imperial Majesty takes a fancy to it and orders the Imperial kitchens to prepare it for him every day. We'll be left with no alternative but to hang ourselves.'

Trinket burst out laughing. 'You certainly don't believe in taking chances.' 'It's one of the standing rules of the Imperial Catering Department that's been handed down from generation to generation, ' said the Eunuch Buyer. The dishes prepared for Their Imperial Majesties

the Empress Dowager and the Emperor must contain no fresh fruit or vegetable that has just come into season.'

'No fresh fruit or vegetable that's just come into season?' Trinket echoed in some surprise. 'You surely don't mean that you only serve them stale old leftovers?'

'No, no, of course not,' said the Eunuch Buyer. 'But any fruit or vegetable which only comes into season for one month or two months in the year must be avoided. Otherwise, if Their Imperial Majesties took a fancy to it and started asking for fresh bamboo shoots in the height of summer or fresh broad beans in mid-winter, we'd be obliged to hang ourselves.'

'But Their Imperial Majesties are very intelligent people,' said Trinket, laughing. 'Surely they couldn't be as silly as that?'

The Eunuch Buyer turned slightly pale.

'Oh yes, of course, Their Imperial Majesties are very intelligent people, ' he said hurriedly. 'I've been told that this rule is an old one that was laid down in the time of the Ming Emperors. Our Qing Emperor is so wise and so understanding, things nowadays are very much easier for all of us.'

The poor eunuch was all of a flutter and very much regretted what he had just been saying.

CHAPTER 9

In which Trinket leaves his Victim and attends an Eventful Gathering

The Little Countess

Returning to the Imperial kitchens from his duties with Kang Xi in the Upper Library, Trinket did not have long to wait for Butcher Qian's arrival. This time the butcher had four assistants with him, carrying between them the neatly butchered, immaculately clean carcasses of two large, fat pigs, each, at a rough estimate, representing not less than three hundred catties of pork.

'Laurie Goong-goong, ' he told Trinket, 'to get the most value out of this China-root pork, you want to eat some each day, as soon as you get up in the morning. It's best if you cut only as much as you need at one time and roast it straight away. I'll have one of these pigs carried to your quarters now. You'll be able to cut some off yourself and roast it first thing tomorrow. What you can't eat yourself you can get the folk in the kitchen here to make salt pork

of.'

Realizing that there must be some hidden purpose behind all this, Trinket thanked him for the advice and offered to show him the way, whereupon Butcher Qian, leaving one of the carcasses and its two bearers in the kitchen, accompanied him to his room, followed by the other two assistants carrying the second pig. The Manager's quarters in the Imperial Catering Department were not very far from the Imperial kitchens. As soon as they were inside, Trinket ordered a young eunuch to take the two assistants back to the kitchens, with instructions that they were to wait for their master there with the other two, and closed the door after them.

'Master,' said Butcher Qian, speaking in a low voice, 'is there anyone else in this apartment?'

Seeing Trinket shake his head, he crouched down over the pig's carcass and gently turned it on its back again so that its legs were pointing upwards. It was now possible to see that the slit-open underbelly of the animal had been drawn together and was being held in place by strips of pig-skin sewn across the slit. It was obvious that something very out of the ordinary must be concealed inside. Trinket could feel his heart thumping as he reflected that this might well be weapons which the Triads were smuggling in to be used in a killing spree inside the Palace. He watched as Butcher Qian tore off the strips, opened out the carcass, and very gently lifted a large object out in his cradled arms. 'Coo!' he gasped. It was a human body. Butcher Qian laid the body on the floor. It was small and slight with an abundance of hair. To his astonishment Trinket found himself looking down at a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl. She was dressed in the flimsiest of summer garments, her eyes were tightly closed, and her body was completely motionless except for the gentle rise and fall of her breathing.

'Who is this girl?' he asked softly. 'Why have you brought her here?'

'She's the Little Countess,' said Butcher Qian. The Mu Family's Little Countess.'

Trinket's eyes grew round with astonishment.

The Mu Family's Little Countess?'

'Young Lord Mu's little sister,' said Butcher Qian. The Mus have kidnapped our Brother Xu, so we've grabbed her as a hostage, just to make sure they don't do Brother Xu any harm.'

'Brilliant!' said Trinket, his surprise now mixed with pleasure. 'But how did you get hold of her?'

'Yesterday, after we found that Brother Xu had disappeared,' said Butcher Qian, 'while you and the others went back to Willow Lane, I went off on my own to make a few enquiries. First of all I wanted to find out whether the Mu Family had any other places in

the city besides the Willow Lane one where they might be holding him; and secondly I wanted to know how many more of them there are, so that we have some idea what we are up against if it comes to a fight-out. Well—huh!—I can tell you the answer to the second question straight away. A lot. The young Lord Mu himself has come to the Capital and he's brought some of their best fighting-men with him.'

Trinket frowned.

Tamardy! How many Triads have we got altogether in the Green Wood Lodge? Enough to fight them ten to one?'

'No need for you to worry, Master,' said Butcher Qian. The reason the Mu Family is here now is not because they want to fight us Triads. It's because the traitor Wu Sangui's son, Wu Yingxiong, is in town.' Trinket nodded.

They've come to assassinate the Little Traitor, you mean?'

'Right first time, Master, ' said the butcher. 'I always said you were a smart one. As long as the Old Traitor and the Little Traitor are in Yunnan, they can't touch them; but as soon as one of them leaves Yunnan, it gives them an opportunity. The only thing is, the Little Traitor is taking no chances with his security: he's brought a whole lot of first-rate fighting-men to protect him, so they won't find it an easy job to kill him. I found out that those Mu folk do have another place

in the city, but when I went to have a look there, the menfolk all seemed to have gone out, and there wasn't any sign of Brother Xu there either. The only people I found there were this girl and a couple of maids looking after her. It seemed too good a chance to miss, so—'

'So you went to catch a sheep, but while you were about it you thought you might as well take a pig,' said Trinket, slightly reconstructing the proverb. Butcher Qian laughed.

That's about it. Although she's only a young girl, she means all the world to the Mu folk. As long as their Little Countess is in our hands, Brother Xu will be safe as houses. There's absolutely no fear of their not looking after him properly.'

'Brother Qian,' said Trinket admiringly, 'this is a major achievement.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said Butcher Qian coyly. 'Anyway, thank you, Master.'

'So now we've got this Little Countess,' said Trinket, 'what are we going to do with her?'

While they were talking, he had been stealing glances at the recumbent figure on the floor. She was very beautiful—though he phrased it to himself mentally in the debased language of the brothel.

'It's a tricky business, this,' said Butcher Qian. 'I was thinking it was one for the Master himself to decide.'

'What do you think we ought to do?' Trinket asked presently, as if he had been mulling the matter over in his mind. He hadn't been with the Triads very long, but long enough by now to know the drill. It was all 'Master this' and 'Master that' and respectfully waiting to be told by the Master what they should do; but invariably they had already decided what they wanted to do and only wanted the Master's approval for doing it, so that if there was any question about it later, the Master would have sole responsibility for what they had done. And so his invariable response to the invariable question was to turn it back on them: 'What do you think we ought to do?'

'Well, for the present,' said Butcher Qian, 'we've got to hide her somewhere safe and somewhere where the Mu people can't find her. There are a lot of them around in the Capital right now, and though it's to assassinate the Little Traitor that they're here, now that we've killed one of their people and they've kidnapped Brother Xu, you can be sure they're keeping a close watch on

anywhere in the city where there are Triads. From now on we shan't be able to take a piss or a shit without their knowing about it.'

Trinket laughed. Here at last was someone who spoke his language.

'Sit down, Brother Qian,' he said. 'Let's take our time over this.'

Thank you, Master,' said Butcher Qian, seating himself in one of the chairs and continuing. [

There were really two reasons why I hid the Little Countess inside this pig's carcass. One was to get her past the Palace Guard: they always search everyone at the gate. But it was also to get her past any of the Mu Family spies who might be out watching for us. There are some really dangerous people among chatMu lot, you can't afford to take any chances. If she's hidden anywhere other than in the Palace, there's no guaranteeing they wouldn't try to get her back.'

'So you're proposing to hide her in the Palace?' said Trinket.

'Well, that's not really for me to say,' said the butcher. 'It's entirely up to you, Master. Mind you, look anywhere you like, you'll never find a safer place than this. However many of their ace fighters the Mu Family may have got in the city, they're not going to take on the Palace Guard. Not that they'd ever guess she was in the Palace, anyway. But even suppose—it's very unlikely, but just suppose—they did find out she was here, they'd never try getting in here to rescue her. If they could get in to do that, they could just as well get in to carry off the Tartar Emperor, and they've never tried to do that yet because they know it's out of the question. Of course, it was rather a nerve, taking it on myself to bring the Little Countess in here without consulting you. It means a lot of danger for you, Master. And trouble. I deserve to be hung.'

'You say yourself that you deserve to be hung,' thought Trinket, 'but you know damn well that you won't be. Still, it does seem the best plan to hide her in here. As he says, it's the one place they will never think of looking; and they'd never be able to get her out of here, even if they did. Well, Mister Butcher Qian, if you had the nerve to kidnap her and smuggle her into the Palace, I suppose I ought to have the nerve to keep her here.' He gave the man a smile.

'It's a very good idea,' he said. 'We'll hide her here then.' 'If you think it's all right, I'm sure it will be,' said Butcher Qian. There's this to be said too, for hiding her here. When this business is over and the Little Countess is back with her own people again, it won't be any disgrace to her if they know that she's been kept all the time in the Palace; whereas if I were to keep her in the

basement of my slaughterhouse—well, what with the stink of blood and offal round her all the time, it wouldn't be very nice for a person of her quality.'

'Unless you fed her on China-root and gave her Shaoxing wine to drink,' said Trinket mischievously.

Butcher Qian laughed at the interruption before continuing: 'Besides, although the Little Countess is only a girl, being a member of the fair sex it wouldn't do much for her good name if she was kept with a lot of rough men; whereas being kept with you, Master, it won't matter.'

'Why's that?' said Trinket in some surprise. 'Well,' said Butcher Qian, 'you're young too, and besides . . .

besides . . . you work in the Palace, so of course ... I mean . . . it's all right.'

The butcher was clearly embarrassed, and Trinket had to think for some moments before he saw why.

'Oh, I see. You mean because I'm a eunuch. If I'm the one guarding her, it won't do any harm to her reputation. But I'm only a pretend eunuch, you know.'

It was because he wasn't a real eunuch that he hadn't grasped sooner what the embarrassed butcher was getting at.

'Is your bedroom in there, Master?' asked the butcher.

Trinket nodded. Butcher Qian took up the Little Countess in his arms, carried her into the bedroom, and laid her down on the bed. There was just the one large bed there. Previously there had been a smaller one as well in which Trinket used to sleep, but after the death of Old Hai, he had had it moved out. He had too many secrets to want a young eunuch attendant living with him in his apartment.

'Before I brought her in, I closed the Holy Hall and Yang Cord points on her back and the Pillar of Heaven one on her neck so that she couldn't move or speak,' said the butcher. 'If you want her to eat anything, you'll have to open them up again; but before you do that, I'd advise you to first close the Ring Jump points on her legs so that she can't run away. The Mu people are all very skilled in the Martial Arts, and though a young girl like this isn't likely to know much about that sort of thing, it isn't worth taking any chances.'

Trinket wanted to ask him where the Holy Hall and Ring Jump vital points were and how you closed and opened them; but then he remembered that, as

Master of the Green Wood Lodge and a disciple of the great Helmsman, he was probably expected to know about these things and felt sure his subordinates would despise him if they found out that he was totally ignorant of these matters; so he just nodded and said that he would.

'Anyway, ' he thought, 'I shouldn't have any difficulty in handling her. She's only a girl.'

'Could you lend me a knife, Master?' said Butcher Qian.

Trinket wondered nervously what he wanted it for, but stooped down nevertheless and extracted the dagger from inside his boot. Butcher Qian took it from him and made an incision in the back of the pig's carcass. Unaware of the blade's incomparable sharpness, he was somewhat surprised at the ease with which it

sank in, at once burying itself up to the hilt and slicing through fat and flesh as if it were bean curd.

This is a good weapon you've got here, ' he said admiringly.

In no time at all he had cut off the two forelegs and two large collops from the back.

'You can keep these to roast and eat yourself, Master, ' he said. The rest you can give to the little Goong-goongs to carry back to the kitchens. I'll take my leave now. If there's any business in the Society to report, I'll let you know straight away, '

'Right, ' said Trinket. He glanced towards the Little Countess lying on the bed:

This girl—she's sleeping very soundly.'

He'd wanted to say, This girl better not stay here long. It's terribly dangerous having her here. If anyone were to find out, I'd really be in the shit, '

But then he reflected that all members of the Triad Society were heroes who laughed at danger and would despise him if they heard him uttering such craven words.

Trinket the Tormentor

As soon as Butcher Qian had gone back to the kitchens, Trinket barred the door and checked the window to make sure there were no chinks or slits in the paper

through which anyone could peep into the room, then, sitting on the edge of the bed, he inspected the Little Countess. She was staring fixedly at the top of the bedstead, and when she saw Trinket approach, she closed her eyes fast. He laughed.

'You can't talk and you can't move! All you can do is just lie there like a good little girl!'

Her dress was still clean, and Trinket reflected that Butcher Qian must have done a good job of cleaning out the inside of the carcass. He threw a coverlet over her. From the snowy pallor of her cheeks, drained of all their colour, and the fluttering of her long eyelashes, he could tell that she was very frightened.

'Don't be afraid, ' he said. 'I'm not going to kill you. Just wait a few days and I'll be setting you free again, '

The Little Countess opened her eyes wide, looked at him for a moment, and then quickly closed them again.

Trinket thought of the great awe in which the Mu Family were held by all the Brotherhood of River and Lake; of their stuck-up

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henchman the elder Bo—now dead, fortunately, struck down by one of his Triads—and his younger brother who had raged at him and nearly broken his wrist. (The bruise was still there, he saw on inspecting it, and only slightly fainter.)

'And now their Little Countess is in my hands,' he thought. 'I can beat her and curse her as much as I want to, and she won't be able to move a muscle.'

The thought was so gratifying that it made him laugh out loud, causing the Little Countess to open her eyes to see what he was laughing at.

'Call yourself a countess, do you?' said Trinket. 'I suppose you think you're very superior. Well, to me you're nobody.'

He grasped her right ear and gave it a few pulls, then he pinched her nose between finger and thumb and twisted it a couple of times, laughing as he did so.

The Little Countess had shut her eyes again, but two fat tears escaped from under their lids and coursed down her cheeks. 'Don't cry!' Trinket shouted at

her. 'I forbid you to cry.' But the Little Countess's tears ran even faster. 'Hot-piece mamma!' said Trinket exasperatedly 'Being stubborn, are we? Open your eyes and look at me, you smelly little tart!' But the Little Countess closed her eyes even tighter. 'Huh! Think you're on your Mu Family estate still, do you?' said Trinket. Think you've got your tamardy Paladins to look after you? Grandmother's! What's so tamardy wonderful about them? I tell you this: if they ever come my way, I'll chop them into little bits, each one of them.' No response.

'Open your eyes!' he hollered at the top of his voice. But all the Little Countess's strength seemed to go into closing them tighter.

'All right,' he said. 'If you won't open your lousy eyes, you won't be needing them any more. I might as well cut them out. They'll make a nice little snack for me next time I'm having a drink.'

He took out his dagger and slid the flat of the blade a couple of times over her eyelids. A shudder ran through her whole body, but she still would not open her eyes. Trinket was at his wit's end to know what to do with her.

'You don't want to open your eyes but I want you to open them,' he said. 'All right, we'll play a little game and see who comes out best, the high and mighty Little Countess or the nasty little

beggar-boy. For the time being I'm not going to cut your eyes out. I'll cut a little turtle on your left cheek and a cow-pat on the right one. Then, when the cuts have scarred over and you go out into the street, people will come crowding round in thousands to gaze at the sight. "Oh, look!" they'll say. "How beautiful! The beautiful Mu Countess with a turtle on one cheek and a cow-pat on the other!" Now will you open your eyes?'

The poor Little Countess, mistress of herself only in the ability to open or close her eyes, now closed them even tighter.

'I see,' said Trinket, pretending to be talking to himself. The little tart knows she's not good-looking. She's decided she wants a bit of decoration on her face to improve her looks. All right, then. I'll carve the turtle first.'

He took the lid off an inkstone that was on the table, ground some ink in it, and dabbled the tip of a writing-brush in it until it was well soaked. The brush, the inkstone, and the ink-stick had all been the property of Old Hai. Trinket had never had a writing-brush in his hand before and held it like a chopstick. Carrying it over to the bed, he proceeded to draw a small turtle with it on the Little Countess's left cheek. Her tears continued to flow, turning the drawing

into an inky streak.

'I'm doing the pattern with the brush first,' he said. 'I'll be going over it with a knife afterwards. That's what they do when they make seals, isn't it? Ah, yes, Little Countess, I know what. When the carving's ready, I'll be able to take you out into Changan Street and set up there as a print-seller. "Roll up, roll up!" I'll say. "Buy a nice turtle print, three cash a sheet!" I'll have your face ready painted over with black ink, then as soon as a customer gives me his three cash: sheet of white paper, rub it over, peel it off, and there's a little turtle! Won't take a moment. I ought to be able to do a hundred in a day. That's three hundred cash. Quite a tidy little sum!'

All the time he was gabbling this nonsense, her eyelids never ceased to flutter. He could tell that she was both very angry and very frightened. This gave him great satisfaction and inspired him to further idiocy.

'Hm, a cow-pat on the right cheek—no, I don't think anyone's going to pay good money for that. A fat pig would be better—a great big, fat, stupid-looking pig. That would sell.'

He moved round to the other side with his brush and executed a crude drawing on her right cheek: a creature with four legs

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and a tail which could perhaps have been a pig but might equally well have been a cat or a dog. Then he laid the brush down and took up a pair of silver-shears, the point of which he applied lightly to her left cheek.

'Now, if you don't open your eyes, I'll start cutting. I'll carve the turtle first. The pig can wait till later.'

The Little Countess's tears were now welling through the closed lids in streams, but still she wouldn't open her eyes.

And since Trinket was unwilling to admit defeat, there was nothing for it but to begin moving the point around on her cheek. Although she had the most delicate complexion imaginable, the point was so blunt that it made not the slightest mark on her skin; but so great was her fear, that she imagined this horrible boy really was cutting patterns on her face and, from excess of emotion, she fainted clean away.

Trinket got a shock when he saw the change that had come over her and wondered for a moment if she really had died of fright; but when he held his hand against her nostrils, he was relieved to find that she was still breathing.

'Little tart!' he said. 'You're only shamming dead.'

It was by now obvious that she would die sooner than open her eyes for him, but he was damned if he was going to admit defeat.

'As the man reading the songbook while he rode his mule said, "We'll work something out as we go along,"' he thought: 'Old Trink's not going to be beaten by a smelly little girl like you.'

He took a wet cloth and wiped the ink-marks from her cheeks. They came off fairly easily, revealing once more the beauty of her delicate, rather aristocratic features. She had fine eyebrows, long lashes, a small mouth and a slightly aquiline nose. But Trinket was unimpressed.

'Little Countess Lah-di-dah,' he said. 'I expect you look down on a little eunuch like me. Well, I don't think much of you either, so that makes us quits.'

After a while the Little Countess began to regain consciousness and presently opened her eyes. Startled to see Trinket bending over her, staring, with far from friendly eyes, from barely a foot away, she quickly closed them again.

Trinket laughed gleefully.

'Ha ha! You've opened your eyes now and looked at me. I've won, admit it!'

It was agreeable to have won, but it rather took the gloss off his victory that she couldn't speak. He would have liked to open the vital points that would enable her to do so, but he didn't know how.

'Now that your vital points are closed, you can't eat,' he said. 'If they're not opened, you'll just starve to death. I was thinking of opening them for you, but though I did once learn the method, it's such a long while ago that I can't remember it. Do you know how it's done? If you don't know, just lie there perfectly still. If you do know, blink your eyes three times.'

He watched her intently as she lay there, inert and unblinking. After a long pause, very slowly and deliberately, she blinked her eyes three times.

Thank heavens for that!' said Trinket delightedly. 'I was beginning to think all of you Mu people were dead from the neck

up.'

He lifted her up in his arms and sat her down in a chair.

'Now look,' he said, 'I'm going to start pointing to places on your body. If I point to the right place, blink three times; if it isn't right, just keep your eyes open and don't move. When I've found the right vital point, I'll open it up for you. Understand?'

The Little Countess blinked three times.

'Good,' said Trinket. 'Now here comes the first go.'

He pointed a finger at the right side of her still childish bosom.

'Is it here?'

The Little Countess blushed to the roots of her hair but held her eyes wide open, not daring to make the tiniest quiver with her

eyelids.

'Is it here?' he asked, pointing this time to her left breast.

The Little Countess turned even redder. She tried her hardest to prevent her eyelids from moving, but after a while she was unable to avoid a tiny blink.

'Ha!' cried Trinket loudly. 'It's here.'

The Little Countess opened her eyes even wider and made a desperate effort to hold them unblinkingly. Apart from her indignation at being trifled with, she was in an agony of embarrassment.

Trinket and the Little Countess were both of an age at which young people have a sort of half-knowledge about sexual matters. There are some things that all girls get to know at an early age, while in Trinket's case, throughout his childhood in the brothel, he had been accustomed to seeing men and women behaving together

in ways he didn't understand the significance of but knew to be somehow dangerous.

Seeing the Little Countess in such a state filled Trinket with a sense of triumph.

It somehow made up for his own humiliation at the house in Willow Lane. He was now revenged. As he proceeded, not very systematically, to point at one place after another on her body, the Little Countess struggled to keep her eyes wide open, fearfully aware that the search could be undermined by her slightest blink. The effort was beginning to tell, for after a while little beads of perspiration had started to appear on her nose. It was fortunate that just as she was reaching the end of her tether, Trinket chanced to point at the correct vital point, a little below her left armpit. At once she blinked three times and breathed a silent sigh of relief.

'Ha ha!' said Trinket. 'So it is here. I knew all along, of course, but my memory is not very good and I'd temporarily forgotten.'

'I've no idea how much she knows about Martial Arts,' he thought. 'It's going to be a bit awkward if she lashes out as soon as I open her points.'

Reaching round and taking a couple of belts from his extensive wardrobe, he used one of them to tie her feet together, while with the other one he tied her wrists together behind the back of the chair. The Little Countess evidently saw this as a prelude to fresh torments, for, though she tried to be brave, her eyes showed clearly that she was terrified. Trinket laughed at her terror.

'You're afraid of me, aren't you?' he said. 'Good. Since you're afraid of me, I'll open it up for you.'

He applied his fingers to the place below her left armpit and made a sort of scratching motion with them. It so happened that the Little Countess was extremely ticklish, but as she was unable to move or speak, the only observable effect was that she became extremely red in the face.

'I used to be a dab hand at this,' he said, 'it's just that I've been too busy lately for little things like this, so I've got a bit rusty. Is this the way you do it?'

He gave the place under her arm a few rubs, which proved equally ticklish. This time she looked angry.

That's the best method I've just been using,' said Trinket, 'but it only works on the best class of people. Since it doesn't seem to have any effect on you, I'll have to try the second best.'

This time he poked her a few times, which not only tickled

but also hurt. Tears welled up in the Little Countess's eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

'Hm,' said Trinket, 'the second best doesn't seem to work either. Can you be a third-rater? Well, it can't be helped. We'll just have to try the third-class method.'

This time it was slaps, which proved equally ineffective.

Control of the vital points is perhaps the most highly specialized branch of the Martial Arts. Even people with a solid grounding in the fundamentals of those arts require several years of rigorous training under the direction of a good teacher in order to obtain proficiency in it. Opening and closing the vital points are simply two aspects of the same technique: if you can do one, you can do the other. But you have to know exactly where each vital point is sited, and you have to have exactly the right touch in your fingers, which only comes with the development of the Inner Force by means of meditation, breath control, and other exercises. It was hardly surprising that Trinket's hit-or-miss methods should fail to work when he had never done exercises to strengthen his Inner Force or had any instruction whatsoever in this most difficult of arts.

When slapping didn't work, he tried pinching. When pinching didn't work, he tried twisting. The Little Countess, both angry and desperate, could not restrain her tears, and Trinket, who had long since ceased playing with her and was trying in earnest, was himself being made desperate by his repeated failures. The perspiration was standing out on his forehead and, as people often will do when they feel ashamed, he was beginning to lose his temper.

'That's the eighth method I've tried now,' he said. 'It's about as much use as a mouse trying to move a tortoise. Does that mean you're ninth-rate? I'm someone with a position to keep up, you know. I don't normally use ninth-rate methods. I'm not sure I should lower myself to do this for a measly ninth-rate girl from the measly Mu Family. Oh well, I suppose I shall have to. Here comes the ninth method.'

He pressed the middle finger of his right hand against the thumb and began flicking the much-abused armpit, chanting as he did so (with some additions of his own) a set of nonsense-rhymes current among the street-urchins of Yangzhou:

Flick, flick, flick

Flick your father's stick

Father's stick broke

Give it to the goat

The goat broke a leg

Mend it with a peg

When the peg's rotten

Tie it up with cotton

Take, it to the rooftop

And hit it on the head

Down falls the goat

On the silly, rotten, stupid, lousy,

smelly, snooty Mu lot

And strikes them all dead!

He gave a flick as he reached the end of each line of this gibberish. At the thirteenth and final flick, just as he was intoning the word 'dead', the Little Countess gave a tiny shriek and burst into tears: not silent tears this time, but a loud lament.

'I knew it!' crowed Trinket, jumping up and down in joyful triumph. 'I said you were a measly little ninth-rate girl. That's why only the ninth-rate treatment would work on you.'

'Y-y-you're the one who's ni-ni-ninth-rate,' retorted the Little Countess between sobs.

Despite the sobs, it was a charming, bell-like little voice, made all the more pleasing by the soft Yunnanese accent.

Trinket, somewhat straining his throat in the process, tried to imitate it.

'Y-y-you're the one who's ni-ni-ninth-rate.'

He burst out laughing.

The vital point on which he had been directing his indiscriminate flicking was

the so-called Gulf of the Armpit, three inches below the armpit itself. It lies on the meridian connecting the Lesser Yang of the foot with the gall bladder. Several of the vital points on the head, for example the Strung Bamboo, the Yang White, and the Weeper's Edge, are also on this meridian. Although his untrained touch was by itself insufficient to open a vital point, all the pinching, twisting, slapping, and tweaking he had inflicted on the Little Countess's Gulf of the Armpit had eventually had the effect of activating those points in the head which control the organs of speech, restoring her ability to speak and move her head.

Trinket was so delighted by his success that his initial hostility towards her as a member of the Mu Family had by now largely evaporated.

'I don't know about you, but I'm hungry,' he said. 'Let me get you something to eat. You must be starving.'

He had always been a greedy boy, and since he became head of the Imperial Catering Department his subordinates had sought to curry favour with him by getting the Imperial kitchens to send over all sorts of little delicacies for him to try. In addition to this, he was constantly buying things to eat—sweets, cakes, pastries, and the like—in his leisure-time rambles through the streets and markets of the city. As a consequence his room was a storehouse of little receptacles—bottles, jars, boxes, and miniature baskets—containing all manner of toothsome little snacks. What young lad with hundreds of thousands of taels at his disposal and the disposition to spend them could resist stocking up on sweets?

Trinket selected something from his collection he thought she might like.

'Try some of this rose and bean-paste fudge.'

The Little Countess shook her head.

He selected another little box and took the lid off.

'This is pea-flour cake. It's a Peking speciality. I bet you can't get this in Yunnan. Try a bit.'

Again the Little Countess shook her head.

Full of proprietorial pride in his collection, he began piling up a variety of confectionery on the table.

'Look, see what a lot of good things to eat I've got! Though you're a countess, I bet you've never eaten some of these. If you don't like sweet things, what about these onion crisps from the Imperial kitchens? They're lovely. Even the Emperor likes them. Try one: I'm sure you'll love it!'

Again the Little Countess shook her head, and continued to do so in response to seven or eight further offers. By now Trinket was losing his temper.

'Smelly little tart! You won't eat this, you won't eat that: what's the matter with you? What will you eat?'

'I won't. . .won't eat anything,' she said. She was crying again now, her body shaking with sobs.

Seeing her crying so bitterly, he was somewhat softened.

'Surely you ought to eat something, otherwise you'll starve to death.'

'I don't. . . care if I ... do!' the Little Countess sobbed.

'Come on, now,' said Trinket, 'I can't believe you really want to starve to death.'

Just at that moment there was a light knock on the door. Trinket knew this must be one of the junior eunuchs with his midday meal. Before going to open the door, he hastily gagged the Little Countess with a hand-towel for fear she might cry out and alarm somebody.

'I think I'd fancy some Yunnanese food today, ' he told the young eunuch. Tell them in the kitchen to do some now and send it here as soon as it's ready.'

The young eunuch murmured assent, set down the tray, and went off to do his bidding. Trinket carried the tray into the bedroom, removed the gag from the Little Countess's mouth, and sat down facing her to inspect the dishes.

'Well, if you won't eat, I will,' he said cheerfully. 'Mm, what have we here? Braised beef in brown sauce, fish pieces in wine, sliced pork in cream of garlic. And what's this? Fresh salt pork from Jinjiang. These are fried prawns. Ah, now this soup—I know this— it's made from chicken-feet and koumo mushrooms. It's delicious, really delicious.'

He ladled some of the soup into a bowl and began sipping it with deliberate slurping noises to show how much he enjoyed it, simultaneously stealing a look at the Little Countess to see if she was interested. But the Little Countess, her

cheeks awash with a steady drip of tears, showed little inclination to eat. His enthusiasm quickly evaporated.

'Oh, I see,' he said resentfully. 'Being a ninth-rate girl, you only like ninth-rate food. All these things I've got here are first-class things for first-class people, so you wouldn't like them. Just wait a bit and I'll get them to bring something you'd like: smelly old fish and bad meat and rotten eggs and stinking bean curd. That's the sort of stuff you'd like, isn't it?'

'Of course I don't like rotten eggs and stinking bean curd, ' said the Little Countess.

Trinket nodded understandingly.

'Uh huh. Only smelly old fish and bad meat.'

'Why do you keep saying such silly things?' said the Little Countess.

Trinket ate a few prawns and a piece of salt pork.

'Really tasty!' he said. But as the Little Countess appeared to be still unmoved, he laid down his chopsticks and sat in silent contemplation, trying to think of a way of making her ask him for some food.

After a while the young eunuch came back with the food that Trinket had ordered.

'Laurie Goong-goong, ' said the young eunuch, 'Chef said I was to tell you that this passe-pom vermicelli soup, though there isn't any steam coming off it, is very, very hot; so please be careful. He says the Xuanwei ham is boiled with candied lotus seed. Because of the short time, he's had to boil it very quickly; so if it's a little bit on the hard side, he says please excuse him. This here is Yunnan black rutabaga. The stuff in this dish is kong-fish from the Erhai Lake in Dali. Although it's not fresh, it's considered a very special delicacy. And he's fried it in Yunnanese safflower oil. The tea in the teapot is Yunnan Puer tea. Chef says Yunnan steamed chicken is the most famous Yunnanese dish, but it takes several hours to prepare. He says if you don't mind waiting, he'll send some this evening with your dinner.'

Trinket nodded and, when the young eunuch had gone, carried the food into the bedroom.

The Imperial kitchens' ability to produce four typical Yunnanese dishes at such short notice might seem a remarkable achievement, but can easily be explained.

Although Wu Sangui, the Satrap of the West, showed, in his headquarters in Yunnan, a growing tendency to arrogate to himself powers that were properly the Emperor's, he was punctilious in the discharge of his annual and seasonal obligations as a tributary. The tribute he sent the Emperor and the presents he sent the Imperial Princes and other high dignitaries on these occasions were of unparalleled profusion and magnificence. By this means he ensured that there was never any lack of voices to speak up for him at Court. As well as precious things like gold, silver, pearls, ivory, and rhinoceros horn, the tribute he sent the Emperor always included a fully representative selection of the produce of Yunnan's rivers, lakes, and fields. It was therefore easy for the Palace chefs to prepare Yunnanese dishes at short notice, since the requisite materials for making them were always

to hand.

The Little Countess was in fact quite hungry, and the sight of all these familiar Yunnanese dishes caused her something of a pang; but she had been so abused and humiliated that she was determined not to give in without a struggle.

'I don't care what this horrible boy does to tempt me, ' she told herself, 'I'm definitely not going to eat.'

Trinket took up a slice of succulent-looking, savoury-smelling

Xuanwei ham with a pair of chopsticks and held it up to her mouth.

'Come on, open up!' he said. There was a big smile on his face, but the Little Countess clenched her teeth and kept her mouth firmly shut. Trinket rubbed the ham to and fro on her lips so that her mouth was all covered with grease.

'Eat this piece of ham up like a good girl, ' he said, 'and I'll open up the vital points for your hands.'

But the Little Countess kept her mouth firmly shut and shook her head.

Trinket, no longer smiling, put down the ham and chopsticks and picked up the bowl of hot soup.

This soup is very, very hot,' he said menacingly. 'If you'll agree to drink some, I'll wait till it's cooler and feed it to you a spoonful at a time. If you won't—huh!'

Laying down the bowl, he pinched her nose between the thumb and fingers of his left hand, and when she opened her mouth to gasp for breath, he rammed a china soup-spoon into it.

Til pour the hot soup down like this,'he said. 'It'll blister your insides.'

He let her gasp a few more times before removing the spoon from her mouth and releasing her nose. The Little Countess knew that passe-pont vermicelli soup is one half oil and several times hotter than any other kind of soup, and that having it poured, still hot, down her throat might well endanger her life. She began to cry.

'You've cut lines all over my face,' she sobbed. 'I don't want to go on living. So ... so ... so ... ugly.'

Trinket hadn't realized that she believed he really had cut her.

'What if I did carve your face?' he said. 'It's a very pretty little turtle. Next time you go out in the street, everyone is going to admire it.'

The Little Countess sobbed even louder.

'It's horrible! I wish ... I wish ... I were dead.'

'What a shame!' said Trinket. 'It's such a pretty little turtle. Still, if you really don't want it, I don't see why you have to go on crying like this. Just say "my darling" three times, and I'll scrape it off for you. Your face will be as good as new.'

The Little Countess blushed.

'Scrape it off?' she said. 'After what you've already done to it? I shan't have any face left.'

'All right, then,' said Trinket. 'I know how to make an ointment that would do the trick. It might not work too well on a first-class man of action, but as you're only a ninth-rate girl, it should clear your face like magic.'

'I don't believe you, ' said the Little Countess. 'All you seem to care about is saying things that are hurtful.'

'Are you going to say it?' said Trinket. The Little Countess blushed again and shook her head. She blushed so prettily that Trinket was just a tiny bit affected.

'It would be easy to clear the marks off your face now, only a short time after it was carved, ' he said, 'but the longer it's left, the harder it will be to cure. Suppose you were to end up with a little turtle's tail on your face that I couldn't

get rid of? You'd be sorry then that you hadn't let me do it sooner.'

The Little Countess wasn't sure whether to believe him or not, but putting ointment on her face couldn't do any harm, even if it didn't do any good; and she certainly didn't want to risk the awful disfigurement of a turtle's tail on her cheek; so she was now quite eager to try.

'Are you . . . are you sure you aren't just fooling me?' she asked him falteringly. Her face was scarlet.

'Why should I want to fool you?' said Trinket. The sooner I put the ointment on, the sooner the marks will vanish. So just hurry up and say it.'

'But suppose after I've . . . after I've said it, your ointment doesn't work?' said the Little Countess.

'Well then I'll have to say six "my darlings" as compensation, ' said Trinket.

'You're horrible, ' said the Little Countess. 'I won't do it.'

'All right, ' said Trinket. 'If you don't trust me, we'll do it by stages. 'You say the first "my darling", then I put the ointment on; then you say the second "my darling" and I show you your face in the mirror. If there aren't any marks on it and you're completely satisfied, then you say the third "my darling". Who knows, you may feel so happy that you'll say ten of them!'

'No, no, ' said the Little Countess hurriedly, 'you said three. Why are you putting the number up?'

'All right, ' said Trinket, 'three times it is then. Only get on with it!'

The Little Countess opened and closed her mouth several times, but no sound came out.

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'Come on!' said Trinket. '"My darling" isn't very hard to say. I haven't asked you to say "my beloved" or "my sweetheart". If you don't hurry up and say it, I'll start putting my price up.'

Terrified that she might be forced to say 'beloved' or 'sweetheart', the Little Countess proposed a compromise.

'Let me just say the first word now. I'll say that. . . that other word after you've cured me.'

Trinket sighed.

'You certainly drive a hard bargain. Personally I can't see that it makes any difference whether you pay for something before or afterwards. All right. Say it then.'

The Little Countess shut her eyes and uttered a little 'my', faint as the hum of a tiny gnat, which to anyone the slightest bit deaf would have been quite inaudible. Yet even this effort made her face hot with shame.

That's a bit half-hearted, isn't it?' Trinket grumbled. 'You've given yourself so much discount, there's hardly anything left for me. Anyway, how do I know what you're thinking of when you say "my"? It could be "my little bastard" or "my dearest monster".'

'No, no,' said the Little Countess hurriedly. 'I'm thinking of that. . . that other word. I'm not trying to cheat you, honestly I'm not.'

'Which other word?' said Trinket, "'bastard" or "monster"?''

'Neither of them,' said the Little Countess. "'Darling.'"

Her lips at once closed tight; but it was too late: already the word was out.

Trinket laughed.

'Good girl!' he said. 'You've kept your side of the bargain, so now I'll keep mine. I'll give your face the very best treatment I can. When you call in a builder to mend a hole in the wall, you only get a good job done if you pay him properly. If you pay him too little, he'll make do with old broken bricks and forget about the whitewash, so what you end up with looks really terrible.'

'I said what you wanted me to say,' the Little Countess protested. 'Why do you have to make fun of me now with all this talk about holes in the wall and broken bricks?'

'I was only giving you an example of what I meant,' said Trinket, laughing, as he went to get the medicine chest from old Hai-goong's trunk.

There were several dozen little phials in the medicine chest containing

powdered medicaments. Trinket took out the lot of

them and placed them on the table; then he began removing the stoppers from them one by one and pouring a little of the contents into a crucible. While he was doing this he gave a wonderful imitation of the concentration and hesitant pauses of a genuine expert making up a formula. The Little Countess, who to begin with was only three parts in ten persuaded that he knew what he was doing, was now, especially when she saw the array of little bottles, half inclined to think he really did.

Trinket took the crucible and its contents into the outer room, emptied the mixed powder on to a large sheet of paper, made it into a little packet, and stuffed it in the inner pocket of his gown; then he got a piece of rose and bean-paste fudge, a piece of pea-flour cake, and the scooped-out lotus seed filling of a Canton moon-cake, washed the crucible so that no trace of powder was left in it, put these sweetmeats in the crucible, added a little honey, and, just for good measure (this was a last-minute inspiration), spat in it a couple of times. When he had mixed all these ingredients to a smooth consistency, he carried his mixture into the bedroom.

This is called "New-Skin Ointment",' he said. 'It has all kinds of very powerful drugs mixed up in it.' He thought a bit before adding: 'If I only take away the marks that I carved on your face so that it looks the same as before, I shan't have shown you what I am really capable of.'

He fetched out the black satin cap that he had bought at the jeweller's for his disguise a few days previously, tore out the four inlaid pearls from the cap-band and, placing them in the palm of his left hand, held them out so that the Little Countess could see

them.

'What do you think of these?'

The Little Countess came of a long line of ducal ancestors, and even though she was born in a time when the family was in decline, her aristocratic upbringing had familiarized her with many objects beyond the ordinary mortal's ken. She studied these flawless, lustrous pearls, each of a finger's circumference, perfectly rounded, rolling and glistening in Trinket's palm, with the eye of a connoisseur.

They are very good pearls,' she said. 'It's very unusual to get four like that all of exactly the same size.'

This was a great boost to Trinket's self-esteem.

'I bought these yesterday for two thousand nine hundred taels,' he said. That's a lot of money, isn't it?'

The four pearls were indeed precious, but worth nothing like two thousand nine hundred taels. The price he had actually paid for them was nine hundred. The 'two thousand' was an afterthought. He found a mortar and put the pearls in it. When he shook it a few times to make them roll, they made a clear, sharp clicking sound as they struck against each other and the sides of the mortar. Then he picked up the pestle and smashed it down on them.

The Little Countess gasped.

'What are you doing?' she cried.

The concern in her voice and the startled look on her face made his spirits soar. It was to purchase such a look that he was making this parade of extravagant generosity. Having, after a brief pounding, reduced the pearls to fragments, he worked the pestle round and round in the mortar until he had ground them into a fine powder.

'If I only make your face like it was before,' he said, 'you won't know what old Trink—what Laurie Goong-goong can do. I guarantee you're going to end up looking ten times prettier than you were to start with. When you see what I can do for you, you'll be saying "my darling" ten times over without even needing to be asked.'

Three times,' said the Little Countess. 'Why has it suddenly turned into ten times again?'

Trinket gave a little smile, poured the powdered pearl on to the 'ointment' of bean fudge, pea-flour cake, lotus seed, honey, and spittle in the crucible, and mixed it well in with the pestle. The Little Countess watched him wide-eyed, unable to fathom what he was at. Whatever its other properties, it was now evident that this ointment was a very costly one.

'Pearls are expensive,' said Trinket, 'but compared with the value of some of the powders I've used in this ointment, they're nothing. Your face didn't look too bad to start with, but you weren't what I'd call a world beauty. After I've treated you with my ointment, you're going to have the most beautiful complexion in the world. Like what they say about girls in stories: "Her flowery face"—'

Flowerlike,' said the Little Countess.

She corrected him unthinkingly, but as soon as she had done so, she felt embarrassed, for she had been taught that correcting people was rude. As a matter of fact, Trinket was quite unconcerned. Errors like this were part of his stock-in-trade.

That's right,' he said, 'a flowerlike face. That's what you're going to have.'

And he began applying the pearly, gluey mess to her inky cheeks. She made no murmur while he plastered it on, and soon her face except for her eyes, ears, mouth, and nose was entirely covered with it. She had been expecting the acrid smell of medicine; instead she found it slightly fragrant and even rather agreeable.

When he saw that she was completely taken in, he could scarcely prevent himself from laughing.

'Yes, my little missy,' he thought, 'I think it's very decent of me not to have pissed in that ointment as well. Let's say I didn't out of respect for your ancestor the Old Duke, because he was one of the Heroes of the Early Ming.'

'We'll let this dry first,' he said, 'then I'll use a special lotion to clean it off. After that I'll do the same again two more times: put it on, let it dry, and then clean it off again. By the time we've finished, you'll have the floweriest, I mean flowerlikiest complexion in the world.'

'Flowerlikiest' sounded so clumsy that the Little Countess felt sure there could be no such word, but she let it pass.

'Why do you have to do it three times?' she asked.

Three times is nothing,' said Trinket. 'When you make soy sauce, you have to soak the beans and then dry them nine times. And dog's meat has to be boiled three times before it's fit to eat.'

'Now you're being horrible again,' said the Little Countess complainingly, 'comparing me to soy sauce and dog's meat.'

'Soy sauce and dog's meat make a very nice dish,' said Trinket. 'Braised Dog in Brown Sauce, they call it.'

He picked a small slice of ham up with a pair of chopsticks and held it to her mouth.

'Come on,' he said, 'eat some.'

Partly because the Little Countess was really hungry, partly because she was afraid that if she offended him he might play some trick that would leave her with a permanent turtle's tail on her cheek, and partly because she could not help feeling grateful for his readiness to sacrifice the pearls on her behalf, she did, after a little hesitation, open her mouth and eat the ham.

'Good for you, sister!' said Trinket delightedly.

'Sister? I'm not your sister,' said the Little Countess.

'All right, mother, then,' said Trinket.

She gave a little peal of laughter.

'How could I be that?'

Ever since Trinket first set eyes on her, this was the first time he had heard her laugh. The enchanting dimples on her cheeks were concealed under a thick layer of his gluey mixture, but merely the sound of her little silvery laugh was so heart-warming and delightful that he half regretted having called her 'mother', since his real mother was a prostitute, and calling her 'mother', even jokingly, was tantamount to calling her 'little tart'. Which of course he had already done, several times. But then, on second thoughts, he decided that being a prostitute wasn't such a bad thing after all, and that his own Mum, who made her living by working hard in a brothel, was no whit inferior to the Little Countess brought up in the lap of luxury on the Mu Family estate.

He took up another piece of ham in his chopsticks and held it for her while she ate.

'If you'll promise not to run away,' he said, 'I'll open the vital points for your hands.'

'What would I want to run away for?' she said. 'If anyone were to see me while my face was in this state, I should die of shame.'

Trinket reflected that she certainly would try to run away when she discovered that there wasn't, after all, a little turtle carved on her cheek. Still, would it matter so much if she did? Butcher Qian hadn't said when he was coming back to collect her, and keeping her here in his room was a terribly risky business. If anyone were to find her here, what on earth was he going to do?

While he was pondering this seemingly insoluble problem, there was a sudden knock on his door.

'Laurie Goong-goong,' a voice outside said, 'this is a footman of Prince Kang's here. Can I see you about something for a moment?'

'Right,' he called; then, lowering his voice, 'Someone's come,' he said to the Little Countess. 'Don't make any noise. Do you know what this place is?'

The Little Countess shook her head.

'If I told you, you'd die of fright,' he said. 'All the other people here are out to harm you. I'm keeping you here for a while because I felt sorry for you, but if any of the others knew you were here— huh!'

He tried to think of something that would really scare her.

'They'd take all your clothes off and beat you on the bum,' he said, after a moment's reflection. 'It would be very painful.'

The Little Countess went very red and there was a look of terror in her eyes. Satisfied that she was sufficiently terrified to keep quiet, he went to open the door. He found a thirty-year-old eunuch waiting there. (Eunuchs were employed by the Imperial Princes as well as by the Emperor.) The eunuch bowed very low and addressed him with extreme deference. Prince Kang had not seen Laurie Goong-goong for a long time, he said, and was constantly thinking of him. Today he had engaged a troupe of actors and would be most happy if Laurie Goong-goong would come over to his residence to have a few drinks and watch the actors perform. The prospect of watching some plays was an exciting one, but the fear that if he went out someone might get into his room and discover the Little Countess or that the Little Countess might cry out and attract attention made him hesitate.

'His Highness says you really must favour us with your presence, Laurie Goong-goong,' said the eunuch encouragingly. 'It's a very lively party he's giving today. Lots of gambling: dice, dominoes, every kind you can think of.'

The prospect of watching plays, though exciting, was resistible; but gambling—that was another matter. Since coming into the money, he had, for want of anything better to do, continued to play dice with the Wen brothers and Fat Ping, but there was little satisfaction in it for him. Gambling at Prince Kang's on the other hand would mean gambling with first-class players for really high stakes. No Little Countess was going to keep him from that.

'All right,' he said. 'Wait here a moment. I'll be with you in a minute,' and he shut the door on the waiting eunuch and went back into the bedroom. He undid the belts fastening the Little Countess's hands and feet to the chair, carried her over to the bed, laid her down on it, tied up her hands and feet again, and covered her over with a bedspread.

'I've got some business to attend to,' he told her, keeping his voice as low as possible. 'I've got to go out now, but I'll be back again shortly.'

He noticed the doubtful, apprehensive look in her eyes.

The pearls weren't enough,' he said. 'I need to go to the jeweller's to get some more. When I've powdered them and put the powder on your face, your complexion will be a hundred per cent.'

'Don't go!' she said. 'They're too expensive'

'No problem,' said Trinket. 'I've got stacks of money. What's a few thousand taels more if they'll buy you a flowerlike face?'

'I'll . . . I'll be afraid here on my own,' said the Little Countess.

She looked so pitiful that he was almost tempted to stay; but if she had looked ten times more pitiful, she couldn't have kept him from gambling. He fed her a piece of dried kong-fish; then he arranged four tiny mincemeat cakes one on top of the other on her lips.

'You've only got to open your mouth and one of these will drop in,' he said. 'You'll have to be careful though. If they fall off on to the pillow, you won't be able to reach them.'

'Don't go!' said the Little Countess; but her voice was so muffled by the four mince-cakes that it was scarcely audible.

Trinket pretended not to have heard. Taking a wad of banknotes from his trunk, he stuffed them into a pocket; then he went through the front room and opened the door again. After locking it carefully behind him, he hurried off to Prince Kang's place with the eunuch.

A Party at Prince Kang's

When they got to Prince Kang's place, Trinket could see, from the impressive appearance of the guards lined up on either side of the entrance, all in glittering new uniforms and with sabres at their sides, that security since his

last visit to the residence had been tightened up. Evidently the lesson of the raid by 'Oboi supporters', as they were thought to be, had been taken to heart.

No sooner was he inside the main gate than Prince Kang came hurrying forward to meet him and all but knelt down to embrace his waist.

'Laurie, dear boy, what a long time it's been!' he said, smiling broadly at his guest. Taller and more good-looking each time I see you!'

'How are you, Prince?' said Trinket, smiling back at him. 'I hope you're well.'

'I should be,' said the Prince, 'if you came to see me oftener. I don't feel at all well when you come to see me so seldom.'

'Just give the word if you want me to come and see you, ' said Trinket. There's nothing I'd like better.'

'I'll hold you to that,' said the Prince. 'One of these days I'll

ask the Emperor to give you nine or ten days' leave so that we can have a really good time together, drinking and watching plays. But I expect he'll say he can't spare you.'

He took Trinket by the hand and the two of them walked in together, side by side, past ranks of saluting guardsmen. Trinket glowed with pleasure. He had grown used to preferential treatment inside the Palace, but as a eunuch he could never dream of walking hand in hand with a prince, as he was doing now.

As they reached the inner gate, two high-ranking Manchus came out to meet them. One was the newly appointed Intendant of the Palace Guard, Dolong. (Those holding this position were generally referred to as the Chief.) The other was Trinket's old friend and adopted 'brother' Songgotu. Songgotu leaped forward when he saw Trinket and embraced him warmly.

'When I heard that the Prince was inviting you, I was determined to get myself invited too, so that we could see each other,'

he said.

Dolong added some flattering greeting of his own, and the four of them mounted the steps into the main hall. A band of musicians waiting under the eaves struck up as they entered. Ceremonious treatment like this was something Trinket had never in his life experienced before. He was almost dancing with elation as the four of them made their way through the main hall

in the direction of the second, or inner, hall where the entertainment was to take place. More honours were to follow. As they entered the forecourt of the second hall, twenty or more high-ranking Manchu officials were waiting there to greet them: presidents and vice-presidents of boards, colonels and generals, and a commandant of one of the brigades of guards. Songgotu introduced them one by one to Trinket before they went into the hall.

Just then a eunuch came running up to the Prince and saluted him in the Manchu style, dropping on one knee and touching the ground with his hand.

'Your Highness, His Grace the Heir Apparent of the Western

Satrap is here.'

'Excellent,' said the Prince. 'Make yourself comfortable here while I go to meet him,' he told Trinket, before going to welcome

his guest.

The Satrap's Heir Apparent? That's Wu Sangui's son, ' thought

Trinket. 'What's he doing here?'

Songgotu leaned over and spoke softly in his ear.

'Congratulations, brother! You'll be able to make a pile today.' 'Depends on my luck with the dice, ' said Trinket. 'I'm sure you'll be lucky with the dice,' said Songgotu, 'but I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of another sure-fire way of making a pile.'

'What's that?' said Trinket.

'The reason Wu Sangui has sent his son here is to deliver the annual tribute,' Songgotu said softly. 'Everyone at Court will have some pickings.'

'Oh, I see,' said Trinket. 'But I'm not a Court official.' 'No, but you're a Palace official,' said Songgotu, 'and you've got much more influence than any Court official. This Heir of Satrap Wu's is a very bright, very able young man. He knows what's what.' He dropped his voice even lower. 'When he offers you a present, never mind how costly it is, don't, whatever you do, look pleased. Just say, in a very cool kind of way, something like, "Your Grace must have had a very tiring journey." Nothing more. If you look pleased, that'll be the end of it. But if you behave rather coldly, he's sure to think you're dissatisfied with what he's given you, and there'll be another woppmg big present tomorrow to make

up for it.'

Trinket burst out laughing, but lowered his voice to reply.

'So that's how you fleece the customers!'

'Anyone who doesn't give the Yunnan sheep a good shearing is just plain stupid,' said Songgotu. 'Since his old man first had the running of Yunnan and Guizhou, I don't know how much wealth he hasn't screwed out of the people of those two provinces. It's up to us now to help his son spend it. We owe it to the old man, not to mention the poor wretched people, '

'You're right,' said Trinket, laughing.

While they were talking, Prince Kang arrived with his new guest. The Satrap's Heir was a young man of some twenty-four or so, handsome in a manly sort of way, with a springy, athletic step: a soldierly looking young fellow, as you would expect of someone who had grown up in the household of a great general. Trinket was the first to be introduced to him, the Prince drawing him forwards by the hand in order to present him.

This is my friend Laurie, Your Grace,' said the Prince. 'Laurie is H.I.M.'s most trusted Goong-goong. It's Laurie Goong-goong who was responsible for Oboi's arrest in the Upper Library, '

Wu Sangui employed a large number of agents in Peking who

kept him informed of current events in the Capital by means of reports sent out daily by express courier to Kunming. Kang Xi's arrest of Oboi was the most sensational piece of news these agents had reported to him in years, so the Heir was familiar with the story in all its details and had discussed it with his father before setting out for Peking. The Satrap foresaw trouble ahead for himself in the ease with which the young but already formidable Emperor had disposed of his too powerful subject. He told his son that, in addition to the customary tribute, he should take an ample supply of costly gifts to bribe the courtiers with, and that he should find out as much as he could about the character of the young Emperor and the sort of ministers he trusted and made most use of. To find himself, on his arrival as a guest at Prince Kang's party, being introduced to the young eunuch who was Kang Xi's most trusted favourite was therefore an unexpected bonus to which he responded delightedly. He clasped Trinket's right hand in both his own and shook it warmly.

'Laurie Goong-goong,' he said, 'I heard all about you in Yunnan. My father is always telling everyone what a wonderfully intelligent, decisive Emperor we've

got—a Sage Emperor he calls him. He says it's because we have a Sage Emperor on the throne that it's possible for someone as young as yourself to carry out a deed of such amazing heroism. He was particularly anxious that I should bring a suitable present to give you when I got to Peking to show you how much he admires you; but then, unfortunately, I found that there is a Qing regulation forbidding external officials like me to have anything to do with members of the Inner Palace, so, much as I'd like to have done, I didn't dare risk getting in touch with you. I can't tell you how delighted I am that the Prince has given me this opportunity of meeting you informally, '

All this was spoken with such naturalness and charm that it was a pleasure to listen to him. It quite disarmed Trinket to learn that even the great Wu Sangui had heard of him all those hundreds of miles away in Yunnan. But then he remembered what Songgotu had told him and answered coolly.

'I am the Emperor's slave, Your Grace. My job is simply to carry out his commands, however difficult or dangerous they may be. I think you're exaggerating when you talk about a deed of heroism.'

While he was saying this, he was thinking: 'Good old Songgotu, you hit the nail on the head! The very first time the

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Little Traitor opens his mouth to me, he's talking about costly presents.'

As the Satrap's Heir Apparent, Wu Yingxiong was equal in rank to an Imperial Prince; he was moreover a visitor from afar. It was natural, therefore, that Prince Kang should now place him in the seat of honour. But when the Prince tried to make Trinket sit next to him, that usually arrogant young man felt bound, in the presence of so many high-ranking dignitaries, to decline. The Prince, however, was adamant.

'Laurie, dear boy, it's because you're so close to the Emperor. By honouring you, we are showing our loyalty to him; so you mustn't be polite.'

With that he pushed him down into the chair. Songgotu had just been promoted Honorary President of the Board of History, so the next place after Trinket was his by virtue of his rank. The other guests, both civil and military, seated themselves in order of precedence.

Tamardy!' thought Trinket. 'When I was a kid in the Vernal Delights brothel

and they were having a party, Mum used to sit behind the guests and sometimes she'd slip me cakes and things on the sly. Chances were the pimps would see her and chase me out. I remember I used to tell myself that one day, when I was rich, I'd come back to the brothel and throw a big party myself and invite the bawd and the pimps and all the girls, just to show them how well I'd done. And now here I am, hobnobbing with a real Prince and a Satrap's son and all these presidents and generals: what a pity the bawd and the pimps aren't here to see me!

Once the company were all seated, the drinking began. Meanwhile the sixteen attendants who had come with the Satrap's Heir stood in a line by the screen-doors at the other side of the hall, from which position they subjected both the guests and the servants who waited on them to their unrelenting gaze. No movement of wine-cup or chopsticks seemed to escape their scrutiny.

Trinket, becoming aware of this scrutiny, had to think for a moment before the significance of it dawned on him.

'Of course!' he told himself. 'These are kungfu specialists, sent by the Satrap as bodyguards to make sure that his son doesn't get poisoned or assassinated. They probably know that the Mu Family are out there somewhere waiting to get him. I expect there'll be a good old dust-up before long, when the two sides get together. I wonder who'll come out on top when they do.'

He rather hoped they would prove to be equally matched. That would make for a more exciting fight, he thought gloatingly. Ideally both sides would get hurt and all of them be losers.

Prince Kang, too, had become aware of the men's relentless gaze and had come to a similar conclusion; but as he was the host, he was not in a position to comment.

Dolong, the new Chief of the Palace Guard and himself a Martial Arts expert, being a straightforward, outspoken person and having, moreover, already imbibed several cups of wine, felt no such inhibition.

'This is a first-class bodyguard you've brought with you, Your Grace,' he said to the Heir. 'I bet each of them is a tip-top professional. You must have interviewed thousands to pick a team like this.'

The Heir smiled deprecatingly.

There's nothing tip-top about them. They're just members of my father's personal bodyguard who happen to have known me for a long time and are

used to my little ways. That's the only reason they were chosen: so that I could have people around who know how to serve me.'

'Your Grace is too modest,' said Dolong with a laugh. 'Look at the way the temples bulge out on those two big fellows. You can see that their Inner Force has been cultivated to the highest peak of perfection. And look at the knotted muscles on the necks and faces of those two there: that's the product of inner training. And those ones there who look as if their faces have been oiled: those great thick pigtails hanging down their backs are almost certainly false ones. Ten to one if you told them to take their hats off, you'd find that they were bald.'

The Heir smiled but made no reply.

Songgotu seemed amused.

'I knew you were a great expert in the Martial Arts, Chief,' he said, 'but I didn't know you were a skilled physiognomist as well.'

'Ah well, there's something else you didn't know, Mr President,' said Dolong, smiling. 'I can remember, years ago, when the Satrap was stationed in Liaoning, he had a whole lot of officers on his staff who'd trained in Jinzhou under the Master of the Golden Gate. Golden Gate always placed very great stress on the head, and all disciples of his who've undergone a long course of training with him have this same characteristic: their faces take on a shiny look and they lose all the hair on their heads.'

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'Do you think we could persuade His Grace to ask these gentlemen to take their hats off so that we can see whether Colonel Dolong is right about this?' said Prince Kang.

'Colonel Dolong is very perceptive,' said the Heir. 'He is, of course, right up to a point. These men have had some training under Golden Gate; but they didn't complete the course with him, so they have, I assure you, quite a lot of hair left. I think it would be rather humiliating for them if I asked them to take their hats off, so I hope you will excuse me if I don't.'

There was a good deal of laughter from the assembled company, but as it was obvious that the Heir was unwilling to comply, they did not press him.

Trinket continued to gaze fascinatedly at the men and to speculate about what they had got underneath their hats.

That big one over there—I wonder how much hair he's got,' he thought. 'I shouldn't think that thin one did much of the course: he's probably got quite a lot of hair.'

Then suddenly an idea struck him and made him laugh.

'What's so amusing, Laurie?' asked the Prince. 'Won't you share it with us?'

'I was thinking: those Golden Gate guys must be a very peaceable lot,' said Trinket. 'I shouldn't think they do much actual fighting, especially with one another.'

'Oh? How do you make that out?' said Prince Kang.

'Well, you see, they wouldn't need to fight,' said Trinket. 'If they ever got angry, they'd just glare at each other for a bit, then they'd take their hats off and look at each other's hair. The one who'd got least hair must be the strongest, so the one with more hair would have to admit defeat.'

This produced a big laugh and Trinket was complimented on the ingenuity of his reasoning.

'Of course, they'd have to carry an abacus with them all the time,' Trinket continued, 'so that whenever necessary they could count each other's hairs.'

This produced another big laugh. In fact, a certain President who had not yet swallowed his mouthful of wine was so overcome with mirth that he had to spit it out for fear of choking. Not wishing to disgrace himself by spitting on the table, he spat it down the front of his gown and ended up with a prolonged fit of coughing.

'I hear that since that remnant of Oboi's party gave you a bit

of trouble here, Your Highness has obtained the services of quite a number of first-rate fighting men,' said Dolong to Prince Kang.

The Prince stroked his little beard and looked rather pleased with himself.

'Really first-class ones are, I can assure you, very hard to get,' he said with a complacent drawl. 'If you recruit through the official channels, you very seldom get anything better than third or second class.' He paused for a few moments

before continuing. 'In pursuit of the best, I can at least claim to have spared no effort. To obtain the services of really tip-top experts, I had, in addition to offering them very high engagement fees, to do various favours for them before they would consent to come. And now that they have come, they expect me to dance attendance on them every day. I tell you, it's a full-time job looking after them.'

He laughed, whether proudly or ruefully it was hard to tell.

'I think Your Highness must have some secret formula for attracting the stars of the profession to come and work for you,' said Dolong. 'I wish you'd tell me what it is.'

'My dear Chief, ' said the Prince, smiling, 'you're the starriest of stars yourself: what need do you have of recruiting star fighters?'

'You're very kind,' said Dolong. 'But I seem to remember, years ago, when we were competing with other young Manchu officers in the presence of the Regent, you and I both received prizes from the Regent for our skill in archery. I hear you were still shooting pretty well when you had that spot of bother here with Oboi's people. They tell me you shot more than twenty of them yourself.'

Prince Kang smiled but said nothing. He had in fact shot two of the Triad raiders on the occasion Dolong was referring to. Dolong had enlarged the figure by a factor of ten.

'I was there,' said Trinket. 'I saw it all with my own eyes. I could hear the arrows whizzing past my ears and the cries of "Aiyo! Aiyo!" in front of me and "Well shot! Well shot!" behind.'

A civilian official who hadn't quite grasped the significance of what Trinket was saying asked him to explain.

'Prince Kang was shooting so accurately,' said Trinket, 'that every arrow he shot hit its target. The "aiyos" in front came from the rebels he was hitting; the "good shots" behind came from our own side. As a matter of fact, though, there were more "good shots" than "aiyos". Now I wonder if you can tell me what the reason for that was.'

The mandarin stroked his beard.

'Well, I suppose because our forces were many times greater than theirs.'

'Ah, there you are wrong,' said Trinket. The rebels had turned up in force. The Prince's men actually were outnumbered. The reason there were fewer "aiyos" is because some of the Prince's arrows hit the rebels in the throat, so they couldn't cry out; and the reason there were so many "good shots" is because the Prince's shooting was so incredibly accurate that even some of the rebels couldn't help crying out in admiration, in spite of themselves.'

The official, impressed, nodded vigorously.

'Ah yes. Yes, yes. I see.'

The Heir raised his wine-cup and proposed a toast.

To His Highness Prince Kang's incredibly accurate shooting!'

The company all raised their wine-cups in response and drained them at a single draught. Prince Kang beamed delightedly.

That young Laurie is a real little charmer,' he thought. 'No wonder the Emperor is so pleased with him.'

'Your Highness, what about inviting those Martial Arts experts you were telling us about to come and join us?' said Dolong. 'I'm sure we'd all like to have a look at them.'

The Prince had been longing to show off his new acquisition and instructed a servant to call them in.

'Let's have a couple of extra tables laid here. And tell Father Illuminatus and the others we'd like them to join the party.'

Kungfu, Hats, and Plays

After a short delay a group of some twenty men came trooping in from the back of the hall led by a large, fat monk in a plum-coloured habit. Prince Kang rose to greet them.

'My good friends,' he said affably, 'I thought you might like to have a drink with us.'

Seeing the Prince rise to welcome them, the rest of the company felt obliged to

do likewise.

The fat monk smiled back at the Prince, pressing his palms together in monkish salutation.

'You do us too much honour,' he said. He turned to the company. 'Please, gentlemen! Please be seated!'

The great booming voice, sonorous as a bell, was itself sufficient evidence of its owner's Inner Force, which years of training had developed. The rest of the party were a somewhat mixed bunch

and not quite so impressive: some tall, some short, some handsome, and some quite ugly. All of them now seated themselves at the two extra tables which by this time had been prepared.

Apart from being a Martial Arts enthusiast, Dolong was also a very impatient man, and before the newcomers had even finished their first round of drinks, was pressing the Prince to let him see their skill.

'I can tell by just looking at them that these proteges of Your Highness have been trained to the very highest degree of proficiency in the arts of self-defence,' he said. 'Do you think we could ask them to give a demonstration? You have two very distinguished guests here today: His Grace the Heir from Yunnan and Laurie Goong-goong from the Palace. I'm sure they would both be most interested to see these gentlemen demonstrate their skills.'

Trinket was the first to support this request; the Heir followed, clapping excitedly; and all the other guests echoed their agreement.

Prince Kang beamed and turned to the men at the two tables.

'My good friends,' he said, 'all these honoured guests are longing to see something of your skills. What would be the best way of showing them something?'

A man of middle years who had been sitting at the left-hand of the two tables leapt to his feet and began speaking in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

'I agreed to enter Prince Kang's service because I thought he had a genuine appreciation of talent, ' he said. 'I hadn't expected to be treated as a travelling buffoon. If what these honoured gentlemen want is acrobatics and tight-rope walking, I suggest they'll find what they are looking for in the Bridge of Heaven

area. Excuse me, I'm going.'

But before he did so, he lifted up his left hand and brought it crashing down on the back of his chair, which disintegrated with a bang. Then, while the assembled company looked on aghast, he began striding from the hall. He had not gone more than a few steps, however, when a little, skinny old man who had been sitting at the same table popped out and stood in front of him, barring his way.

'See here, friend Lang,' he said, 'what you've just been saying is most unreasonable. His Highness asked us very courteously if we would give a demonstration of our skills. If you don't want to, that's up to you. I'm sure His Highness has no intention of forcing you. But to go smashing up the furniture in front of all these

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guests—even if His Highness, out of the kindness of his heart, lets you go unpunished, what sort of position does it put the rest of us in?'

'People seem to have rather different ideas about what is honourable,' the man called Lang replied sneeringly. 'If you fancy yourself as an entertainer, go ahead! Only leave me out of it.'

He took a step forward, but the old man was not giving way.

'If you're determined to go,' he said, 'at least do it properly. Make His Highness a kowtow and go with his permission.'

The man called Lang gave a contemptuous laugh.

'I'm not His Highness's bought slave. My legs are still my own. I walk where I please. What business is it of yours to try and stop me?'

Once more he started to go, and might have walked straight into the old man, who showed no inclination to budge. But the old man put his hand out and seized him by the left arm, only just preventing a collision.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I think it is my business.'

The man called Lang freed his arm by jerking it violently downwards; then, jerking it upwards, he aimed a blow at the old man's waist. The old man

countered by lashing out with his right foot in the direction of the other man's solar plexus; but Lang seized his upraised leg behind the knee and, by pushing upwards and outwards, caused him to lose his balance, so that he fell down backwards. He managed to save himself by putting out his right arm and leaping once more to his feet. By doing this he avoided the humiliation of falling flat on his back; but it was obvious from the dusky red hue of his face that he felt he had made a fool of himself. The Lang fellow laughed derisively and hurried towards the nearest exit from the hall.

'Please don't go, Lang!'

A tall, thin man, politely clasping his hands as he said this, had suddenly appeared in the exit. Lang was hurrying at such a speed that he couldn't have stopped if he'd wanted to and walked straight into him with a quite audible bump. The thin man had made no effort to avoid the collision and appeared unperturbed by it, but the shock of it caused Lang to stagger three paces backwards. Recovering his equilibrium, he took a couple of steps sideways to the left, but this was only a feint, for he suddenly changed his direction and rushed towards a screen-door on the right. As if by some

magic, the thin man was waiting for him on the threshold when he arrived. This time, not relishing the idea of another collision, Lang stopped himself just in time to avoid one. It was a near thing: there was barely an inch between his chest and the thin man's, and their noses were actually touching. The thin man didn't move a muscle or blink an eyelid. Lang moved to the left. The other man moved with him so that they were face to face as before. This so enraged Lang that he hit out with his fist at the thin man's face. Though aimed from a very short distance, there was great force behind the blow and the thin man might have been expected either to dodge aside from it or duck his head down to avoid it. In fact he did neither. He simply held his left hand up in front of his face and received the blow in his cupped palm. He must have exerted a strong outward pressure as the fist made contact, for once again Lang was sent reeling backwards. The hall re-echoed with the 'bravos' of the watching guests.

Lang was now in a dilemma. He couldn't shake off the thin man, nor could he fight a way past him, since he obviously wasn't his match. As he stood there, crestfallen and irresolute, the thin man clasped his own hands politely and addressed him:

'Do please sit down again, friend Lang. His Highness asked us to give a demonstration of our skills. We've just given one.'

He walked back and resumed his own seat at the right-hand table, while everyone in the hall applauded. The wretched Lang, covered in shame and

confusion, slunk back to the other table, not daring to raise his head.

Lang's rude outburst had put the Prince very much out of countenance. By forcing Lang back to his seat the thin man had retrieved the Prince's honour, so the Prince felt very grateful. He ordered his attendants to bring in a supply of fifty-tael silver ingots. But when Trinket leaned over and asked him what the man's name was, the Prince found, after rubbing his cheek reflectively, that he could not for the life of him remember either the man's name or when he had entered his service. He laughed apologetically.

'My memory is so bad,' he said. 'I can't for the moment recall it.'

Presently the attendants returned, carrying between them a big wooden board covered with a red silk cloth on which twenty large, gleaming fifty-tael ingots were arranged. They took up their position beside the Prince.

'Ah, good!' said the Prince jovially. 'Skill must have its

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reward.' He turned to the tall, thin man. 'Come, friend! Come and take one of these ingots!'

The thin man came forward, bowed, and received one of the ingots from the Prince's own two hands.

'What is your name, friend?' Trinket asked him.

'Qi Yuankai, sir,' said the thin man. Thank you for asking, sir.'

'You're terribly good,' said Trinket.

'Good for a laugh,' said the man.

'Now that we know how good these gentlemen of Prince Kang's are, ' said Dolong, 'I'm sure we're all dying to see what the gentlemen from Yunnan can do. What about choosing one of them for a bout or two with our friend Qi here, Your Grace?—A touch on one of the points would count as a win, of course, ' he added, seeing the Heir hesitate. 'We don't want any hard feelings, '

Prince Kang, who loved excitement of any kind, was enthusiastic.

'What an excellent idea, Chief! I'm sure each side would learn something from the other. We'll give two of these ingots to anyone who wins a bout and one each to the losers. Put them down on a table somewhere!'

The board with its nineteen ingots was set down in a position where everyone could see it. The red of the silk offset the whiteness of the silver which gleamed even more brightly in the candlelight.

'I am going to have Qi Yuankai again as my champion, ' said the Prince jovially. 'Which of your sixteen gentlemen will you choose, Your Grace?'

Excited at the prospect of a contest, the guests all craned their necks for a better view of the sixteen. Although this was nominally to be no more than a trial of strength between two Martial Arts professionals, everyone realized that it was really a competition between the two noblemen in which face and prestige would be at stake. They had seen something of Qi Yuankai's skill already and were inclined to doubt whether any of the sixteen would be a match for him.

While the Heir was still hesitating, one of the sixteen stepped forward and saluted Prince Kang with a bow.

'Your Highness, ' he said, 'we are none of us highly qualified in Martial Arts and definitely no match for the gentlemen of your household. We have accompanied His Grace to the Capital not so

much as bodyguards but to wait on him and cater to his needs. His Grace's father was most insistent when we set out that we should under no circumstances give offence to those in the service of other households, particularly those of Imperial princes or ministers of state. This was issued to us as a military order which it would be more than our lives are worth to disobey.'

Prince Kang laughed dismissively.

'His Highness the Satrap is a very cautious man: but this is only a demonstration we are talking about: no one is asking you to take part in a brawl. If His Highness should question you about this when you get back, you can tell him that I insisted that you should give an exhibition of your skill.'

The man bowed once more.

'I humbly beg pardon, Your Highness, but I dare not.'

Prince Kang was secretly furious.

'I am a Prince of the Blood, ' he thought, 'yet this fellow thinks more of his wretched Satrap than he does of me. I suppose if the Emperor gave him an order he would refuse that too, '

'Do you mean to tell me that if someone actually attacked you, you would not retaliate?' he asked the man.

When I was in Yunnan, ' the man replied, 'I was told that everyone living under the eye of the Emperor here in the Capital, from the highest officials down to the common people, is civilized and law-abiding. As a mere provincial coming from an out-of-the-way part of the Empire, I'm very careful, now that I'm in the Capital, to be on my best behaviour and not give offence to anybody; so, since the people here are so well-behaved, I can't imagine why any of them should want to attack me.'

He was a big, powerfully built, very able-looking man and spoke with considerable eloquence. He had just told the Prince, in so many words, that to set his bravoos on the Yunnanese in order to provoke a fight, if that was what he was planning to do, would be 'uncivilized'.

Prince Kang was getting really angry now. He turned to his own followers.

'Father Illuminatus, friend Qi, ' he said, 'if these gentlemen from Yunnan are determined not to oblige us, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about it.'

Father Illuminatus laughed his booming laugh and rose to his feet.

What our friend from Yunnan is really afraid of, Your

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Highness, is being beaten and losing face, ' he said. 'I can't believe these men wouldn't retaliate if they were seriously threatened. I've only got an average punch, but I think I can claim to have a little more power in my hand than our friend Lang who wanted to leave and found he couldn't. Would Your Highness be offended if I broke one of the tiles on this floor?'

Father Illuminatus was the most formidable of Prince Kang's retainers, a fighter whose Inner and Outer Forces were both superbly developed. The Prince realized, with pleasant anticipation, that the monk was about to give an

exhibition of his strength.

'Go ahead, Father,' he said. 'Break a hundred, if you like!'

Father Illuminatus squatted down and struck the floor lightly with the palm of his left hand. As he rose slowly to his feet, a large, slate-coloured tile—it must have been all of eighteen inches square—was seen to be adhering to his palm as if by magnetism. Although not particularly heavy, the tile had been cemented firmly into the floor, yet the monk, by exercising some mysterious inner power, had been able not only to dislodge it from its setting, but to keep it adhering to his palm even after he had risen to his full height. Trinket uttered a loud cry of admiration:

'Excellent kungfu!'

The rest of the company applauded with their hands.

Father Illuminatus, with a little smile of triumph, made a slight movement of his hand, releasing the tile from the power which held it captive to his palm, so that it began to fall; but as it reached the level of his chest, he clapped his hands together against its edges. There was a sort of plopping noise and the tile crumbled and dropped in a shower of particles to the floor. This time the shouts of applause came from every side. Since only four or five inches on each side of the tile could have been in contact with the monk's hands when they struck it, there must have been quite extraordinary power in them to have reduced the whole of it to little pieces, the largest of which could not have been more than an inch or two square.

Father Illuminatus walked over to the big retainer and pressed his palms together in monkish salutation.

'Now, sir, what's your name?'

'You have amazingly strong hands, Your Reverence,' said the man. 'I've certainly never seen anything like that before. But I'm only a nobody from the outback, you know: not anyone you would ever have heard of.'

The monk laughed.

'Don't nobodies from the outback have names, then?'

The big man raised his eyebrows and a look of anger passed over his face; but it was only momentary.

'Yes, we country folk have names, but so do cats and dogs. There'd be no point in Your Reverence knowing them.'

'You're very sparing of your skill, my good sir,' said the monk. 'Today Prince Kang is giving this big reception for his friends; all the guests here are highly distinguished men; this is probably the biggest occasion we've had in Peking this year. Yet when His Highness asks us to do our little bit to help him entertain these distinguished guests, you absolutely refuse to oblige. You're quite prepared to spoil their pleasure. Aren't you putting rather too high a value on your skill?'

'I don't know about skill,' said the big man. 'I've done a few years' training in the backwoods, but only up to the standard you'd find in country fairs. I'm certainly no match for the famous Father Illuminatus of the Iron Buddha Monastery in Cangzhou. If you insist on challenging me, I might as well concede victory straight away and let you take the two ingots without a fight.'

He began to walk back to his place; but Father Illuminatus wasn't giving up so easily.

'Not so fast!' he shouted. 'I'm not letting you go until I've found out what stuff you're made of. I'm going to do a Double Drumbeat on those temples of yours and I want you to show me what you can do to prevent me.'

The man shook his head, but Illuminatus, ignoring this, gave a great roar and flexed the muscles of his arms, which swelled visibly in the sleeves of the cassock he wore under his sleeveless plum-coloured surplice. This was merely the intimidating preliminary. Now, bending his arms, he held them out at shoulder level, embracing the air in front of him; then, moving them in two horizontal arcs as far back as they would go, he prepared to drive his great fists, each as large as a rice-bowl, against the sides of the big man's skull. There was an audible gasp from the company in the hall. They had seen what those two great hands could do to a floor-tile. It was too late to dodge the blow. Surely, if the man didn't want his skull to be crushed like the tile, he would be forced to parry it?

Amazingly he made no movement, either of hand or foot or head or even of his eyes, but continued to stand there, still and

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CHAPTER 9

Illuminatus had begun this little performance with the sole intention of forcing the other man to fight; it was no part of his plan to kill him. The Yunnan Heir was Prince Kang's honoured guest and to kill one of his retainers by a gratuitous act of violence would be no laughing matter. The man's passive immobility, even as the great fists were about to crush his head, caused the monk something close to panic. With a supreme effort he managed, in the last split second, to jerk them upwards so that they merely touched the man's head, while the plum-coloured surplice brushed against his face.

The man's face wore an almost imperceptible smile.

'Brilliant, Your Reverence! Superb kungfu!'

The guests in the hall had watched this open-mouthed. The man's impassivity was extraordinary; but if Illuminatus's great fists hadn't changed direction and had struck his temples, he would undoubtedly be dead. Surely someone who could play ducks and drakes with his own life like this must be insane?

The last-moment upward jerk which had saved the man's life had made the monk's arms hurt. For some moments he glared at him, trying to decide whether he was mad or just simple-minded. He was wondering, too, how he could get out of this situation without looking foolish. Obviously he couldn't just walk away and sit down.

'All right, my good sir, ' he said. 'If you're determined not to oblige me, you mustn't mind if I get a bit rough with you. You'd better make yourself ready: I'm going to give you a Black Tiger now, right in the middle of your chest.'

The Double Drumbeat and the Black Tiger are both very crude, elementary forms of attack which any beginner is taught to master in the first few months of his training. Both, as if to emphasize the primitive nature of the attack, are preceded by an in-timidatory shout. Using such crude methods on his opponent was the monk's way of showing his contempt. But the big man merely smiled his little smile and made no reply.

Illuminatus was getting angry.

'I'll give him a blow that will damage him internally,' he thought. 'It won't kill him straight away: he'll die in three or four days' time. That way there won't be any risk of upsetting the Heir while he is here.'

He struck up the first position, which is supposed to terrorize your opponent before you hit him, bending the legs as if astride

a saddle while simultaneously uttering a blood-curdling cry; then shooting out his right fist, he drove it smack into the centre of the man's chest. The man stepped backwards with the blow, so swiftly that it looked as if he was being carried by it, then gave a little laugh.

'Your Reverence has won. I stepped back.'

Father Illuminatus hadn't put all his strength into the punch, but it was still, potentially, a very damaging one; yet here was this man looking as if he hadn't felt anything and speaking in a quite ordinary tone of voice. It was obvious that he hadn't been hurt. The civilians present didn't understand the significance of what they had just witnessed, but anyone with any knowledge of the Martial Arts realized that the big man had deliberately given ground. In Trinket's case it was half and half: he thought he understood but wasn't sure.

Father Illuminatus was proud of his reputation among members of the Martial Arts fraternity and wasn't going to accept this as a victory. A cloud of ill-suppressed anger darkened his face.

'All right, here's another one!'

Once more he shot out his great fist at the big man's chest. He was still not using his maximum strength, but a good deal more than he had put into the previous attempt. This fellow's asked for it,' he thought. 'If this one makes him spit blood, that's just too bad!'

This time the big man stood his ground, but even as the fist touched his clothing, his chest seemed to cave in. While keeping his feet firmly on the floor, he contrived to move the upper half of his body two or three feet backwards, so quickly that, once more, it looked as if the blow had moved him, whereas in fact it had only hit the air.

With a cry of rage Father Illuminatus kicked out his right foot at the big man's lower belly. There was a cry of 'Aiyo!', and the watching guests jumped as one man to their feet, sure that this time he really had been hurt. But when they looked, they saw that he had thrown himself back still more, bending from the knees and arching his body backwards like an acrobat, so that the kick had passed harmlessly over him, inches above his horizontal body. The monk in his fury was resolved now to stop at nothing and followed up the abortive kick with another kick, this time using his left foot, which he aimed in a low sweep—the Dragon Sweep—at the man's shins, hoping to sweep his legs from under him so

that he lay helpless on his back; but the man, by an amazing piece of timing, pressed the balls of his feet on the floor and, while still

maintaining his horizontal position, jumped his bent legs momentarily up into the air so that the kick passed harmlessly beneath them. This time the applause was deafening.

By now it was obvious to Father Illuminatus that the big man's kungfu was superior to his own, and that even if he did succeed in provoking him to a fight, he would probably get a trouncing. He therefore pressed his palms together and bowed.

'You are very skilled, sir. I am most impressed.'

The man righted himself before returning the bow.

'I couldn't fight anyone with a punch and a kick like yours, Your Reverence,' he said. 'I had no choice but to take avoiding action.'

'Both men are extremely skilled, ' said Prince Kang. 'I'm sure it was only out of politeness that your man wouldn't fight back, Your Grace. Come, gentlemen: I think each of you deserves the two ingots.'

The big man bowed.

'I can't take a prize that I haven't earned, ' he said.

Since the big man had refused a prize, Father Illuminatus couldn't very well go forward and collect two ingots for himself. The Prince turned to one of his attendants:

'Give the two gentlemen their prizes.'

The big man bowed his thanks and accepted the two ingots from the attendant, after which Father Illuminatus somewhat shamefacedly took his.

Prince Kang knew very well that, although there hadn't been a proper fight, his own man had got the worst of the encounter. It was merely to cover up Father Illuminatus's embarrassment that he had awarded two ingots to both of them, pretending that there was nothing to choose between them. But he was not very happy with the outcome, and his craving for excitement was unappeased. 'This big fellow is not at all bad, ' he thought, 'but the rest of the Heir's retainers probably aren't nearly so good, whereas my lot are all of them exceptional. That Qi just now, for example: I wouldn't be surprised if he was even better than the

monk, not to mention all the others, '

In his imagination the champion whom he normally thought of as 'Father Illuminatus' had already been demoted to 'the monk'.

'Well, that little exchange was very interesting, ' he said, 'but it wasn't—what shall we say?—quite what we had hoped for.

Friend Qi, why don't you pick fifteen of your colleagues and arm yourselves for a little bout with His Grace's sixteen gentlemen?'

He turned to the Heir.

Tell your men to let us see their weapons, Your Grace, so that we can match them with our own.'

'I'm here as your guest, ' said the Heir. 'Surely you don't think we've come armed?'

The Prince laughed.

'My dear fellow, you're too punctilious. Your father and I are old soldiers: we've had swords and lances about us all our lives. We don't bother about these old-womanish conventions.' He turned to one of his attendants. 'Bring in a selection of all the stuff we've got. His Grace's gentlemen can choose what weapons they want, '

Prince Kang had begun active life as a military commander and had fought in campaigns all the way from Manchuria to the Central Plain, so it was not surprising that he had a very well-stocked armoury. A number of his attendants hurried off in answer to his summons and soon reappeared carrying between them a great variety of weapons of all shapes and sizes which they deposited on the floor in front of the Heir's sixteen retainers.

Qi Yuankai had by now selected his team. He chose only fourteen men, counting himself as the fifteenth and asking Father Illuminatus to make up the number as their leader. Father Illuminatus was looking for an opportunity to restore his damaged reputation. Though politeness required him to refuse, it was a very perfunctory refusal and he was easily prevailed upon to accept.

'I'll spoil the looks of a few of these Southern yokels yet, ' he thought. 'I shan't feel happy until I do.'

In his thirst for vengeance his earlier decision to do nothing that might upset

the Heir was now forgotten.

Attendants now brought in the weapons belonging to the members of Prince Kang's team. Father Illuminatus's were a pair of 'monk's knives' as they are called. He put them under his arms so that he could press his palms together as he stepped forward and bowed to Prince Kang. The Prince inclined his body a fraction and nodded back.

Having made his bow to the Prince, Father Illuminatus turned to address the Heir's men in a loud, commanding voice:

'Friends from Yunnan, choose your weapons!'

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He was answered by the same big man he had been trying to provoke into a fight a few minutes earlier.

We have the Satrap's express orders never, under any circumstances, to do any fighting while we are in Peking.'

'Not even if someone with a big sword takes a swipe at your head?' said Father Illuminatus. 'What would you do then? Stick your neck out and let him cut it off? Or would you draw it in and hide your head between your shoulders?'

Fifteen of the Heir's men looked angry. He was calling them turtles, and to call a man a turtle is tantamount to saying that he sweeps the floor in a brothel. Only the big man, who appeared to be their leader, remained unruffled.

'The Satrap's order was issued as a military command,' he said. 'If we disobey it, we'll get our heads cut off anyway, when we get back to Yunnan.'

'All right,' said Father Illuminatus. 'We'll see.'

He beckoned to the other members of his team and went into a huddle with them in a corner of the hall.

'I propose that this time we go for them with weapons and make it look as if we're aiming at vital points,' he said in a low voice to the others. 'See if that will make them fight.'

That's all right as long as we don't really hurt any of them,' said Qi Yuankai.

'We're just threatening them, mind, to try to make them defend themselves.'

'It won't be that easy,' said another of the men. 'We shall have to be very careful.'

'Right then, here we go!' said Father Illuminatus, raising his voice into a shout; then, with a long, shrill whistle, he went charging forwards, his two blades flashing, against the Heir's sixteen retainers. The other fifteen members of his team advanced in line beside him, brandishing swords, spears, metal stocks, maces, and a variety of other weapons. In the face of this wild onslaught the Heir's sixteen retainers continued to hold their line, stiffly at attention, eyes front, and seemingly insensible to everything in front of them.

Seeing that their opponents did not move, the Prince's men, anxious to show off their skills in front of their employer, began, each one of them, to go through the motions and figures which best demonstrated the capabilities of his chosen weapon, so that the Heir's sixteen retainers became the centre of a whirling, slashing, thrusting, lunging ballet in which blades and bludgeons moved

with a speed that dazzled the eye and made an audible swishing in the air.

'Careful! Careful!' cried the civilians in the audience; and the experts, aware that each thrust and cut was aimed at a vital point and capable, if applied with only a fraction less restraint, of causing the instant death of the person who sustained it, were almost equally alarmed.

The sixteen retainers continued to stare straight ahead. It was as if they set no store on their lives and had decided that if their opponents wanted to kill them, they would let them do it.

As the Prince's men got up speed, there was an occasional clang and a shower of sparks as two men's weapons accidentally clashed. It was not their intention that any of the Heir's men should be killed or wounded, but they were handling their weapons with so much force and so close to each other that there was a danger of one weapon glancing off another when one of these clashes occurred and wounding someone unintentionally. This is what, in fact, very soon happened, when one man's iron mace hit the copper hammer wielded by the man next to him, ricocheted off, and landed with a thump on the shoulder of one of the Heir's retainers. Shortly after this another of the Prince's men was slicing the air with a cutlass a few inches to the right of a retainer's face, when his cutlass clashed with a long-sword. The force of the collision turned the blade of the cutlass inwards so that it cut the retainer's face, which at once began bleeding profusely. Although both men were quite badly hurt, neither

made a murmur or ceased to stand rigidly to attention.

Prince Kang could see that if he allowed this to go on, even more men would get hurt; and as the Heir's men were obviously not going to fight, his enthusiasm for the whole business had considerably abated. He decided to call things to a halt.

'Excellent kungfu!' he said. 'Very good! I think you can put up your weapons now.'

Father Illuminatus gave a shout and, with a sweep and a flick of both his monk's knives, he lifted the hat off the man opposite him and sent it flying into the air. Seeing him do this, the rest of the Prince's team, with shouts of laughter, followed his example, knocking the hats off their opposite numbers before putting their weapons up and leaping clear.

Seven of the Heir's men proved, in fact, to be completely

hairless. Trinket, when he saw the bald, shiny pates, laughed and clapped his hands.

'You were absolutely right,' he said to Dolong. 'They really are a bunch of—'

But he never finished what he was saying. He had just glanced a second time in the men's direction. They were still standing stiffly to attention, but their faces were contorted with anger and their eyes were blazing.

Trinket had grown up on the streets where, even among the lowest of the low, there are certain unwritten laws which, in the course of his wild childhood, he had learned to obey. They told him now that what Father Illuminatus and the rest had just done was ugly; and it was ugly because it had stripped the men of their self-respect. The people of the streets, even the most hardened criminals capable of robbing and cheating and doing all sorts of shameless and disgusting things, will, in any quarrel, always leave the loser a little ground. North of the River, South of the River, this is the universal law. In a brothel, when some poor, besotted young man has thrown away his fortune on a whore and ended up utterly broke, the bawd will always give him thirty or forty taels to help him on his way. This is so that he doesn't do something desperate, like hanging himself or throwing himself in the river: for the fact that members of the criminal classes behave in this seemingly magnanimous manner is not due to kindness on their part but a sensible precaution against creating trouble for themselves in the future.

Thus when Trinket was cheating someone at dice and had cleaned him out of

money, if the sum he had relieved him of was a tael of silver, he would always allow him to win back a couple of pennyweights; if it was a hundred cash, he would see to it that he won back ten or twenty coppers. For one thing it was a way of ensuring that you could go on doing business; for another it helped to allay suspicion; and for another it meant that there was less danger of the loser turning nasty and your ending up with an unwelcome taste of his knuckles.

When he saw the look on the men's faces, he felt very sorry for them. At once he rose from his seat and went over to them; then, bending down in front of the tall man who seemed to be their leader, he picked his hat up off the floor.

'Brother,' he said, 'you were terrific.'

And with both hands he put the hat on his head.

The man bowed: Thank you, sir.'

He went on then to pick all the fifteen other caps up, one after the other.

They shouldn't have done this,' he said, smiling apologetically. 'Not kungfu. No way to treat friends.'

He didn't know which hat was whose, so he let them take them from him and put them on themselves.

The men had seen Trinket sitting beside their own master and knew that he was one of Prince Kang's most important guests. Although he was only a boy, they had noticed how deferentially he was treated by all the other guests. And someone had told them that this was the Laurie Goong-goong who had arrested Oboi. They were quite overcome by the honour he did them in picking up their hats and murmured confusedly, over and over again, as they bowed their thanks: 'No sir, no sir, you really shouldn't. Thank you, sir. No, no, too much honour, sir. Thank you, sir.' And so on, in various combinations.

Trinket had started off with a highly unfavourable impression of these men. They were servants of the treacherous Satrap and his Heir and, as such, he would happily have seen them come to a sticky end. But the patient way in which they had stood up to repeated harassment by Father Illuminatus and his team had awakened his sympathy for the underdog; and he was even more favourably disposed towards them by the obvious sincerity of their thanks.

'Highness,' he said, turning to Prince Kang, 'I need to spend some money. Could you lend me a few taels?'

'As much as you like, dear boy,' said the Prince. 'Would fifty thousand be enough?'

'I don't think I shall need quite as much as that,' said Trinket, laughing.

He turned to one of the Prince's attendants:

'I want you to buy sixteen hats for me, the best you can get. Only be as quick as you can.'

'Very good, Goong-goong,' said the man, and hurried off on his errand.

The Heir clasped his hands and made Trinket a deep bow.

""Love me, love my dog", as the saying goes. It's I who should be grateful to you, Laurie-goong, not these men.'

Trinket clasped his hands and returned the bow; but while he did, he was thinking:

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'If there are any dogs around here, Little Traitor, it's not these men, it's you!'

When Prince Kang saw Father Illuminatus and the rest of his team knocking the hats off the Satrap's men from Yunnan, he knew they had gone too far and was on tenterhooks lest the Heir should be offended; yet it would have been unbecoming for him, as a Prince of the Blood, to apologize. He therefore found Trinket's intervention providential and resolved to take advantage of the goodwill it had generated.

'Some service here!' he cried, looking round for an attendant. 'I want you to give each of His Grace's men fifty taels.' Then, because it occurred to him that if he only rewarded the other team his own people would lose face, he added: 'And fifty taels for each of our own men as well.'

From the buzz of approval that rose in the hall, it seemed that everyone was pleased.

Songgotu rose to his feet now and began filling the wine-cups of his fellow-guests; then, raising his own wine-cup and turning to face the Heir, he made the following little speech:

'Your Grace, I think what we have just seen here today is a good demonstration of your father's genius as a commander. We have been given some idea of the iron discipline of his soldiers and of their readiness to lay down their lives when called upon to do so. Your Highness, gentlemen, may I propose that we drink a toast to our absent guest, His Highness Field Marshal Wu Sangui, the Satrap of the West!'

The Heir hurriedly rose to his feet and held up his own cup:

'I drink the toast on my father's behalf. Thank you, everybody, thank you!'

The company followed his example by draining their wine-cups. Then the Heir made a little speech of his own.

'Your Highness, gentlemen. My father's ability to maintain the Southern frontier of our great Empire in a state of peace depends first and foremost, of course, on the gracious patronage of His Imperial Majesty; but it also depends on the wise management and expert guidance of your good selves, the Princes, the nobles, and the great ministers at Court. For his own part, my father does no more than perform the duties that are laid upon him as conscientiously and diligently as he is able. He can claim no credit himself. Thank you.'

After a few more rounds had been drunk, the Prince's

attendant arrived back from his shopping expedition with the sixteen new hats, which he deposited on the table in front of Trinket.

'Your Highness,' said Trinket to Prince Kang, 'I think you owe His Grace's gentlemen a new hat each to make up for the ones that were accidentally knocked off by your people.'

'I entirely agree,' said the Prince. 'I'm so glad you thought of it, Laurie.'

And he ordered the attendant to present one to each of the men. Each man bowed as he received his new hat, expressing his thanks in the same words: 'Thank you, Your Highness. Thank you, Laurie Goong-goong.' Then he folded the hat in two and put it inside his jacket.

Prince Kang and Songgotu exchanged glances. They realized that it was out of respect for their master that they continued to wear their old hats and would not put on the new ones.

After the drinking had gone on a little longer, the Prince's players came in and

asked what they should perform. Prince Kang invited the Heir to choose first. The play he chose was A Heap of Honours, a dramatic representation of the sixtieth birthday party of the great Tang military commander General Guo Ziyi, attended by his seven sons and eight sons-in-law, all of whom held high office, the 'heap of honours' of the title being a reference to the table in his reception hall piled high with their insignia. The choice was a flattering one since Prince Kang, like Guo Ziyi, was an ex-general and trusted servant of the Emperor who, like Guo Ziyi, was giving a big party. It is not impossible that in choosing this play the Heir had his father in mind as well.

As soon as the Heir had finished choosing, Prince Kang handed the list of plays to Trinket.

'Come on, Laurie, now you choose one!'

Trinket couldn't read the characters and handed it back with a laugh.

'I'm no good at choosing. You choose for me, Prince. Pick something with a bit of fighting in it.'

'So you like military plays, Laurie,' said the Prince with a smile. 'Hm. What we want is something in which a young hero vanquishes someone much older than himself, like your arresting Oboi. Ah yes, here we are. Let's have Whitewater Pool. That's got a young hero a little like you who beats the living daylights out of a villain called Black-Faced Tiger.'

When the players had finished performing A Heap of Honours

and Whitewater Pool, the next play was The Walk in the Garden, in which two female impersonators warbled on interminably 'Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah', so that Trinket, who couldn't understand a word, was soon growing bored. Getting up from the table he wandered off to one of the galleries at the sides of the hall where tables had been set out for gaming, with both cards and dice.

Trinket recognized the banker at the dice table as an officer in Prince Kang's guards. He must have been doing very well, for there was a big pile of money in front of him. As Trinket drew near, he greeted him with a smile:

'Laurie Goong-goong. Want to try your hand?'

'All right,' said Trinket.

Just at that moment he caught sight of the big man who had acted as spokesman for the Heir's bodyguard, standing apart on his own. Trinket had

rather taken to the man and beckoned to him to come over. The man stepped smartly towards him.

'Laurie Goong-goong. What can I do for you?'

'Forget the formality,' said Trinket. 'Everyone's equal at the tables. What's your name, friend?'

The man had refused to tell Father Illuminatus what he was called, but Trinket had asked him in a friendly, courteous manner and he told him willingly.

'My surname is Yang. I'm Yang Yizhi.'

That's a good name,' said Trinket, who hadn't the faintest idea what the characters were or what they meant. But he remembered the stories about the famous Yang family in the days of the Song dynasty in which not only the menfolk but several of the women were famous soldiers. He prattled away for a bit on the assumption that these were Yang's ancestors; and indeed perhaps they were, for Yang looked pleased and seemed to accept what he was saying as a compliment.

'Want to come in with me as a partner?' Trinket asked him, with a nod at the table.

'I don't know much about gambling,' said Yang.

That's all right, ' said Trinket. Til show you. Give us those two big ingots.'

Yang Yizhi handed him the ingots he had been awarded by Prince Kang. Trinket took a banknote from his inner pocket and laid it with the ingots on the table.

'Friend Yang and I are going in as partners,' he said. We'll lay a hundred on the first throw.'

'Right,' said the banker. The more the merrier.'

The betting was on a single throw of two dice. The banker threw first and got two Fours. Trinket's throw scored only seven, so they lost the hundred taels.

'Another hundred,' said Trinket. This time he won.

After sixteen or seventeen throws in which the luck seemed about equally divided, they remained more or less where they were when they started and

Trinket was getting rattled.

'It doesn't matter if I lose several hundred,' he thought, 'but it would be too bad if Yang were to lose his two ingots because of me.'

His next throw scored only six: an almost certain loser. Surprisingly, the banker scored only five. Trinket laughed happily. After that it was a series of wins. One hundred taels became two hundred, two hundred became three hundred: in only three throws he won four hundred taels.

'You're in luck today, Laurie Goong-goong,' said the banker with a smile.

'Do you think so?' said Trinket. 'Til try another couple of throws then.'

He pushed back the four hundred taels he had just won and threw. A Four and a Six. Once more the banker lost with a double Three.

What about it?' said Trinket to his partner. 'Shall we go on?'

'You know best, Goong-goong,' said Yang. 'Whatever you say.'

Trinket added the four hundred taels they had already got to the four hundred they had just won.

Why not?' he said to Yang. 'Let's have a bit of fun! Eight hundred!' he called, and made his throw.

One of the dice, after rolling violently, rested at Six; the other one continued to roll. Trinket had given a secret little twist to his throw which he felt sure would yield a double Six—the gambler's 'heaven'; but whether because it wasn't his own special dice he was playing with or because he hadn't quite perfected the trick, the wilful dice, after rolling interminably, finally rested at Two. A score of eight was almost bound to lose. Trinket cursed the dice.

'Sod you, stinking little dice! Is that the best you can do for me?'

The banker laughed.

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'Ha ha, Laurie-goong! This time I think you really have lost.'

He threw. One of the dice rested at Five: the other, like Trinket's, continued to roll and roll.

'Come on, deuce, deuce, deuce!' Trinket shouted at it.

Two was the highest that would make him the winner. Three would make a score of eight, and with the dice, if the scores are equal, the second player wins. Incredibly, while Trinket was still shouting encouragement at it, it came to rest at Two.

'Officer, ' said Trinket, smiling happily, 'you're not in luck today'

'Oh, it's a lousy bank,' the man said, grinning back at him. 'Anyway, the sun seems to shine for you, Laurie Goong-goong: whatever you put your hand to seems to turn out right. With a player like you I haven't got a chance!'

He handed Trinket his winnings: three two-hundred-tael banknotes and two hundred-tael ingots.

'Well, much obliged,' said Trinket, sweating somewhat now that the excitement was over. Thank you very much.'

He turned to Yang Yizhi and thrust the lot into his hands.

'Here you are, friend, ' he said. 'I think we'd better not push our luck any further. We'd only be picking green apples if we were to go on now.'

Having just made a small fortune without lifting a finger, Yang looked like a happy man.

'Laurie Goong-goong,' he asked his benefactor, 'what was that officer's name?'

Trinket suddenly realized that, although he had recognized the man, he did not know his name.

'I forgot to ask, ' he said softly, and turned back to enquire.

The man seemed rather flattered that he should want to know, for he beamed happily, stood up, and answered him very deferentially.

'Jia Baisheng, Goong-goong. Brigadier-Major Jia Baisheng. Under Prince Kang's command. I've been with the Prince quite some time now.'

After exchanging a few pleasantries with him, Trinket walked off on his own.

As he was doing so, a thought suddenly struck him:

'Why did Yang want to know the banker's name?'

While he was pondering this question, he turned back for another look at Jia Baisheng, who was already busy with another

gambler. From the way he handled the dice—his way of picking them up, the peculiar way in which he turned his wrist, the way he crooked his fingers, the way he released the dice—he could tell that this was a past master he was watching, with years of experience behind him. In the excitement of gambling he hadn't noticed these things; but now it suddenly dawned on him.

'Of course! The so-and-so was losing deliberately! No wonder I won five times running! No one's ever really as lucky as that. Tamardy! I suppose it's because I've got so much money and don't much care whether I win or lose, otherwise I'd have spotted straight away. I bet that Yang fellow knows a few tricks too. I'm sure he's not a beginner; he's probably an old hand at the game.'

'But why should a Brigadier-Major I don't even know the name of want to let me win money off him?' he wondered. 'I suppose, like everyone else, he thinks that because I'm in favour with the Emperor, I might put in a good word for him, or if I don't do that, at least I won't do anything to harm his prospects. Well, up your granny's! One thousand four hundred taels just to make me feel pleased! Easy money!'

Now that he knew the banker had been losing deliberately, he felt no inclination to go on gambling. There was no excitement for him in bloodless victory. He went back to join the others at his table, to eat a bit more and listen to the players.

They were doing *The Escape from the Convent*. A young nun was singing and miming as she sang, cheered on by repeated 'bravos' from the audience. Trinket couldn't conceive what she was supposed to be up to and soon rose from his seat again, feeling desperately bored.

'What would you like to do, Laurie?' Prince Kang asked amusedly. 'Just say the word. Don't be polite!'

'Don't worry about me, ' said Trinket. 'Til find my own amusement.'

He was half tempted to go back to the gallery where the gaming tables were and where, to judge from the loud cries of the gamblers, things had considerably livened up, but quickly thought better of it.

'I'm definitely not gambling any more today, ' he told himself.

From previous visits to the residence he had a vague idea of its layout and could find his way around. With nothing particular in mind he drifted into the regions behind the hall.

A Conversation, a Crossbow, and a Sutra

Everywhere the residence was ablaze with lights. Several of the Prince's people he encountered in his wandering immediately stood still when they saw him coming and waited, with arms held respectfully at their sides, until he had gone by. Suddenly, as he ambled onwards, he became conscious of a strong desire to piss. He couldn't be bothered to look for someone who could tell him where there was a privy, so, as there was a little garden to the left of the gallery through which he was walking, he pushed through a screen-door and made his way to a dark corner of it in which he could empty his bladder. He had undone his trousers and was about to piss when he heard the sound of two men talking in low voices on the other side of the flowering shrubs behind which he was standing.

'Give me the money and then I'll take you,' said the first voice.

'No, you take me there and show me where it is first,' said the second voice. 'Don't worry, you'll get your money all right.'

'Money first,' said the first voice. 'Suppose you get this thing and then don't pay me? Where would I go to look for you?'

'All right,' said the second voice. 'I'll give you a tenth of it now. Here's a thousand taels.'

Trinket's heart missed a beat.

'If one thousand taels is only a tenth,' he thought, 'whatever it is they're talking about must be mighty precious.'

He overcame the urgent need to piss so that he could listen to what they were saying.

'I want half now,' said the first voice. 'Otherwise the deal is off. This is no laughing matter, you know. I could lose my head because of this.'

There was a pause in which the owner of the second voice appeared to be

thinking.

'All right,' he said. 'Five thousand taels. Here, you'd better check.'

Thank you,' said the first voice, and Trinket could hear the rustle of banknotes being counted. Then, 'Follow me!'

Trinket's curiosity was now thoroughly roused.

'Lose his head!' he thought. 'I wonder what it could be that's so important. I'd better follow them and see what they're up to.'

He could hear the men's footsteps walking towards the west side of the garden. Slipping out from behind the flowering shrubs,

he could just make out the backs of the two men as they moved through the trees and bushes. He began following them, keeping at a discreet distance behind. When they had gone about twenty yards, they stopped and looked around them, as though fearful that someone might have seen them.

'Whatever it is they're up to,' thought Trinket, who had stopped when they did, 'it must be something pretty bad or they wouldn't be acting so suspiciously. Prince Kang has been very good to me: it would be rather a nice gesture if I could round off the evening by catching a couple of villains for him.'

To fortify his courage he felt in the side of his boot to make sure that his dagger was still there, then under his gown to make sure that he was wearing his impermeable, weapon-resistant waistcoat.

At the western end of the garden the two men disappeared inside a small, ornate building through whose elegantly latticed, paper-covered windows a faint light was shining. Trinket tiptoed up to one of the windows, wet the paper with the tip of a saliva-moistened finger, and applied an eye to the hole.

Looking inside, he could see that the building was a Buddhist chapel. There was an altar with a Buddha-image behind it and an oil-lamp burning in front of the image. A man dressed like a servant was speaking.

'It took me more than a year to find out where it was hidden,' he said. 'I reckon I've earned that ten thousand taels.'

The second man had his back to Trinket.

Well, where is it?' he said.

'First things first,' said the manservant.

'What do you mean?' said the other man. The thin, sharp-featured face was turned now so that Trinket could see. It was Qi Yuankai, who earlier on had prevented the man called Lang from leaving the hall.

'You know very well what I'm talking about,' said the manservant. 'The other five thousand.'

'You're a hard man to do business with,' said Qi, taking a wad of notes from an inside breast pocket and handing them to the man, who proceeded to count them in the light of the oil-lamp on the altar.

Trinket was afraid. He had seen something of Qi's martial prowess and it was obvious that what he and the manservant were involved in was a matter of very serious consequence. If Qi found

out that he had been spying on them, he would kill him without a moment's hesitation in order to stop his mouth. In his panic he wet himself. Once the piss had started, he made no effort to hold it back, but let it course freely down his leg. That way at least it made no noise.

The manservant had now finished counting.

'That seems to be correct,' he said, very pleased. Then he began talking in Qi's ear, but in so low a voice that Trinket was unable to hear what he was saying. Qi nodded several times while he was talking.

When the man had finished, Qi braced himself for a spring, leaped up on to the altar and, having first glanced back to make sure he was unobserved, reached a hand out towards the image's left ear, felt around for a bit, and extracted a small object from it. When, after jumping down again, he examined it in the light of the altar lamp, Trinket could see that it was a little key—a gold key, he guessed, for it gleamed goldenly in the lamplight. It was no longer than the little finger of a child's hand, and could easily have been made from a single ounce of gold.

Qi's thin face wore a grin of triumph as he bent down and began counting the floor-tiles in line with the front of the altar. Starting from the right-hand corner of the altar, he counted ten or a dozen tiles along, then the same number forwards along a line at right angles to them. Then he squatted down, extracted a short dagger from inside his boot, and began levering with it at the tile he had reached in his counting. A little, low cry of satisfaction escaped from him as the

tile began to rise.

'You see!' said the manservant. 'I told you, didn't I? I haven't cheated you.'

Qi did not reply. Having removed the tile, he appeared to be inserting the gold key very gently into a keyhole in something underneath. Though Trinket couldn't see what he was doing, he heard the faint click of a key turning in a lock. But Qi was looking puzzled.

'There's something wrong here,' he said. 'I can't get it open.'

'Can't get it open?' said the manservant. 'I can't understand that. I've stood at the window and watched with my own eyes while the Prince opened it.'

He made Qi move over, squatted down in his place, took hold of whatever it was that was giving trouble, and effortlessly pulled it out. Even as he did so, there was a whirr, and a crossbow bolt

flew up from below the ground and hit him in the chest. The man fell back with a cry of pain, releasing, as he did so, the square metal cover-plate he had been holding in his hand, so that it went flying into the air. Qi reached out and caught it before it landed on the paved floor, where it would undoubtedly have made a very loud clang. Then, squatting down behind the man's back, he put his right hand over his mouth to prevent him crying out, while with his left hand he grasped the man's left wrist and pushed the hand down into the hole to feel around with it.

All this Trinket watched round-eyed and open-mouthed with horror.

That Qi is a cold-blooded devil,' he thought. 'He must have guessed there would be some mechanism to guard the treasure or whatever it is, so he used the man as a shield.'

As no more crossbow bolts seemed to be forthcoming, Qi released the servant's arm, plunged his own inside the hole, and pulled out a rectangular object wrapped in cloth. Keeping his right hand over the man's mouth, he stood up and dragged him over to the altar, where he threw him on his back on the floor, stamped his right foot down on his mouth so that he couldn't cry out, and placed the object on the altar, where he could undo the cloth and examine its contents in the light.

Trinket drew a deep breath when he saw what the cloth had concealed. It was a book. Now there are millions of books in the world, but there was only one whose title Trinket was able to read: the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. And this

was it. It was exactly the same as the ones he had found among Oboi's things except that this one was bound in red silk.

Qi Yuankai hastily wrapped the book up again, then raised his left foot and stamped it down on the crossbow bolt projecting from the man's chest. There was a sound like 'pff!' as the bolt sank into his body. The man was already mortally wounded and died almost instantly: a sound like a muffled groan from under Qi's foot, a few convulsions, and his body lay still.

Watching this, Trinket felt his heart pounding fiercely in his chest and his bladder, which he had thought empty, discharging more wetness into his trousers. As he continued to watch, he saw Qi stoop down to remove the banknotes from the dead man's inner pocket, straighten up, and stuff them into his own with a little laugh:

'So you wanted to be rich!'

After thinking for a moment, he stooped down again, put the gold key in the dead man's palm and closed his fingers over it. Then, picking up the cloth-wrapped Sutra, he made his way swiftly out through the rear of the chapel.

'He'll get away now, ' thought Trinket. 'I wonder if I ought to raise the alarm.'

But before he could make up his mind, he became aware of a shadow moving somewhere above. It was Qi on the roof of the chapel. He ducked down and made himself small, scarcely daring to breathe. The only sound he could hear was the noise of tiles being moved about overhead. After a while Qi jumped down from the eaves and went swaggering off, as cool as if nothing had happened.

'I see,' thought Trinket. 'He's hidden the book under the tiles so that he can come back and get it later. Hm. I don't think this time he's going to be quite so lucky.'

He waited a while until he thought Qi must be a fair distance away and could bear to wait no longer, then, by climbing one of the pillars of the verandah, he managed to scramble up on to the eaves, where he could stand and walk slowly up the roof. Having made his way to the part which was roughly where he thought the noise had been coming from, he started removing the tiles. He must have lifted fourteen or fifteen of them before he saw, faint in the darkness, the cloth-wrapped corner of the book. When he had got it safely out, he put all the tiles back in place, wondering as he did so what it was that made the book

so precious.

The Old Devil, the Empress Dowager, this fellow Qi, Oboi, Prince Kang—they all seem to think this book is a priceless treasure. Well, all I can say is that any copy that comes my way I'm hanging on to—or my name's not Trinket!

He took the cloth wrapping off and laid the book flat on his stomach under his gown, tying it tightly in place with his belt. Fortunately he was wearing a loose, thickly-lined gown with a jacket over it. No one would guess that he was concealing a book underneath his clothes. He threw the cloth wrapper into the bushes and made his way back to the hall.

Everything in the hall seemed exactly as it had been when he left it: the gamblers in the gallery were still gambling; the diners were still watching the same play; the little nun was still mincing seductively about the stage, warbling as if she would never stop.

'Why is she going on like that?' Trinket asked Songgotu.

'She's thinking of men,' said Songgotu, grinning. 'She'd like to run away from the convent and get married. Look at her face now! She's full of the joys of spring. Now look—see? She's giving the glad eye—'

He stopped suddenly, remembering that he was speaking to a eunuch, with whom it was tactless to talk about such things, because it only reminded them of their lost opportunities.

This play isn't very interesting,' he said, in an attempt to change the subject. 'Let me choose something else for you. I know, let's have a scene from Fair View Inn after this. It's about a young hero called Li Cunxiao who has a fight with a tiger. Great stuff. And after that we can have a scene from The Marriage of Zhong Kui's Sister. There's some very good tumbling in that by Zhong Kui's five little devils.'

Trinket was enthusiastic about the choice of plays, but remembered that he ought to be getting back to the Palace and wouldn't have time to watch them. He could see Qi Yuankai out of the corner of his eye playing a very rowdy game of guess-fingers with another member of the Prince's Martial Arts team. Presently, when the game was over, he heard him shout across the table at Father Illuminatus:

What's happened to that Lang fellow, Father?'

Several of the other men at the table remarked that they had not seen him for

some time and expressed the view that he had probably slipped away.

Father Illuminatus snorted contemptuously:

There's no helping people like that. He's probably gone for good. Didn't have the face to stay here.'

'I expect he has sneaked off, ' said Qi. 'He's a shifty-looking character. Let's hope he didn't steal anything before he went.'

'It wouldn't surprise me a bit if he had, ' said one of the men.

This Qi fellow had it all worked out, ' thought Trinket. 'He deliberately made Lang lose face so that he'd want to slink away while no one was looking. So then, when later on they find out that someone has been killed and something is missing, suspicion will naturally fall on him. Clever. This is a trick I must remember. Before you do any dirty work, always make sure in advance that there is someone else who will take the blame. Excellent kungfu . . .'

It was getting late now, so when Dolong, the new Intendant of the Palace Guard, rose to take his leave, saying that he was on

duty in the Palace, Trinket followed his example. Under the circumstances Prince Kang could not very well urge them to stay longer, so, with much laughing and jollity, he conducted them all the way to the main gate, assisted in this civility by the Yunnan Heir, Songgotu, and a number of other guests.

No sooner had Trinket settled back in his sedan than Yang Yizhi, his late sleeping partner at dice, came running up with something in his hands.

'A little gift from His Grace,' he said, handing it to Trinket. 'He hopes you won't find it too unworthy.'

'Thank you,' said Trinket, receiving it politely with both hands; then, mindful that the bearer of a present is normally tipped, he thought he had better add something. 'Old Yang,' he said, 'I felt from the moment I first saw you that we should be friends; and if we are friends, I think it would be a bit insulting if I were to offer you money. One of these days when I'm free I'll ask you to come and have a drink with me.'

Yang was greatly touched.

'Goong-goong,' he said, 'you've already given me seven hundred taels today. Isn't that enough?'

Trinket laughed as he bade farewell:

That was money paid out of someone else's pocket. It hardly counts.'

Impatient to see what the Heir's present was, Trinket ordered the bearers to stop as soon as they reached the end of the lane. He got one of them to hold up the carriage lamp and shine it inside the sedan. On unwrapping the carrying-cloth, he found three brocade-covered boxes. The first contained a miniature cock and hen, exquisitely carved out of green jadeite. The second contained two pearl necklaces, each made up of at least a hundred pearls, not as big as the ones he had ground up for the Little Countess's ointment, but all perfectly round and flawless and of exactly the same size. (This part of the present he found particularly pleasing, because he had pretended to the Little Countess that he was going out to buy more pearls and now, thanks to the Little Traitor, he would seem to be as good as his word.) The third box was full of banknotes, forty in all, each with a face value of ten taels of gold, making a total value of four hundred taels which, at an exchange rate of eighty to one, was the equivalent of thirty-two thousand taels of silver.

'Next time I see the Little Traitor,' thought Trinket, 'I shall thank him very coldly, so that he can see I found his present disappointing and knows that he'll have to come up with a whole lot more if he wants to make me happy. That's what Songgotu said I should do. If the Little Traitor pretends not to understand what I'm getting at, I'll start finding fault with what he's given me. "Oh, Your Grace," I'll say, "that little pair of chickens you sent me: they're very nice, but they're not much like chickens, are they?" Then the Little Traitor will say, "What do you mean, not like chickens, Laurie Goong-goong?" And I'll say, "Whoever saw a cock and hen as small as that? They're not even as big as sparrows. And for another thing, I've seen green parrots and green peacocks, but I've never seen a green chicken. Or do you have them in Yunnan perhaps?" The Little Traitor won't know what to say to that; he'll just try to put on a smile. "And even if you do," I'll say, "I'm sure the combs must be red. And then again," I'll say, "that hen you gave me doesn't lay eggs. I don't think much of a hen that doesn't lay eggs." Hee, hee, hee!'

*

As soon as Trinket got back to the Palace, he rushed straight to his own room, barred the door behind him, lit the candles, and threw open the curtains of the bed.

'Bet you're tired of waiting, ' he said.

The Little Countess lay motionless on her back with wide-open, staring eyes. The little cakes were still piled up on her mouth. She hadn't eaten a single one. He got out the pearl necklaces and held them up to show her.

'Look what I've bought for you!' he said. 'When I've ground these up and put the ointment on your face, you'll be the most beautiful girl in the world, or my name's not—not Laurie. Aren't you hungry? Why didn't you eat the cakes? Let me help you up so that you can eat something.'

As he put his arms out to sit her up, he experienced a sudden numbing sensation below his ribs followed by a sharp pain in his chest.

'Ow!' he cried, as much from surprise as because of the pain in his chest.

His knees buckled under him and he found himself sitting on his haunches on the floor. His body was all pins and needles. He was quite unable to move.

THE DEER AND THE CAULDRON

The Second Book

A Martial Arts novel

by

Louis Cha

Translated and edited

by

John Minford

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORICAL BACK GROUND

Tamardy! Trinket is back! This Second Book continues the Adventures of that Incurable Turtle. I had once planned to call the three books of the translation 'Trinket in Trouble', 'The Trials of Trinket', and 'Trinket Triumphant'. These trilling (if not thrilling) subtitles were considered (no doubt justifiably) a trifle too trivial for the trilogy, and were abandoned, but I still feel they capture something of the romping spirit of Trinketian Trumpery that is this novel's True Life Force.

These ten chapters represent twenty chapters of the Chinese original. There has been quite a bit of condensation, but I (we) have tried to lose nothing significant from the plot. My unheralded collaborator David Hawkes has (once again) been far cleverer than I have at this business.

My students and colleagues at the Hong Kong Polytechnic (avid Cha-readers all!) have taught me a lot over the past four years. In particular, Agnes Chan and Joanne Tsui provided me with several valuable suggestions during the final stages of revising this volume.

And once again, all thanks and praise to my gifted editor Rachel May, whose superb literary kungfu skills and miraculous patience have salvaged many a careless blunder.

Hong Kong, November 1998

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1559 Birth in the North-Eastern Long White Mountains of Nurhachi, the Exalted Founder of the Manchu Imperial House of Gioro, descended from a noble family of the Jurchen Tartars (rulers of China in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the Jin or Golden dynasty).

1592 Birth of Abahai, eighth son of Nurhachi.

1572-1620 Reign of the Ming Emperor Wan Li; beginnings of the decline of the Ming (Bright) dynasty.

1616 Nurhachi declares himself Khan or First Emperor of the Later Jin (Golden) dynasty and presides over a growing Manchu state in the North-East.

1626 Death of Nurhachi, who is succeeded by Abahai, the Illustrious Ancestor.

Hong Kong, November 1998

1628 Accession of Chong Zhen, grandson of Wan Li, and last Emperor of the native (Han) Ming dynasty.

1636 Rise of rebel movements in northern and central China, including that led by Li Zicheng (General Bash-em); Abahai proclaims himself Emperor of the Qing (Pure) dynasty, in the Manchu capital Mukden (present-day Shenyang).

1638 Birth of Fulin (later to be the Emperor Shun Zhi) , fourth son of Abahai.

1644 Rebel leader Li Zicheng enters Peking; the Emperor Chong Zhen commits suicide; the Manchu army enters Peking, aided by the turncoat Satrap Wu and his force of Chinese troops; beginning of the Manchu Qing dynasty proper in China and of the reign of Shun Zhi.

1646-1647 Manchu conquerors try to consolidate their hold over central and southern China; Ming Princes (Pretenders) establish short-lived refugee courts in the South.

1654 Birth of Xuanye (later to be Emperor Kang Xi), second son of the Emperor Shun Zhi.

XII

1659 Coxinga, leader of the anti-Manchu resistance, tries to take Nanking but fails.

1661 Death of Empress Donggo, the Emperor Shun Zhi's favourite consort; also supposed death of Emperor Shun Zhi.

For an excellent, readable account of the historical background to *The Deer and the Cauldron*, see the first three chapters of Jonathan Spence's book, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990).

1662 Accession of Kang Xi. Ming Pretender Prince Cui taken prisoner in Burma and strangled in Kunming, with the connivance of Satrap Wu (acting on the orders of Oboi the Regent). Coxinga moves his base to Taiwan. Death of Coxinga. Formation, under Coxinga's General, Helmsman Chen Jinnan, of the Triad Secret Society, committed to the overthrow of the Manchus and the restoration of the Ming Imperial House.

1662-1663 Inquisition surrounding the *Ming History*.

1663-1664 Dutch fleet helps Manchus drive Coxinga's son from Taiwan; Manchu rule is established throughout mainland China.

1667 Kang Xi, aged thirteen, dismisses his Regents. **1669** Death of Oboi, formerly Chief Regent.

1673 Rebellion of Satrap Wu (Yunnan and Cuizhou Provinces), Shang Zhixin (Guangdong Province), and Geng Jingzhong (Fujian Province)-the Three Feudatories.

1678 The Dzungar Prince Caldan invades Eastern Turkestan, taking Kashgar and Yarkand, then (1679) Hami and Turfan.

1681 Three Feudatories are finally put down.

1682 Death of Fifth Dalai Lama. The Grand Lama Sangge seizes power, and supports Caldan's territorial expansion.

1683 Manchus finally conquer Taiwan.

1686 Kang Xi calls unsuccessful conference of Mongols and Tibetans.

1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk between Manchus and Russia, defining their border.

1690 War finally breaks out between Caldan and the Manchus.

1696 Caldan is finally defeated by Kang Xi's army at the battle of Jao Modo.

XIII

For an excellent, readable account of the historical background to *The Deer and the Cauldron*, see the first three chapters of Jonathan Spence's book, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990)

GLOSSARY OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

AH KI *see* Blue Girl **AH KOR** *see* Green Girl

AO BIAO The Blue Tiger. One of the Mu Family retainers, the much tattooed disciple of Shaker Wu.

AUREOLE, Father Abbot of Pure Coolness Monastery on the Wutai Mountains.

BAG-OF-BONES *see* Fat Dhuta

BASH-EM, General Li Zicheng (1605-1645), rebel leader who drove the last of the Ming Emperors from Peking in 1644, only to be ejected in his turn by Satrap Wu and the Manchus. His subsequent fate is unknown. One legend says that he did not die in 1645, but escaped to a monastery.

BAYEN, Brother Elderly Tibetan fighting lama from one of the great lamaseries of Lhasa.

BIG BEAVER Guan Anji, bearded Triad.

BLACK DRAGON MARSHAL Zhang Danyue, senior member of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

BLOSSOM One of the Empress Dowager's maids-in-waiting; Trinket's first girl-friend.

BLUE DRAGON MARSHAL Xu Xueting; elder of Mystic Dragon Sect.

BLUE GIRL Wang Ah Ki, twenty-year-old disciple of the White Nun.

BO HANFENG, Maple Mu retainer, descended from one of the original Paladins of the Ming dynasty; surviving younger brother of Bo Hansong (Pine).

BRIDGE OF HEAVEN (*Ttanqiad*) District of Peking famous for its storytellers, acrobats and other street-performers.

BUBBLING SPRING, Temple (*Yongquan si*) The easternmost temple on the Wutai Mountains.

XV

BUDDHA LIGHT, Monastery (*Foguang si*) One of the more eminent religious establishments on Wutai.

CHALJU, Colonel Commander of the Plain Yellow Banner; Colonel of the Valiants.

CHANG, Princess *see* White Nun

CHONG ZHEN, Emperor (1611-1644) Zhu Youjian, last Emperor of the Ming dynasty, who hanged himself on Coal Hill when the rebel leader Li Zicheng entered Peking.

CLARITY, Brother Shaolin Monk attached to the Vinaya Hall. j **CORDIAL, Brother** One of the Eighteen Lohans of Shaolin.

COXINGA (1624-1662) This was the Western name (sometimes written Koxinga, based on a title Guo-xing-ye given him by the Ming Court) for the naval warrior Zheng Chenggong, Marshal Zheng, Prince of Yanping, leader until his death of the anti-Manchu resistance, cryptically referred to as Dragon Brother by the Triads. His father was a Fukienese pirate and adventurer, his mother Japanese; the remnants of his army are supposed to have formed the first Triad Lodges.

CRYSTAL, Father Fat, twittering Abbot of Buddha Light Monastery on Wutai.

DENG BINGCHUN Member of the Mystic Dragon Sect, and lover of Mao Dongzhu, the false Empress Dowager, who dresses up in woman's clothes and poses as a lady-in-waiting. Father of Princess Ning.

DOLONG Colonel and Chief Intendant of the Palace Guards, a member of the Plain White Banner.

DONGGO, Empress (1639-1661) The 'fox-woman', favourite consort of the Emperor Shun Zhi, and mother of Prince Rong.

DORGON (1612-1650) Fourteenth son of Nurhachi, regent during the early years of Shun Zhi's reign.

DOUBLET Pretty young orphaned maid given to Trinket by Widow Zhuang, as a reward for having killed Oboi. A superb fighter, she becomes Trinket's devoted companion.

DUAN JIN *see* Yellow Dragon Marshal

EIGHTEEN LOHANS Elite Corps of Shaolm Fighting Monks.

EMPRESS DOWAGER Wife of Shun Zhi, daughter of the Mongol Prince Korcin, of the Borjigit clan; referred to by Trinket as the Old Whore. It transpires during the course of the Second Book that the 'Old Whore' is not in fact the real Empress, but an impostor, a woman named Mao Dongzhu, the daughter of Mao Wenlong, a Ming general who had fought against the Manchus on the frontier for several years.

FAN, Brother Fan Gang, Triad with bass voice.

FANG YI Mu Family retainer; beautiful sister-in-arms of the Little Countess, much admired by Trinket.

FAT DHUTA Also known as Bag-of-Bones. Originally a very fat disciple of the Mystic Dragon Sect; becomes excessively thin and tall after taking the Leopard Embryo Pill. Tries to ambush Trinket and take him to Snake Island. Brother-in-arms of Thin Dhuta (Lump-of-Flesh).

FEMALE REPOSE, Gate of (*Kun'ning men*) One of the northern gates within the Forbidden City, leading from the Hall of Female Repose to the Imperial Flower Garden.

FEMALE REPOSE, Hall of (*Kun'ning gong*) Residence of Empress, north of the Hall of Heavenly Purity.

FENG, Brother Feng Jizhong, Triad with superb kungfu skills.

FENG THE BLOODLESS SWORD Feng Xifan; general in service of Zheng Jing; evil mentor (and father-in-law) of Zheng Keshuang; supreme master of the Kunlun School of kungfu.

FUDENG Son of head of the Plain Blue Manchu Banner.

GALDAN (? 1644-1697) Mongol prince, Bushktu Khan of the Dzungars (a tribe of the Eleuths or Western Mongols), with ambitions to rule over Chinese Turkestan. Finally defeated by Kang Xi's armies in 1696.

GAO YANCHAO Young Triad, member of the Green Wood Lodge. Trinket's contact man.

GENG JINGZHONG (died 1682) Chinese Bannerman, Satrap of Fujian Province, later involved in the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories against Manchu rule.

GOLDEN PAVILION, Monastery of the Pure Land Buddhist establishment north of the Monastery of the Holy Precinct on Wutai.

GOODLY AUSPICES, Temple of the Local temple in Fuping County town, east of the hills leading to Wutai.

GREEN GIRL Chen Ah Kor, beautiful sixteen-year-old disciple of the White Nun, much admired by Trinket, but infatuated with the 'cad', Zheng Keshuang.

GU YANWU (1613-1682) Renowned Loyalist scholar and philosopher.

HAI DAFU Hai Goong-goong, Old Hai; an elderly eunuch, and formidable Martial Arts adept, loyal to the Emperor Shun Zhi; referred to by Trinket as the Old Devil, or Old Turtle. Dead by the beginning of the Second Book (killed by Trinket, during a confrontation with the Old Whore).

HATIEMO Mongol envoy sent by Galdan to Yunnan.

HEADLONG, Brother **Religious name taken by Manchu ex-soldier Hebacha, who accompanies the Hermit Emperor, Shun Zhi (Brother Wayward), and guards him on Wutai.**

HEAVENLY PURITY, Palace of (*Qianqing gong*) **Central compound of the Forbidden City, used as an audience chamber by the Manchu monarchs.**

HEBACHA *see* **Brother Headlong**

HOCHABO **Head of the Bordered Red Manchu Banner, owner of one copy of the Sutra. Colonel Rui steals the Sutra from him (on the Empress Dowager's orders) and murders him.**

HOLY PRECINCT, Monastery (*Linking si*) **One of the oldest religious establishments on Wutai.**

HONG, Leader **Hong Antong, elderly Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect.**

HONG, Madame **Su Quan, beautiful young Consort of Hong Antong, Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect.**

HUANGFU, Mr **Civil Chinese official from the Western Marches, between the province of Sichuan, and Tibet.**

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HUBAYIN **Tibetan Lama, acting under the orders of the Grand Lama Sangge.**

IRON DRAGON *see* **Liu Dahong**

KANG, Empress (1640-1663) **Deceased mother of the Emperor Kang XL**

KANG, Prince (1645-1697) **Giyesu, great-grandson of Nurhachi.**

KANG XI, the boy Emperor (1654-1722) **This was the reign tide of the second Manchu Emperor; his personal name was Xuanye (which means, roughly speaking, Dark Effulgence—he calls himself Misty, for Trinket's benefit). He was the third son of the Emperor Shun Zhi, whom he succeeded at the age of eight. By the beginning of the Second Book he has got rid of the overweening Regent Oboi, and assumed the reins of power.**

LAUREL ('Laurie Goong-goong') **Junior eunuch in attendance on Old Hai, murdered and subsequently impersonated by Trinket.**

LI, Brother **Li Lishi, tall thin Triad.**

LITTLE COUNTESS **Mu Jianping, younger sister of Mu Jiansheng, descended from old Duke Mu. At the beginning of the Second Book, she has been 'kidnapped' by Trinket.**

LITTLE FLOWER **Galumphing peasant woman, impersonated by a Mu Family retainer in order to incriminate Sir Zheng.**

LIU DAHONG **Shifu of Mu Family; a ruddy-faced, vigorous old man with wispy white whiskers and piercing eyes, known on River and Lake as the Iron Dragon.**

LIU YAN *see*. **Sister Swallow**

LIU YIZHOU **Member of Mu Family, of pale complexion and questionable courage; in love with Fang Yi.**

LU, Doctor **Senior member of Mystic Dragon Sect; a man of wide reading and culture, and a connoisseur of calligraphy and painting.**

LU YIFENG **Churlish official in the service of Satrap Wu; he ill-treats Xu Tianchuan, and is punished (at Trinket's request) by the Satrap's son; subsequently he is made Governor of the Black Hole, a prison in Kunming.**

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LUMP-OF-FLESH *see* **Thin Dhuta**

MANJUSRI Monastery **A lamaist establishment on Wutai.**

MAPLE *see* **Bo Hanfeng**

MA BAO Brigadier on staff of Satrap Wu.

MADAME HONG *see* **Hong, Madame**

MAO DONGZHU *see* **Empress Dowager**

MAO WENLONG **Ming general, father of Mao Dongzhu.**

MATERNAL TRANQUILLITY, Hall of (*Gning gong*) **Empress Dowager's residence, in the north-west corner of the Forbidden City.**

MILITARY PROCLAMATION, Gate of (*Xuanwu men*) **The south-west gate of the Tartar City.**

MU FAMILY **This was the common appellation for the powerful faction surrounding the descendants of Old Duke Mu, who had made the South-Western Province of Yunnan their personal fief throughout the Ming dynasty, and were loyal to the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui. They were implacably opposed to Satrap Wu, who after the arrival of the Manchus supplanted them in the South-West. The Family had its own distinctive style of kungfu.**

MU JIANSHENG **The Young Count. MU JIANPING** **The Little Countess.**

MU, Old Duke (1345-1392) **Mu Ymg, one of the foremost generals, and adopted son, of the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang. He was the founder of the Mu Family, and was much spoken of in *The Heroes of the Ming*, from which Trinket loves to tell stories.**

MU, Young Duke (died 1661) **Mu Tianbo, descendant of Old Duke Mu, loyal supporter of the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui.**

MYSTIC DRAGON **This fanatical sect, with its powerful mantra-based kungfu, is based on Snake Island. Details of the sect emerge in the Second Book. It is divided into Five Branches, each having its own colour, and its own Dragon Marshal. Among other things, there has been a purge of the Sect's 'elders', in favour of the young, and more fanatical, 'acolytes'. And it is explained that one of the**

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ways in which the Leader, Hong Antong, maintains control over the members of his Sect is by giving them the powerful Leopard Embryo Pill, which then makes them dependent on regular doses of the antidote.

NING, Princess **The Emperor Kang Xi's fifteen- or sixteen-year-old tomboyish 'half-sister'; in actuality, the daughter of Mao Dongzhu and a Han-Chinese father, Deng Bingchun.**

NURHACHI (1559-1626) **The Grand Progenitor, founder of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty.**

NURTURING NATURE, Hall of (*Yangxing dian*) **Hall in the north-east corner of the Forbidden City.**

NURTURING THE MIND, Hall of (*Yangxin dian*) **Hall in northwest section of the Forbidden City, between the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity and the Hall of Heavenly Purity.**

OBOI, Lord (died 1669) **This Imperial Guardian and Former Regent was one of Dorgon's trusted men. He was elevated to the rank of Duke in 1656 and at the death of the Emperor Shun Zhi (1661) he was one of the Four Regents for the**

boy Emperor Kang Xi (with Soni, father of Songgotu; Ebilun; and Suksaha).

He is arrested and put to death in the First Book.

OBSCURUS, Father Xuanzhen Daoren, Taoist Triad. Orphaned son of a frontier fur-trader shot dead by the Russians.

OSHOKHA Head of the Bordered Blue Manchu Banner.

PALADINS, the Four These were the four original aides of Old Duke Mu, whose surnames were Bo, Fang, Liu, and Su, and whose descendants continued to be loyal retainers of the Mu lineage.

PERCEPTION, Father Monk at the Shaolin Monastery; Master of Discipline.

PRAJNA HALL One of the compounds of the Shaolin Monastery.

PURE COOLNESS, Monastery The establishment on Wutai to which the Old Emperor, Brother Wayward, has retreated.

QIAN, Butcher Triad, pork-butcher to the Palace.

RADIANT, Brother Shaolin monk who knows a great deal about poisons.

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RAT-TRAP CONGRESS Gathering of various sectors of the anti-Manchu Resistance held at Hejianfu, to co-ordinate efforts for a Ming Restoration and plan the demise of Satrap Wu.

ROOTLESS, the Taoist Red Dragon Marshal; senior member of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

RUI, Lieutenant-Colonel Rui Dong, of the Palace Guards, known as the Invincible Iron Palm.

SANGGE Chinese name for sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho, Tibetan Grand Lama, formidable and somewhat sinister exponent of Tantric kungfu.

Historically, Sangge was the Tepas, or Temporal Ruler, of Tibet, and seized absolute power after the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1682, allying himself with Galdan.

SHANG KEXI (died 1676) Satrap of Guangdong Province, later involved in the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories against Manchu rule.

SHI LANG (1621-1696) An officer in Coxinga's army, who surrendered to the Manchus. One of the teachers of Zheng Keshuang.

SHUN ZHI, Emperor (1638-1661?) The Hermit Emperor, often referred to as the 'Old Emperor' (even though he is, in fact, barely forty years old), and sometimes the ex-Emperor. Shun Zhi was the reign title (the words mean literally 'obedience and rule') of Fulin, first Emperor of the Manchu dynasty, the ninth son of Abahai. He was known to have been deeply interested in Zen Buddhism, and it was widely believed that after the death of his favourite consort, the beautiful Empress Donggo, in the autumn of 1661, the young Emperor, 'pining for his lost mistress and weary of the dull routine of statecraft, voluntarily handed over the government to four of his Ministers and retired to the contemplative life.' As one contemporary poet wrote, 'He threw away the Empire as one who casts away a worn-out shoe. Following the example of the Lord Buddha, he preferred to seek the mystic solitudes.' This is the legend that lies behind the plot of *Deer*. The more conventional version of Shun Zhi's death is that he died of smallpox.

In the Second Book, he appears in the guise of Brother Wayward, in retreat in the hermitage behind the Pure Coolness Monastery. His Zen Master is the Venerable Yulin.

SIMPLE, Brother **Elderly white-bearded monk** at the Shaolin Monastery, in charge of the Prajna Hall; pedantic kungfu scholar, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of martial arts.

SITU BOLEI Officer in Wu Sangui's army, who in disgust at Wu's collaboration with the Manchus, withdrew with some 30,000 of his men to the Wang Wu Mountains (on the borders of Henan and southern Shanxi Provinces) and formed the resistance band, with its own distinctive style of kungfu, known as the Wang Wu Clan. His son, Situ He, commanded the Wang Wu detachment that ran into Colonel Wishy-Washy's regiment en route to Shaolin.

SNAKE ISLAND Snake-infested island in the Gulf of Bohai, lair of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

SONGGOTU (died 1703) This powerful Manchu statesman of the Heseri clan, third son of the elderly Regent Soni, becomes Trinket's 'adopted brother'.

SU GANG Known as the Magic Hand, a distinguished member of the Mu establishment.

SU QUAN *see* Madame Hong

SWALLOW, Sister Liu Yan, the Sow, plump member of Mystic Dragon Sect, posing as a lady-in-waiting in the Palace, and working for the Empress Dowager. Comes to a sticky end.

TAO, Aunt **Tao Hongying**, once a maid serving the Princess Chang (see the White Nun), the Princess Royal, daughter of the last Ming Emperor. She has sworn vengeance on the Tartars. Adopts Trinket as her 'real' nephew.

THIN DHUTA Alias Lump-of-Flesh; originally a thin disciple of Mystic Dragon Sect, becomes fat as a pumpkin after taking the Leopard Embryo Pill. One of the False Empress Dowager's lovers.

TREASURE, Father Trinket's *nom de religion*, given him by the Abbot of Shaolin.

TRIBULATION *see* White Nun

TRINKET Wei Xiaobao, the novel's principal character. He is an incorrigible scamp born to Spring Fragrance in the Yangzhou whorehouse, Vernal Delights. He is an egregious impostor, knave,

and poltroon, and a young man of many identities. In the course of his (never very convincing) attempts to learn kungfu from Whiskers Mao he acquires the *nom de guerre* Little White Dragon. In the Imperial Palace he kills, and takes the identity of, the eunuch Laurel. He meets and befriends the young Manchu monarch Kang Xi, whom he knows as Misty, and who calls him by the affectionate nickname Laurie. Subsequently in his encounter with the Triads he is made Master of the Green Wood Lodge. During his eventful visit to Snake Island, he is appointed White Dragon Marshal of the Mystic Dragon Sect. In order to enable him to travel to the Wutai Mountains, the Emperor appoints him Lieutenant Trinket Wei of the Imperial Guard. He is subsequently promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and adopts the Manchu-style sobriquet Wishy-Washy. As a monk, he takes the *nom de religion* Father Treasure. Kang Xi subsequently makes him a Viscount (Lord Wei).

TSERENG, Brother Tsereng-bLo-do, Tibetan Grand Lama of Manjusri Monastery, on Wutai.

UNIVERSAL SALVATION, Monastery of Buddhist establishment on the summit of Brocade Peak, on Wutai.

VERNAL DELIGHTS One of Yangzhou's more up-market pleasure-houses, home of Trinket's mother.

WANG WU CLAN *see* Situ Bolei

WARTHEAD Character invented by Trinket, to explain his own presence in the Forbidden City.

WAYWARD, Brother Emperor Shun Zhi's Buddhist name, taken when he retreated to his hermitage on the Wutai Mountains.

WHISKERS Mao Eighteen, notorious brigand, who escapes from prison, befriends Trinket, and takes him to Peking. Does not feature in the Second Book.

WHITE DRAGON MARSHAL Zhong Zhiling. Executed for failing to accomplish a Palace mission, and replaced by Trinket.

WHITE NUN One-armed Shifu of Green Girl; also called Tribulation; once upon a time Princess Chang, the Princess Royal, daughter of last Ming Emperor Chong Zhen. A refined and beautiful woman, practitioner of the Buddhist style of kungfu known as Iron Sword.

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WIDOW ZHUANG Her husband and many other Zhuang menfolk were executed at Oboi's orders, as part of the Ming History Inquisition (see Prologue to First Book). She and other Zhuang womenfolk escape on their way to penal servitude in the northeast, and take up residence in a 'haunted house', where they set up shrines to the victims of the purge.

WISDOM, Father Abbot of Shaolin Monastery.

WU, Satrap (1612-1678) Wu Sangui, the Big Traitor, was a turncoat Ming general who joined forces with the Manchu commander Dorgon to drive the Chinese rebel Li Zicheng (General Bash-em) out of Peking. He subsequently established his own fiefdom in the south-west, in Yunnan Province.

WU, Shaker Wu Lishen, the Shaker Lion, retainer of the Mu Family, Martial Arts veteran and brother-in-arms of Iron Dragon Liu.

WURTLE Yu Ba; servant provided to escort Trinket on his journey to the Pure Coolness Monastery by the Abbot of the local temple in the county town, Fuping.

WUTAI, Mountains (literally Mountains of the Five Terraces, from the five pagoda-crowned peaks of the range) This was a sacred range or massif on the eastern borders of Shanxi Province (said to have been the location of an apparition of the Bodhisattva Manjusri), with a long-standing link to the Imperial houses of China. Of its 150 monasteries, some 24 were Lamaist. 'It remains to this day an important place of pilgrimage. . . . On those days when the air is bright and sunny the range's grey and silver outline can be seen from afar, and when the sun sets behind it, the holy hill glows like a purple pyramid. Then it speaks of peace and perfection, of remoteness from the worries and futilities of earth, of another life, better and nobler than ours. This life the pilgrims, toiling slowly upwards, hope to attain through patience and perseverance' (Bredon and Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, 1927.) The Manchus

regarded their great Founder Nurhachi as a re-incarnation of Manjusri,' and according to some, the name Manchu itself derives from this.

WU YINGXIONG (died 1674) The Little Traitor, eldest son and heir of Satrap Wu.

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XU TIANCHUAN The Eight-Armed Ape, Triad plaster-seller. XU XUETING *see* Blue Dragon

YANG YIZHI One of the Little Traitor's entourage, a big man befriended by Trinket.

YELLOW DRAGON MARSHAL Duan Jin; Mystic Dragon elder of shifting loyalties.

YOUNG COUNT Mu Jiansheng, brother of the Little Countess; head of the Mu Family; a tall, thin young man of twenty-five or six, with a vigorous, manly air.

YULIN, Venerable Elderly Zen Buddhist monk, inscrutable Shifu of Brother Wayward.

ZENG ROU Fifteen-year-old female member of Wang Wu Clan, daughter of one of Situ Bolei's officers.

ZHANG KANGNIAN Palace Guard, friend of Trinket.

ZHANG, Old Elderly peasant who helps the Riders of the Mystic Dragon find shelter from the storm.

ZHAO QIXIAN Palace Guard, friend of Trinket.

ZHENG JING, Prince (died 1681) Eldest son of Coxinga, and present Prince of Yanping. In 1664 he organized the government of Taiwan, and in 1674 went to the aid of Geng Jingzhong, Satrap of Fujian, in his revolt against Manchu rule.

ZHENG KESHUANG (P1670-1707) Sir Zheng; second son of Prince Zheng Jing; a dashing (and insufferable) young man of twenty-three or so. He took over nominal control of Taiwan on the death of his father in 1681, finally surrendering to the Manchus in 1683. His father-in-law was Feng Xifan.

ZHENG KEZANG (died 1681) Eldest (illegitimate) son of Zheng Jing; son-in-law of Chen Jinnan, the Helmsman. He took charge of Taiwan in 1679.

ZHONG ZHILING *see* White Dragon Marshal

BALD PATE Common appellation for any male member of a Buddhist monastic order (they had to shave their heads); but it also carries connotations, especially in Chinese fiction, of a more ordinary sort of male member.

BEILEH Manchu prince of the Blood of the third degree.

BONZE A word used since the sixteenth century to designate Chinese and Japanese Buddhist priests.

BROTHER-IN-ARMS (Chinese *shixiong*, *shidf*) Term used by fellow disciples of the same martial arts Shifu.

CAMERARIUS Monk charged with accomodating visitors.

CINNABAR FIELD (Chinese *dantian*) The Inner Cinnabar is the alchemic elixir which the Taoist and Martial Arts adept distils. Cinnabar Field is the name given in Taoist, alchemical and Martial Arts terminology to the area in the lower abdomen, where all energy is stored. 'It is the root of the human being. Here men keep their semen and women their menstrual blood. It houses the gate of harmonious union of yin and yang. It is also called the Palace that keeps the Essence.' (The Book of the Centre, in Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 1993.)

DHARMA The Buddhist law, or doctrine.

DHUTA Buddhist recluse, one who follows ascetic practices and precepts in order to purify body and mind.

DRAGON The dragon is one of the supreme symbols of Chinese culture. Unlike the Western dragon, which is so often the primordial enemy, and combat with which is the ultimate test of virtue, the Chinese dragon is essentially an auspicious and spiritual beast, embodying cosmic energy, and representing the Yang principle. It is also a symbol of power, and associated with the Emperor.

DRAGON GATE (Chinese *longmen*) This term is used for the Five Branches into which the Mystic Dragon Sect is divided.

DRAGON LINES (Chinese *longmo*) Sometimes translated as

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Dragon Veins. According to *fengshui*, the system of Chinese geo-mancy (the traditional science of harmonising human habitations with the earth's natural environment), it is extremely hazardous to interfere with or cut across features of the landscape that the geo-mancer declares to be parts of the Terrestrial Dragon's body, especially the Dragon Lines or Veins, through which flows the vital energy (*qi*) of the earth.

DZUNGARS Western nomadic Mongol tribe, who dominated large areas of Central Asia, including Tibet, in the late seventeenth century. Galdan was their leader.

EIGHTEEN FIGHTING LOHANS OF SHAOLIN Traditionally there were Eighteen Buddhist Arhats or Lohans (Chinese *luohan*), sixteen of them Indian, the other two Chinese. In Shaolin kungfu lore, there have been various groupings of eminent fighting monks. The group of Eighteen in *Deer* includes Father Aureole, formerly of the Shaolin Temple, subsequently Abbot of Pure Coolness Monastery on Wutai, and Brother Cordial of the Dharma Hall of Shaolin.

FENGSHUI *see* Dragon Lines

FIVE DRAGON DISC Talismanic symbol of authority in the Mystic Dragon Sect.

FOX-SPIRITS (Chinese *hulijing*) These were-vixen are one of the favourite archetypes of feminine beauty in Chinese literature. These beautiful, sensual, irresistible creatures could be destructive and heartless, ruthless and vindictive (sucking out the essence of their lovers), but could also be tender and vulnerable, and capable of deep love and loyalty. They were an expression of the deeply ambivalent attitude of the Chinese literati towards women. The power of feminine beauty and sexuality, as personified by the fox-spirit, inspired them, and simultaneously incapacitated them, with a mixture of infatuation, fascination, and terror. This fear (of which Trinket, being still only a boy, was still innocent) was at the root of the sexual vampirism conducted under the guise of the so-called Taoist techniques of the bedchamber.

GOLDEN GATE School of Martial Arts based in Liaoning Province.

GOONG-GOONG Term of address for a Palace Eunuch.

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IMMORTAL (Chinese *xian*) An eternally youthful being, the supreme Taoist adept, one who through occult practice has mastered supernatural and magical skills, and attained physical and spiritual immortality.

INTERNAL FORCE (Chinese *neiqi*) The vital energy stored within the body, which the Martial Arts practitioner strives to conserve and strengthen through various exercises.

KARMA The law of cause and effect, by which actions and thoughts in one life create a necessary response and due retribution in a sub-sequent life. Human destiny is determined by acts done in an earlier existence.

LEOPARD EMBRYO PILLS A potent drug (with steroidal, or hormonal, properties?) used by the Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect to induce dependency among his followers. Its administration necessitates doses of an antidote. Among those affected by Leopard Embryo dependence are the fake-Empress Dowager and Doctor Lu. The scrawny Fat Dhuta (aka Bag-of-Bones), and his counterpart, the corpulent Thin Dhuta (aka Lump-of-Flesh), were transformed from their original shapes as a consequence of not taking the antidote.

MANJUSRI (Chinese *Wenshu*, or *Manshu* in Southern dialects) A bodhisattva who symbolises the wisdom aspect of mind, and is greatly revered in Lamaist Buddhism as the Enlightener of the World. He often appears in iconography as the left-assistant of Shakyamuni Buddha, seated on a lion, with a sword in his right hand and a book resting on a flower in his left. He is the presiding genius of the Wutai Mountains, and is said to 'appear at the mountain retreat from time to time, sanctifying its misty peak so often veiled in clouds'. (Bredon and Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, 1927.)

MANTRA A mystic syllable, word, or verse recited to still the mind and harness certain energies.

PRAJNA The fundamental wisdom inherent in all men.

PURE' LAND Sect of Buddhism, founded in China by Master Huiyuan (died 417), its adherents teaching salvation through faith in Amitabha Buddha (the Buddha of the Pure Land or Western Paradise), aided by single-minded

recitation of mantras and visualisation techniques. Widespread in China and Japan.

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REALGAR ELIXIR **Realgar** (Arabic *rehj al-ghar*, 'Powder of the Cave', Chinese *xionghuang*, 'Male Yellow', the mineral disulphide of arsenic) was a substance much used in traditional Chinese and Indian medicine.

SHANZAI! Exclamation expressing admiration and approval.

SISTER-IN-ARMS *see* **Brother-in-arms** (term used by female disciples)

STELE An inscribed stone tablet, often erected to commemorate a person or an event.

TIBET An independent state during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it came under Dzungar domination (1635-1713), and was invaded by Kang Xi in 1720.

TURTLE (*wugui*) Creature symbolising both immortality (often supporting inscribed stone tablets, as in chapter 14) and immorality (metaphor for the penis). Turtle-head is a common term of abuse (a reference to the glans penis).

VINAYA The vinaya, or discipline, texts of Buddhism constitute one of the Three Baskets (Tripitaka) of scripture. The Vinaya Hall was the disciplinary centre of the Shaolin Monastery complex.

ZEN Japanese pronunciation of Chinese word *chan*, from the Sanskrit Dhyana, contemplation or meditation. The mission of the legendary founder of the Zen School of Buddhism, the Indian monk Bodhidharma (fl. 470-516), was to point directly to the Mind as a path to enlightenment.

NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

In this book, Chinese names and place-names are in general spelled according to the Chinese system known as *Hanyu Pinyin*, which is now internationally accepted. (Occasional exceptions to this rule include well-established geographical names such as the Yangtze River, and the cities of Peking, Nanking and Canton.) The following short list may help readers with some of the more difficult sounds used in the Pinyin system:

Letter	Pronunciation
C	ts
q	ch
x	sh
z	dz
zh	j

The following very rough equivalents may also be of help to readers.

Word	Pronunciation
Bo	Boar (wild pig)
Cai	Ts'eye ('It's eye', without the first vowel)
Gang	Ts'arng
Chen	Churn
Cheng	Churng
Chong	Choong (as in 'book')
Chuan	Chwan
Dang	Darn g or Dung (as in 'cow dung')
Dong	Doong (as in 'book')
Emei	Er-may
Feng	Ferng
Gui	Gway
Guo	Gwore
Jia	Jeeyar
Jiang	Jeeyung
Kong	Koong (as in 'book')
Lii	Lee

NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

Long	<i>Loong</i> (as in 'book')
Lii	<i>Lew</i> (as in French 'tu')
Qi	<i>Chee</i>
Qian	<i>Chee-yenne</i>
Qing	<i>Ching</i>
Rong	<i>Roong</i> (as in 'book')
Shi	<i>Shhh!</i>
Si	<i>Szzz!</i>
Song	<i>Soong</i> (as in 'book')
Shun	<i>Shoon</i> (as in 'should')
Wen	as in 'forgotte«'
Xi	<i>Shee</i>
Xiao	<i>Shee-ow</i> (as in 'shee-cow' without the 'c')
Xing	<i>Shing</i>
Xiong	<i>Sheeoong</i>
Xu	<i>Shyeu</i> (as in French 'tu')
Yan	<i>Yen</i>
Yi	<i>Yee</i>
You	<i>Yo-heave-ho</i>
Yu	<i>Yew tree</i> (as in French 'tu')
Yuan	<i>You, Anne!</i>
Zha	<i>Jar</i>
Zhe	<i>Jerrr!</i>
Zhen	<i>Jurn</i>
Zhi	<i>Jim!</i>
Zhou	<i>Joe</i>
Zhu	<i>Jew</i>
Zhuang	<i>Jwarng</i>
Zi	<i>Dzzz!</i>
Zong	<i>Dzoong</i> (as in 'book')
Zuo	<i>Dzore</i>

CHAPTER 10

In which Trinket acquires a Second and most Delectable Companion, and learns what it means to be jealous; an Attempt is made on his Life; the Emperor plays at Detective and offers Trinket another Opportunity to enrich Himself



A Summons from the King of Hell

The Little Countess giggled, threw back the bedspread and climbed out of bed. She laughed. 'My Vital Points opened a long time ago. Why are you back so late? I've been sitting here waiting for you for ages.'

'Who opened them?' asked Trinket in some surprise.

'You just have to leave them for six or seven hours, and they open themselves,' she explained. 'Come on, let me help you into bed. I have to go now.'

'Oh no you don't!' cried Trinket agitatedly. 'You can't! The cuts on your face haven't healed properly yet! They need some more of my ointment.'

The Little Countess laughed.

2

'You're so naughty, always fibbing, and trying to scare me to death. You never carved anything on my face, did you?'

'How do you know?' asked Trinket.

'Because I got out of bed and looked at my face in the mirror, that's how! And there was nothing the matter with it!'

Trinket looked at her face. It was clean, and positively glowing and smooth. Every last bit of his bean-fudge and lotus-seed mash 'New-Skin Ointment' was gone.

'What an idiot I am not to have noticed!' he thought to himself.

'Of course there's nothing the matter with your face *now*,' he said promptly. 'It's thanks to my special ointment. That's why I went to so much trouble to get you these extra pearls. I had to hunt everywhere! *And* I've bought you a pair of lovely little knick-knacks.'

'Show me!' cried the Little Countess.

'Open *my* points first/ said Trinket.

'That's easy!'

As the Little Countess reached out her hand, she glanced at Trinket. He was rolling his eyes histrionically. She stopped and smiled.

'I almost fell for it again! If I open your points, you'll never let me go.'

'I promise I will!' said Trinket. 'By my plight and troth!'

The Little Countess hesitated.

'Well, don't you want to know about the knick-knacks?' asked Trinket. 'They're very cute.

One's a boy, one's a girl

The Little Countess could not help being curious.

'Are they rabbits?'

Trinket shook his head.

'No, ten times cuter than rabbits.'

'Goldfish?'

Trinket shook his head even more vigorously.

'*Much* cuter than goldfish!'

The Little Countess made several more guesses, none of which was correct.

'Well, what *are* they?' she cried impatiently. 'Show me!'

'Open my points first,' insisted Trinket.

'No,' said the Little Countess. 'I've got to leave straight away. My brother must be terribly worried about me by now.'

Trinket frowned, and gave a sudden grimace of pain.

3

'What's the matter?' cried the Little Countess. 'Are you hurt?' 'I was rushing around so much trying to find your stupid pearls, I tripped and hit my chest on a rock. It suddenly got worse again. All because you . . . you . . . you closed my points, and now you won't open them. I... I... can't... t... brea . . . the . . . ' moaned Trinket, his voice trailing very touchingly into silence.

Suddenly he rolled his eyes like a fainting man, and held his breath. The Little Countess put her hand to his nostrils. There was no trace of breath. She gave a scream and started trembling with terror.

'What's the matter with you?'

'You . . . closed . . . closed the wrong points,' stammered Trinket. 'You . . . you closed ... a fatal. . . one!'

'No! No, that's impossible,' said the Little Countess in some agitation. 'I *couldn't* have done. My Shifu taught me how to do it, and I couldn't have got it wrong. I closed the Wasteland and the Walkway, and then the Pool of Heaven. I'm sure that's right.'

'You . . . you were probably so frightened, you went and clos . . . closed the wrong ones/ said Trinket. 'Oh! Oh! I can feel the blood pounding in my veins! It's like a raging torrent! I can feel my whole Inner Force flowing backwards! My whole body's gone topsy-turvy! I think I must be possessed . . . ' 'By what? A devil?'

'Yes, yes, that's it, a devil! You've killed me! Closing points is *very* advanced kungfu, much too advanced for you! You've been fooling around with me, and now look what you've done! It wasn't the Wasteland or the Walkway—you've gone and opened the Gate of Death!

Deeeeeeeaaaaaath!' wailed Trinket. He would have come up with the names of one or two genuinely fatal points, but unfortunately didn't know any.

There was one thing he was right about, however. Opening and closing Vital Points *is* a highly advanced branch of kungfu. There are hundreds of such points dotted all over the body, some of them situated just a few centimetres from one another. The Little Countess

was young and far from *expert* in this art, so it was quite plausible that in the heat of the moment she might have closed the wrong points. (In actual fact, she had done nothing of the kind. She had closed the three correct points with great accuracy, though with a certain lack of force in her fingers.)

Trinket's display of agony was so convincing that she now began to doubt herself.

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'Maybe I opened your Middle Chest point by mistake?' she said anxiously.

'Yes, yes, that's it!' replied Trinket. 'But don't worry, I... I know you didn't do it on purpose. I won't blame you when I'm dead. When the King of Hell asks me how I died, I swear I won't tell. I'll say I did it myself. I'll say it was all my own fault!'

The Little Countess felt her heart welling with gratitude and remorse.

'Don't say any more, let's...let's open your points first. Maybe there's still a chance!'

She quickly began massaging him on his chest and beneath his armpits, and because she had not closed the points very forcefully in the first place, a little rubbing and squeezing soon did the trick. Trinket was able to move again.

'It's no good!' he groaned. 'It's the Gate of Death! I'm done for!'

'Maybe there's something else I can do,' cried the Little Countess, now quite distraught. 'I... I'm really so sorry, it's all my fault!'

'I know how good you are really,' said Trinket. 'That's why when I die, I promise my ghost will stay with you day and night.'

The Little Countess let out an ear-piercing scream.

'Your *ghost!*'

'Yes, my ghost has to stay with whoever killed me. But don't be afraid. It won't hurt you.'

'But... but I didn't mean to kill you,' said the Little Countess, more terrified than ever.

Trinket sighed.

'I promise I'll never scare you. I'll just look after you. During the daytime, when you're sitting down, my ghost will shoo off the flies; when you're asleep at night, it'll keep away the mosquitoes. And it'll come to you in your dreams and tell you lots of wonderful stories.'

'Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?' sighed the Little Countess sadly. 'Oh dear! I just wish this tragedy had never happened. I wish you weren't going to die.'

'Til only have one regret when I die,' said Trinket. 'That you promised me something during my lifetime, and never kept your word.'

'What was it? What did I promise?'

'You promised to call me ."my darling" three times. Remem-

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ber? Oh, if I could just hear those precious words on your lips before I died, then I think I could go peacefully!'

The Little Countess had grown up far away in the deep South, on the Mu Family estates in Yunnan, protected and loved by her parents, by her brother, and by a host of officials, generals, maids, servants, and other family retainers. She had never been lied to or intimidated in her entire life. She was used to hearing the plain truth, and at first she had seen no reason to doubt Trinket. But then he had started hopelessly overdoing it: the more he spoke, the more carried away he became, and by the time he got to the three 'my

darlings' even she could detect a sly twinkle in his eyes. She was naive, but she was not stupid. It finally dawned on her that he was teasing her.

'Liar!' she cried, drawing back from him. 'You're not dying at all, are you?'

He laughed.

'If I don't die now, I'll die in a couple of days.'

'No, you won't.'

'Well, *sometime* or other I'm bound to. And if you don't call me "my darling" three times, when I do die my ghost is bound to follow you wherever you go. It will be forever crying

"My . . . sweetheart. . . my . . . sweet. . ."

Trinket managed a long drawn-out growling sort of noise. It sounded extremely gruesome. Then he stuck out his tongue, and looked just like the ghost of a hanged man. The Little Countess was absolutely terrified again and ran to the door.

Seeing her pull out the wooden door-bar, Trinket dashed forward and quickly seized her by the waist.

'You can't go. There are too many fierce ghosts lurking outside.'

'Hands off!' protested the Little Countess. 'I'm going home!'

'You can't!' insisted Trinket.

The Little Countess raised her right hand, and brought it down with a sharp chopping motion on Trinket's right wrist. Trinket turned his own palms upward, intending to seize her forearm, but she drew her elbow back quickly, and at the same time clenched her left fist, striking at the top of his head. Trinket ducked backwards, neatly escaping her blow, and wrapped his arms around her legs. She replied to this with a move known as the Tiger's Leap, bringing her left hand sweeping down at him. This time Trinket

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was unable to dodge, and took a sharp crack on the shoulder. He tugged at the Countess with all his might, and they both went tumbling to the ground, her on top of him.

Trinket immediately leapt up and grappled with her. She aimed a quick Ring Chain Double Kick at his face. He dodged out of the way, at the same time twisting back her left forearm.

The Little Countess had obviously been taught these moves by an excellent Shifu, and she was a far better fighter than Trinket. In serious combat, he would not have stood a chance. But he was not too bad at this kind of close scrapping. The Little Countess managed to give him two hard blows to the chest, but then he succeeded in seizing her right arm and twisting it back. He laughed.

'Surrender?'

'No!' she cried.

Trinket knelt on her back, pinning her to the ground.

'Now?'

'No! Never!' she cried.

Trinket applied extra force, and raising her twisted arm, yanked it towards him. The Little Countess screamed with pain.

In the past, when Trinket and Kang Xi were fighting, neither of them would ever give up, far less cry out, however much pain they were in. Not until one side had conclusively gained the upper hand, and victory was assured. Then the other side would call out 'I surrender!', and the next round would begin at once. Trinket was therefore shocked to see the Little Countess burst into tears at her first setback.

'Useless girl!'

He gave a snort of contempt and let her go.

Ghost or Whore?

At that very moment, there was a knocking on the window-frame.
'Listen!' said Trinket in a barely audible whisper. 'It's a *ghost*!'
The Little Countess turned around in abject terror, and hugged him tightly.
There was another knock on the window-frame, followed by a series of creaks as the window was pushed open. This time even Trinket was frightened.
'It is a ghost!' His voice was shaking.
The Little Countess threw herself onto the bed and crept trembling under the covers.

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The window was pushed slowly open, and an eerie, high-pitched voice drifted into the room:
'Laurel. . . Laurel. . .'
At first Trinket thought it was the old eunuch Hai Dafu's ghost come to get him. But then he realized it was a female voice.
'It's a woman ghost!' he cried in terror, staggering backwards, until his legs gave way beneath him completely and he collapsed onto the bed.
A sudden gust of wind blew out the candles. Now Trinket and the Little Countess could see nothing. But they could sense the presence of a third person in the room.
'Laurel. . . Laurel! The King of Hell has summoned you. He says you killed Old Hai Goong-goong!'
The woman's voice sounded cold as ice.
'I didn't kill him!' was what Trinket *meant* to say in reply. But he was so terrified, that all he could do was open his mouth and gawp.
The King of Hell has ordered me to arrest you and take you for punishment. You are to climb the Mountain of Knives, and be dropped into the Wok of Boiling Oil! Laurel, this time there is no escape!
Trinket suddenly realized who it was: this woman was no ghost, it was the Empress Dowager! But this did nothing to allay his fears.
'A real ghost would have been better than *her*!' he thought in panic. 'I might have been able to get away from a ghost. But I don't stand a chance against the Old Whore. She wants me dead. I know too much. She wants to shut me up for good.'
Ever since he had overheard her talking that night with Old Hai, and had discovered a part of her secret, he had known that his life was in peril. One day she would certainly come for him and kill him. But then the days went by, and still she made no move, and after some time the danger began to fade from his mind. He began to assume that she must have believed him when he said that he had heard nothing of her conversation with Old Hai. Or else she was giving him a chance, reckoning that he would never dare to expose her, that he was too indebted to her for her earlier kindness in promoting him to eunuch-in-charge of the Imperial Catering Department.
Such were the speculations that raced through Trinket's mind. But the *real* reason for the Empress Dowager's delay in coming to

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get Trinket (or 'Laurel', as she knew him) was a great deal simpler. She herself had been badly injured in the fight with Old Hai. Seeing 'Laurel' survive the older eunuch's devastating kick, she had assumed he must be a young fighter of great Inner Force, and

deemed it dangerous to take any further risks with him for the time being. She had decided to wait, until such time as her own injuries were healed and *her* Inner Force fully recovered. Then, when the moment was right, she would strike. She could trust no one but herself to do this dark deed. Some hired assassin might learn too much from 'Laurel', even in the last minutes before the little eunuch died. The Empress Dowager was a woman of unstoppable determination, prepared to snuff out anyone who stood in her way, whether that person was an Imperial consort, a prince, a general, or an important official. Disposing of a little eunuch was a mere bagatelle.

So she bided her time. Even tonight she was still not fully recovered, but she had decided she could wait no longer. She must act. She had hidden outside Trinket's apartment, and then his mentioning of the word 'ghost' just as she was opening the window had been her inspiration. She climbed into the room, still unaware of the Little Countess's presence, slowly concentrated her strength, and raising her right hand, began striding towards the bed.

Trinket had no intention of putting up a fight, and wriggled under the bedspread. The Empress Dowager brought down the edge of her open palm. The blow struck both Trinket and the Little Countess at the same time. Fortunately the quilting was thick enough to absorb a certain amount of the impact.

She raised her hand for a second strike, and brought it down more powerfully than the first time. As her palm made contact with the bedspread, it was pierced by something extremely sharp. She was wounded! The pain was excruciating! She gave a great cry, and leapt clear of the bed. At that very moment voices could be heard from outside the window.

'Assassins! Assassins in the Palace!'

The Empress Dowager started, thinking for a moment that somehow her plan to kill the little eunuch had been discovered. But how? She had told no one. Meanwhile the pain in the palm of her hand was growing more intense with every second. She retreated, and clambered out through the window, without even bothering to find out if Trinket was dead or not.

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As she landed on the ground, two men attacked her from behind. She whipped round and swept her fists through the air in the countermove known as the Double Rear Guard, delivering two well-aimed blows to the chest, which sent both men crashing to the ground. Even as they fell, the clanging of gongs could be heard echoing throughout the Palace, and a voice in the distance shouted: 'Platoon One and Platoon Two to protect His Majesty!

Platoon Three to protect Her Majesty!'

'They're over here!' yelled another voice behind a rockery, closer at hand.

The Empress Dowager could tell it was one of the Palace Guards, and immediately hid herself behind the bushes. The throbbing wound on her palm was growing more and more difficult to endure. She could now make out the shapes of several clusters of men fighting fiercely, and the clashing of their weapons reached her ears across the darkened grounds of the Palace.

'So there *are* intruders in the Palace! But who?' she wondered. 'Friends of Old Hai? Supporters of Oboi?'

From far away drifted sounds of more orders, as yet more Palace Guards were dispatched, while closer at hand torches and lanterns began to gather from every direction, forming a circle of light. Sensing that this might be her last opportunity to escape, the Empress Dowager crouched down, then jumped from behind the bushes out into the open, and ran in the direction of the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity.

She had only covered a short distance, when she encountered a man hurrying towards her. 'Halt!' he shouted, thrusting a pair of vicious-looking fighting clubs into her face. It was another guard.

She dodged slightly to one side, then feinting with her wounded right hand, she struck at the man's shoulder with her left palm. The man lowered his shoulder to evade the blow, then spun round and brought the club in his left hand swinging upwards. The Empress Dowager dodged again to the left and hit back, this time with her right palm. They exchanged quite a few such moves in quick succession.

'It's a woman!' shouted the man.

The Empress Dowager needed to finish him off quickly, before reinforcements arrived.

'I am Her Majesty the Empress Dowager!' she blurted out.

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The guard was momentarily stunned. In that precious moment of hesitation, she struck him a double-handed blow on the chest, sending him to an instant death. She herself gasped for breath, then leapt into the bushes.

A Password

The Empress Dowager's first blow had caught Trinket in the small of his back, and knocked the wind out of him. In a desperate last attempt to save himself, he had pulled out his dagger, and held it point upwards beneath the quilt. With her second blow, she had impaled her hand on the dagger.

Trinket waited until she had jumped out of the window, then lifted one corner of the quilt. He could hear a confused hubbub of voices outside—no doubt the Empress Dowager's men coming to get him. Quickly he threw back the quilt and leapt out of bed, saying to the Little Countess, 'Come, let's go!'

'It hurts . . .' sobbed the girl.

The Empress Dowager's first blow had caught the Little Countess with more force than Trinket, and fractured her left leg.

'What's up with you?' asked Trinket, grabbing her by her collar, and hauling her out of bed.

'Just run for it! Hurry!'

The Little Countess tried stepping on the ground with her right foot, but immediately felt an agonizing pain in her left leg, lost her balance, and went tumbling onto the floor.

'My leg . . . It's broken!' she cried, bursting into tears.

Trinket was in much too much of a panic to be sympathetic.

'Great timing! You would have to choose *now* to go and break a leg . . .'

His one thought was survival. She could break four legs, or eight. . . She could leave a dozen bits of leg lying around the room, for all he cared . . .

He hurried to the window, and looked out, hoping that there would be no one outside, and he could spring out into the garden. He got there just in time to see the shadowy outline of the Empress Dowager executing her Double Rear Guard. One of the two men flew through the air and crashed hard onto the ground right under the window. Even in the dark, Trinket was able to make out that he was wearing a Palace Guard's uniform. He was curious why the Empress Dowager should want to kill a Palace Guard. Then he saw her go skulking off into the bushes. Several

yards away from her, six or seven men were engaged in fierce combat. 'Catch the assassins! Get them!' shouted a voice in the distance. 'So they haven't come for me after all!' thought Trinket, with mixed feelings of joy, fear, and confusion. Peering into the distance, he saw the Empress Dowager fighting another guard. The guard's metal clubs glimmered in the shadows. The struggle lasted for a while, and then she finished him off and disappeared into the dark once more. Trinket turned around. The Little Countess was sitting on the floor, groaning with pain. Now that he was in no immediate danger, he was a little more disposed to be nice to her. 'Does it hurt a lot?' he whispered. 'Sh! There's someone out there who wants to catch you, so you'd better keep very quiet!' The terrified Little Countess complied at once. A voice outside the window shouted: 'The Black-Legs are too many for us! To the Mountains!' That's our men!' exclaimed the Little Countess in utter astonishment. 'Your men? How do you know?' asked Trinket. '"To the Mountains!" is a Mu password. Just. . . just help me up. I want to have a look.' 'They've come to the Palace to rescue you, haven't they?' said Trinket. 'I don't know,' said the Little Countess. Then suddenly: 'Is this the Palace?' Trinket did not answer her question. 'They mustn't find out that she's in my room,' he was thinking to himself. He clamped a hand over her mouth and whispered in his most frightening voice: 'Don't make a sound! If the guards find you, they'll break your other leg. And then I'd really be upset!' There was a loud scream outside, followed by a cheer. Two down!' They're heading east! After them!' Gradually the hullabaloo died away, and Trinket loosened his hand. 'Your friends seem to have gone for good.'

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'No, they haven't/ replied the Little Countess. 'It's just a temporary retreat. That's what "To the Mountains" means.' 'And who are the Black-Legs?' asked Trinket. The Tartar guards.'

The Girl beneath the Window

Suddenly they heard groans of pain coming from outside the window. It was a female voice, evidently not a Palace Guard. That must be one of the assassins!' cried Trinket. 'I'll finish her off with my dagger!' 'No . . . Don't kill her! She's probably one of our people,' said the Little Countess, supporting herself on Trinket's shoulder, and hopping to the window on her right foot. She could see two figures down below. 'Soudiern Skies and Northern Lands . . .' she began whispering through the window, when Trinket reached out his hand, and clamped it tightly over her mouth. 'Beneath the Throne of the Peacock King,' returned the female voice from beneath the window. 'Is that... the Little Countess?' If this woman discovered the whereabouts of the Little Countess, thought Trinket, it could mean big trouble for him. He quickly raised his dagger and was about to hurl it at her

through the window, when the Little Countess seized his wrist, and he felt a sharp pain under his armpit, which obliged him to loosen the hand that had silenced her.

'Sister, is that you?' asked the Little Countess.

'Yes! What are you doing here?' replied the voice.

'What the hell are *you* doing here?' cried Trinket.

'Please . . . please don't be hard on her! She's my sister-inarms.' The Little Countess turned from one of them to the other as she spoke. 'Sister, are you hurt?' To Trinket: 'Please save her! Please! She's always been so good to me!'

'I don't need any help from *him*!' said the voice with a groan. 'And anyway, *he* couldn't save anyone's life even if he wanted to.'

Trinket struggled hard to free himself, and the Little Countess finally let go.

'Smelly little tart!' he cried to the owner of the voice. 'Who the hell does she think she is? I'm not taking that from a third-rate little kungfu slut like her! Tamardy! I can save lives! I could save

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twenty or thirty girls like her without batting an eyelid! Seventy, eighty...a hundred!'

At that moment, more shouts could be heard in the distance.

'Get them all! Don't let a single one of them escape!'

The Little Countess was desperate. She begged Trinket to help.

'Please save my sister! I... I'll call you *it*. . . three times. My darling, my darling, *my darling*. There!'

Finally she had done it! Trinket was ecstatic.

'Sweetheart! What would you like me to do for you?'

The Little Countess blushed.

'Save my sister!' she whispered.

'Don't!' protested the voice outside fiercely. 'He can't even save himself.'

Trinket snorted contemptuously.

'For the sake of my *dear sweetheart* the Countess, I *will* save your life! My dear, the two of us must never break our word. *I'll* save your sister, and then *you'll* call me "my darling" for ever and ever.'

'Yes!' replied the Little Countess. 'Whatever you want! My darling, my darling brother, my darling uncle, my darling grandpa if you like!'

As she said this she gave Trinket a gentle push, and he vaulted through the window. He found himself in front of a female form in black, lying huddled up on the ground just below.

'Come on. Up you get. Or the guards'll mince you into little pieces and use you to stuff dumplings . . .'

'I don't mind! One day someone will avenge me.'

'Stubborn little tart, aren't you!' said Trinket. 'Anyway, they won't kill you straight away.

First they'll strip all your clodies off and . . . rape you.'

Then finish me off now!' spat the voice furiously.

Trinket smiled.

'I've got a much better idea. Why don't / strip your clodies off, and rape you myself.'

As he said this, he bent down and made as if to put his arms around the girl. She tried to slap him angrily on the face, but was too badly wounded to manage more than a feeble sort of tap. Trinket laughed. He lifted her up in his arms and helped her through the window and into the room. The Little Countess limped forward, and staggered with her to the bed. Trinket was about to

climb back into the room himself, when suddenly he heard another barely audible voice coming from near his feet.

'Lau . . . Laurel Goong-goong, that girl. . . that girl. . . you . . . you mustn't. . .'

It was the guard who had been sent flying by the Empress Dowager. He was still alive, though badly wounded and incapable of movement.

'I suppose he's right really,' thought Trinket to himself. 'I ought to hand the girl in. But then what about the Little Countess? They might find out about *her*.'

The decision was quickly taken. He pulled out his dagger, and stabbed the guard in the chest.

'Sorry about that,' said Trinket, to the unfortunate corpse. 'Forgive me. If only you'd kept your mouth shut, I wouldn't have had to kill you.'

He searched every inch of the nearby garden for any further survivors, but only found five more corpses, three of them Palace Guards, two intruders. He heaved the body of one of the intruders up onto the window-sill, its head protruding into the room, its feet hanging outside into the garden. Then he stabbed it a few times in the back with his dagger for good measure.

'He . . . he's one of our people/' said the Little Countess in a frightened voice. 'He was dead already. What did you need to do that for?'

Trinket humphed.

'I had to. If you want me to save that smelly tart of a sister of yours.'

'*You're* the smelly one, not me!' protested the girl, from where she lay on the bed.

'How would you know?' asked Trinket.

'Your whole room stinks!'

'It smelled nice enough, till you arrived.'

The Little Countess interrupted them.

'Would the two of you please stop? You don't even know each other! Sister, what are you doing here? Did you come ... to rescue me?'

'No, we didn't even know you were here. When we found out that you'd disappeared, we searched everywhere, but it was hopeless . . .'

She was already out of breath.

'Why don't you just shut up!' said Trinket.

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'And if I *don't* shut up? What are you going to do to me then?'

'Nothing,' replied Trinket. 'You'll wear yourself out sooner or later. Oh dear! The Little Countess is such a nice, gentle girl; but you're—'

'No, no, you don't understand/' the Little Countess hurriedly interposed. 'She's really very nice.'

She went on:

'Sister, are you badly hurt?'

'Of course she is,' said Trinket. 'I told you, she's a third-rate little kungfu slut, and she obviously can't fight for peanuts. I shouldn't think she'll live more than three hours. She'll probably die before dawn.'

'No! She mustn't! My . . . my *darling*. . . You must save her, *please*Y

'I would rather die!' growled the girl. 'I don't need any favours from him! Little Countess, why do you keep calling him . . . calling him *that*?'

'Calling me what?' asked Trinket.

The girl didn't fall for it.

'Little *ape*. ' That's what I'll call you!'

'Well, in that case, we can be Mr and Mrs Ape!'

Trinket was an old hand at this kind of whore-house repartee. He had heard no end of it at Vernal Delights as a small boy. The girl tried to ignore him, and lay there panting in pain. Trinket took a candlestick from the table, and proposed that he should examine her wounds.

'Don't you *dare* look at me! *Don't!*' she cried.

'Stop screaming like that! Do you want the guards to come running in here and rape you?'

Trinket approached her with the candlestick in his hand. Through the blood smeared all over her face he could make out that she was a young woman of extraordinary beauty, about seventeen or eighteen years old.

'So, the smelly little tart turns out to be quite a babe!'

'Don't be so rude about my sister!' protested the Little Countess. 'She ... she *is* beautiful.'

'All the more reason for me to marry her!' said Trinket.

The girl protested vehemently, and struggled to sit up and hit him. But the pain was so great that she could only gasp, and collapse onto the bed again.

As far as matters sexual and matrimonial were concerned,

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theoretically Trinket knew it all. As a child he had heard such things endlessly discussed in the whore-house—by other people. But he had never taken them seriously himself. Even now he didn't actually *mean* to marry the girl, or have sex with her, not in any real sense; he was just having a bit of fun at her expense, baiting her, enjoying her reaction.

'Be patient!' he said mischievously. 'You'll have to wait until we're properly wed! This isn't a whore-house, you know! Aiyo! You're bleeding all over the bed.'

The girl was indeed seriously injured, and the blood was still seeping from under her clothes.

Just at that moment a group of people came hurrying up outside.

'Laurel Goong-goong, Laurel Goong-goong!' shouted one of them loudly from the garden.

'Are you all right?'

Now that the intruders had been driven off, a number of Palace Guards had been dispatched to ensure the safety of the Emperor, the Empress Dowager, and a couple of high-ranking consorts, while others had received orders to protect senior officials and some of the more important eunuchs.

'Get onto the bed/ he whispered to the Little Countess.

He covered both the girls with the bedspread, and closed the bed-curtains.

'Come on in, I've got one of them here in my room!' shouted Trinket.

A shudder passed through the body of the girl, but she was too weak even to sit up.

'Don't do it!' the Little Countess pleaded with Trinket, *sotto voce*. 'Don't hand her over to the guards!'

'She wouldn't be my wife/ Trinket whispered back. 'Why should I do anything for her?'

As they were talking, a dozen guards came up to the window.

'Here he is!' one of them shouted. 'Here's the man!'

'Yes, that's him!' said Trinket casually. 'He tried to climb into my apartment, so I went for him with my dagger.'

The guard held up his lamp, and examined the corpse. It had several wounds in the back, and blood was running down the clothes, over the window-sill, and onto the floor.

'I think you should run along/ said Trinket to the guards. 'You never know, you may find another one hiding in some dark corner. If you do, give him a good beating; if it's a

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woman, take off her clothes and . . . you know, have a bit of fun with her!' The guards burst out laughing. Trinket asked them to remove the corpse from the window, and they left.

Ointment and a Splint

Trinket closed the window, turned around, and lifted the quilt. 'You're so naughty!' said the Little Countess with a smile. 'You had us really scared . . . Aiyo!' Her hand had touched a large patch of blood on the mattress. The other girl's face had now turned an ashen white, and she was breathing very faintly. 'You must find out where she's been hurt/ said Trinket, 'and try to stop the blood.' 'Go...go away!' said the girl. 'Little Countess, the wound's here, on my chest.' She had lost a great deal of blood, and Trinket was now genuinely afraid that she might die at any moment. 'Little Countess, have you got any ointment you could use?' 'No/ Trinket heard a ripping sound as the Little Countess tore off the girl's blouse. 'Aiyo!' she screamed. 'What's this?' Trinket could see a two-inch-long wound right below her right breast. Blood was pouring from it. 'She mustn't die!' moaned the Little Countess helplessly. The girl was overwhelmed with a mixture of fear and shame. Her voice was trembling. 'Don't. . . don't let him see!' 'Come on/ said Trinket. 'It's no big deal.' But even he began to panic when he saw how much blood was still flowing from her wound. He looked around the room for some strips of cloth to bandage her with, and spotted the little mortar containing his bean-fudge and lotus-seed mash. This magical mixture of mine is *very* effective/ he announced proudly. He scooped some out and smeared it on her wound. The texture of the ointment was very gluey, and it did in fact succeed quite well in clogging up the wound and staunching the flow of

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blood. Trinket's fingers were now very sticky, and the sight of the girl's trembling little breast inspired him with an irresistibly mischievous notion. Very casually, as if it was the most natural and thoughtless thing in the world, he began rubbing the leftover mixture into the breast itself. This time it was not fear that mingled with the girl's shame, it was fury! 'Little Countess!' she screamed. 'Kill him!' 'Sister, he's only trying to help!' said the Little Countess, rather feebly. The girl almost fainted with rage. She was much too weak to do anything.

'You must close her points at once,' ordered Trinket. 'If she talks or moves around too much, she'll only lose more blood. She might die.'

'All right!' replied the Little Countess, and proceeded to close the points on the girl's stomach, armpits, and legs.

As the Little Countess begged her friend not to move, she suddenly became aware again of the pain in her own broken leg, and tears welled up in her eyes.

'I think you'd better lie down,' said Trinket. He remembered as a child in Yangzhou watching the bone-setters mend the broken arms of his street-urchin friends, how they used to set the break with a splint made of two pieces of wood, then apply a herbal liniment of some kind. He pulled out his dagger, sliced two legs from a chair, and fashioned from them a rough splint, which he bound tightly to the Little Countess's broken leg. But he still needed the ingredients for the liniment. An idea occurred to him at once. He turned to the Little Countess: 'You two stay in bed, and keep quiet.' He closed the bed-curtains, blew out the candle, and unbarred the door.

'Where . . . where are you going?' asked the Little Countess. To find some medicine for your broken leg,' said Trinket. 'You will come back as quickly as you can, won't you?' she said.

'I will.'

Something about her pathetic tone of voice gave Trinket a little thrill. He rejoiced at the prospect of being her saviour. He barred the door from the inside, and jumped out through the window, closing it behind him. Now no one in the Palace would

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dare to try entering his apartment, with the possible exception of the Empress Dowager, or the Emperor himself.

Medical Supplies

He had only taken a few steps, when he felt an ache in the small of his back, where the Empress Dowager had hit him.

'If the Old Whore wants me dead, I must get out of here as soon as possible!'

He walked towards some lights. A couple of guards on patrol dashed forward to greet him as soon as they saw him.

'How many of your men have been injured?' asked Trinket.

'Goong-goong, seven or eight guards are badly hurt, fourteen or fifteen lightly.'

'Where are they?' said Trinket. 'Show me.'

'Certainly, Goong-goong! We really appreciate your concern,' said the guards, and led the way. There were some twenty wounded men lying in the Palace Guards' mess-room, and four Imperial Physicians were in attendance, working hard to treat their injuries.

Trinket went up to the men and made a great show of expressing his concern, commending them for their loyalty and bravery, and asking their names one by one. But all the while he was paying the most careful attention to the way the Imperial Physicians were treating the various knife wounds, internal bruises, broken bones, and other injuries.

'I think I'd better have a supply of different types of medicine myself,' said Trinket casually.

'Just in case. Then if one of the guards gets hurt, I'll be able to give him first aid myself before the doctor arrives. You never know when those intruders might be back.'

'A very wise precaution, Laurel Goong-goong/ said the guards.

'In fact, just a moment ago, three of them tried to kill me,' Trinket went on. 'I dealt with one, but the other two got away. One of them hit me hard in the small of the back. It still hurts.'

'After all,' he was thinking to himself, 'it's true, the Old Whore *did* try to kill me!'

The four physicians, hearing that Laurel Goong-goong was hurt, left their patients at once, and came over to examine him together. They removed his gown, applied some medicine to the

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large bruise on his back, and gave him a herbal decoction to take internally. Trinket asked them to wrap up quantities of different types of drugs for him, which he put carefully away in his inside pocket, having first ascertained exactly how to use each one. Then he asked for two splints. Before he left, he showered the guards with more compliments and expressions of his undying concern. His attempts at courtly language were still far from perfect, and were interlarded with many a tamardy-this and a tamardy-that, but what did the guards care? They were so overwhelmed to have received all this attention from the Emperor's favourite (and from one who had himself also received wounds in defending His Majesty's person), that they themselves would gladly have gone out and been wounded again twice over.

Trinket the Physician

When Trinket reached his apartment, he pressed his ear to the window, and listened. There was absolute silence within.

'Little Countess, it's me/ he whispered.

He was afraid that if he climbed in unannounced, the girl might mistake him for an intruder, and welcome him with a well-aimed sword-point—in which case he would be needing all of his medical supplies for himself.

'We've been waiting for you for ages,' said the Little Countess, glad to see him return.

Trinket clambered in, closed the window, lit a candle, and drew apart the bed-curtains. The injured girl and the Little Countess were lying side by side. When the girl caught sight of Trinket, she closed her eyes immediately. The Little Countess beamed at him with gratitude.

'Little Countess, let me put some medicine on your wound for you,' said Trinket.

'No, I'd like to treat my sister first/ she replied. 'Would you please hand me the medicine. I'll put it on for her.'

Why do you keep saying "you" and "I"?' asked Trinket. 'Have you forgotten our deal?'

What/s your real name?' said the Little Countess, smiling evasively. The others seem to call you Laurel Goong-goong all the time.'

'They can call me that, but *you can't*. Come on now: what are you supposed to call me?'

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She lowered her eyelids slowly, and said in a hardly audible voice.

'In my heart... in my heart I can call you . . . my darling, but I don't think ... I should say it out loud all the time.'

'All right, I'll make things easier for you. If there's someone else in the room, you can call me "brother Laurel"; but if we're alone, you're to call me "my darling".'

The girl did not wait for the Little Countess to reply: That's disgusting!' she cried, casting an angry glance at Trinket. 'Don't listen to him, he's harassing you.' Trinket gave a little snort.

'I wasn't talking to you, so mind your own business! Even if *you* wanted to call me that, I wouldn't want to hear it!'

Then what *do* you want her to call you?' asked the Little Countess.

'Simply "dearest husband", or "darling husband"! The girl blushed, and gave him a scornful glance. 'You, my husband? Huh! Don't even *think* about it! Ever!' 'All right, all right/ said the Little Countess. The two of you can't seem to stop quarrelling! Obviously you were deadly enemies in a previous life. Brother Laurel, please give me the medicine.' 'No, I'll put it on for you,' insisted Trinket, lifting the quilt. He rolled up her trouser leg, removed the home-made chair-leg splint, then applied some ointment to her broken leg, and bound it tight in a new double splint. The Little Countess thanked him profusely.

Tell me,' he asked her. 'What's my wife's name?' She looked at him in amazement. 'Your wife?'

Trinket shot his lips out in the direction of the girl. The Little Countess smiled.

There you go again! My sister's surname is Fang, and her name is. . .'

'Don't tell him!' the girl cried.

Trinket laughed. He passed the medicine to the Little Countess, and bent down to breathe into her ear:

'Go on, my dear, tell me her name! Whisper it to me!'

Trinket had lowered his voice until it was scarcely audible, but the girl was lying right next to the Little Countess, and could hear his every word.

'Don't tell him!' she protested agitatedly.

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Trinket chuckled to himself.

'It's entirely up to you. Either you tell me your name, or else you let me kiss you: first on the left cheek, then on the right, and then on the lips. Which do you prefer? I can only presume you prefer to be kissed.'

By the flickering light of the candle, Trinket gazed at the delicately sculpted beauty of the girl's face. He detected a faint feminine fragrance emanating from beneath her flimsy clothes. He was enraptured.

'Delicious!' he murmured, breathing in her perfume. The immobilized girl was seething with rage. She reminded herself that this loathsome urchin was only a child, and (more importantly) a eunuch. When he moved closer and threatened to kiss her, however, she decided to compromise. 'Oh all right then, tell him.' The Little Countess gave a peal of laughter. 'My sister's name is Fang Yi.'

'That sounds like a pretty average sort of name to me,' said Trinket. 'And what's your name, Little Countess?' 'I'm Mu Jianping.' 'Better. But still not the best.'

'Well, I suppose *yours* is bound to be the *best* name,' said Fang Yi. 'May we have the honour of knowing what it is?'

Trinket ignored her question, and spoke to the Little Countess instead.

'You'd better put the ointment on straight away, my dear, or the pain will kill her. She's the only wife I've got. If she dies, I'll never be able to afford another one.'

The Little Countess closed the bed-curtains, lifted the quilt, and began applying the ointment to Fang Yi's wound.

'Brother, what should I do with the ointment you've already put on her wound?' she asked.

'Does it seem to be doing any good?' 'Yes, it does.'

One of the main ingredients in Trinket's bogus ointment had been honey, and because of its sticky texture honey *is* in fact rather an effective substance for staunching the flow of blood. It had clogged up the bleeding in her wound entirely. The other fudge-like ingredients, although they had no healing properties, had also helped. Trinket was delighted.

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'You see, my special medicine is far better than any magic potion! All those crushed pearls are working wonders. By the time she's fully recovered, she'll have the most beautiful breasts! What a pity that my son will be the only person lucky enough to get a good look at them—apart from me, of course!'

The Little Countess giggled.

'You are peculiar. I don't understand what you mean at all. . .'

'When she's breast-feeding the little boy, obviously.'

The Fang girl gave a snort of disgust.

The Little Countess stared at Trinket in wide-eyed bewilderment. She still didn't understand.

'You'd better gently wipe off my special ointment first,' said Trinket, 'and then apply some of the new stuff.'

Colonel Rui, the Invincible Iron Palm

Suddenly, in the midst of these medical ministrations, they heard the tramp of boots outside the door. Then a booming voice called out:

'Laurel Goong-goong, are you asleep?'

'Yes, I was as a matter of fact,' replied Trinket. 'Who are you, and what do you want? Can't it wait till the morning?'

'Lieutenant-Colonel Rui Dong,' replied the man.

'Oh! Colonel Rui! What's the matter?'

From his daily conversations with the guards, Trinket knew something about this Lieutenant-Colonel Rui Dong. He was a highly praised and widely respected officer, and something of a Martial Arts pundit. Among the guards, he was second only in popularity to Dolong, the Chief Intendant. In recent years, he had been posted outside the Palace, and this was Trinket's first encounter with him.

'I'm here on an extremely urgent matter, Goong-goong. I do apologize for waking you from your dreams.'

Trinket was indeed deeply engrossed, not in dreams, but in urgent thought:

'What's *he* doing here in the middle of the night? I expect he knows I've got two of the intruders hidden here and has come to search for them. What next? If I don't open the door, he'll probably break it down. I'd better play it by ear . . .'

Colonel Rui spoke again.

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'Goong-goong, this really is very important, otherwise I would never have presumed to *wake* you.'

That's fine. Just coming,' said Trinket, as he did so popping his head through the bed-curtains, and whispering to the girls to be silent.

He walked out into the ante-chamber, closing the bedroom door behind him, then somewhat hesitantly opened the main door. Outside stood a strongly built man, a good head taller than himself.

'Goong-goong, I'm sorry to disturb you,' said the Colonel yet again, pumping his hands apologetically.

'Not at all, not at all.'

Trinket was still totally in the dark. He scanned the Colonel's face, but could detect no expression of any kind on it, neither the faintest smile nor the slightest sign of anger.

'What's so urgent?' he asked. He pointedly did not invite the Colonel inside his apartment.

'Her Majesty is most concerned about this unpleasant disturbance in the Palace tonight. She has ordered me to carry out a full investigation, and to begin by asking you a few questions.'

The two words 'Her Majesty' were enough to put the wind up Trinket.

'Yes ... As a matter of fact, *I've* got a few questions to ask *you* about that/ he improvised.

'I've just come back from seeing *His* Majesty, who didn't seem *at all* pleased. "What a nerve that fellow Rui has!" he said when I saw him. "Causing trouble the minute he gets posted back to the Palace . . . "'

Trinket was just bluffing, playing for time while he figured out how to make his getaway. But Colonel Rui clearly believed his every word.

'What else did His Majesty say?' he asked in great alarm.

'He said that I should get started immediately after dawn and question all of the guards. We've got to find out who's behind this plot of yours, what you were aiming to do, and how many accomplices you had. That's what he said.'

This sent Colonel Rui reeling.

'His . . . His Majesty said that!' he stammered. 'I've been set up! I'm innocent! This . . . this is the most terrible injustice!'

'His Majesty asked me to keep *my* investigation top secret,' Trinket babbled on. 'Otherwise he was afraid you might try to kill *me*. I said that you would never dare to raise your hand against me

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inside the Palace. But His Majesty was not so sure about that. "If the villain's prepared to kill his own Emperor," he said, "he's clearly a man who'll stop at nothing!"

'That's ... all lies! I was never part of any plot!' cried Colonel Rui. 'His Majesty . . . His Majesty would never put the blame on a good man without solid evidence. Why, this very night I killed three of the intruders myself. Several of the guards witnessed it. His Majesty can question them.'

His veins were bulging blue on his forehead, and both his fists were tightly clenched.

Trinket thought quickly:

'I've got to seriously scare him. I've got to make him panic. Otherwise I'll never survive till morning. I'll never make my getaway. The girls'll just have to take pot luck. I've got to get out of this place. Once I'm out, I'll give it all up. Imagine! I'll never have to dress up as a eunuch again! I'll give up being a Triad Lodge Master too! I'll just spend my half million, and have some fun! I'll go back to Yangzhou and set up a whole chain of whore-houses!' He brought his day-dream to an abrupt close and turned to Colonel Rui.

'So you mean to say, those intruders had nothing to do with you?'

'Of course not,' insisted the Colonel. 'In fact Her Majesty herself told me that *you* were the one who let them in. She gave me orders to kill you, and not to waste time listening to your stories.'

Well, it looks as if we've both been framed, doesn't it? But don't you worry, Colonel. I'll go to His Majesty myself, and speak up for you. His Majesty is young, but he's very smart, and trusts me absolutely. I'm sure he'll get to the bottom of this.'

'I should be most obliged to you,' said Colonel Rui. 'But right now, I must still insist that you come with me to see Her Majesty.'

'In the middle of the night? Whatever for? No, I really think I'd better go and see His Majesty straight away. I'm afraid he may have already sent someone to arrest you. Let me give you a word of advice, Colonel. If they come, whatever you do, don't put up a fight. It will only make it look worse.'

Colonel Rui's face twitched.

'Her Majesty was quite right to warn me about you!' he declared angrily. 'She said you were fond of telling lies, and she was

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right! I've done nothing wrong, why should I want to put up a fight? Now you come along with me!'

Trinket leant to one side, and whispered in Colonel Rui's ear: 'Look, they're coming to get you now!' The colour drained from Rui's face, and he swivelled round to look behind him. As he did so, Trinket dashed back into his room. Rui immediately realized that he had been fooled and ran after him in hot pursuit.

Trinket had planned to make a desperate leap through the window and then to hide somewhere in the dense bushes and rockeries of the garden. The Colonel would never find him in the dark. He took a flying leap up onto the window-sill, and was about to jump out into the garden when Colonel Rui came racing up behind him and struck him a fearsome blow on the back with the palm of his right hand. Trinket's legs gave way, and he fell from the window into the room. Rui Dong now lunged with his left hand, and tried to grip him by the small of his back, but Trinket whirled round and counter-attacked with a Catch-Can technique he knew, blocking him with both palms. The move upset his balance, and he toppled with a great splash into the vat of water that stood by the window—the vat in which Old Hai had been accustomed to cool himself during his bouts of fever, and which Trinket had not removed since the old eunuch's death.

Colonel Rui gave a triumphant laugh. He plunged his hands into the water and made a grab for Trinket. But the boy had curled up into a ball at the very bottom of the vat. Rui made a second attempt, and was able to get hold of the back of Trinket's collar, and drag him dripping out. Trinket spat a mouthful of water in Rui's face and threw himself forward, butting the Colonel in the chest and wrapping his left arm around his neck.

Colonel Rui let out a loud shout, shook himself several times, and gradually loosened his grip on Trinket's collar. His entire face was drenched with water. Then his eyes opened wide, and a *terrible* expression of fear and bewilderment came over him. A few nasty groans issued from deep inside his throat, vain efforts to say something. Then suddenly there was a ghastly ripping sound, and the Colonel saw a dagger slicing its way neatly down from his upper chest to his lower belly. He stared at the blade. He failed to understand where it could have come from. His blood just kept spurting from the wound, and then all of a sudden he fell heavily

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to the floor. Even as he breathed his last he was still trying to *puzzle* out how Trinket had managed to kill him.

It was now Trinket's turn to give a triumphant cry. With his left hand he drew the dagger out of the Colonel's belly, and brought his right hand out from beneath his long robe. When he had fallen into the water, he had curled himself up tightly into a ball, meanwhile drawing out his dagger, and hiding it under his long robe, its tip pointing outward. Spitting the water in Rui's face had served to blind him momentarily, and then, in that precious instant, Trinket had thrown himself forward, grappling his opponent by the neck, and simultaneously plunging his trusty dagger, with the blade that could slice its way through metal, into the Colonel's heart and then down. This was the desperate Trinketian ruse that had saved his own life, and taken that of his great burly opponent. If they had engaged in real combat, ten Trinkets would have been no match for one Colonel Rui.

Peeping through the bed-curtains, the Fang girl and the Little Countess had watched all of this with their own eyes. But they too were still trying to *puzzle* out how Trinket had done the killing.

'I... I... This . . . this ...' stammered Trinket huskily.

He had wanted to boast in front of the girls, but he found himself frightened out of his wits by his narrow encounter with death, and incapable of putting two sensible words together.

Thanks be to Heaven that you . . . you've killed the Tartar!' cried the Little Countess.

'I know that man,' said the Fang girl. 'He was called the Invincible Iron Palm. He killed three of our people tonight. You've taken revenge for us!'

Two Sutras, a Sword, and a Soaking Waistcoat

Trinket searched through Rui Dong's clothes and found a little notebook the pages of which were densely covered with small writing, along with a bundle of official documents. He couldn't decipher a single word of either, so he put them casually aside.

As his hands continued to rummage around, they encountered a package concealed in the back of Rui's gown. Trinket cut open the gown with his dagger, to reveal an oilskin packet, tied with a silken strip. He cut the silk and unwrapped the packet. To his amazement it contained yet another copy of the *Sutra in Forty-Two*

Sections. It looked exactly the same as the others he had already seen, except that this one was bound in a different colour.

Trinket let out a loud cry, and immediately produced the copy from inside his own gown, the one that had been hidden under the tiles by the thief at Prince Kang's. Luckily, Colonel Rui had lost no time in pulling him out of the vat, and Trinket's Sutra had sustained no severe damage. The water had penetrated no further than the silken binding. Putting the two copies on the table, Trinket could see that they were indeed identical, apart from the colour of the silk: the one from Prince Kang's was bound in plain red, the one in the Colonel's package was bound in red with a white border. He had now seen four Sutras altogether: two were in the Empress Dowager's hands, and two in his own. There must be something very special written in these books, he thought to himself, if only he were capable of reading them! He could hardly ask the girls to read them for him; he would lose too much face. He opened a drawer, and put them both away.

He continued to muse on his predicament:

'First the Empress Dowager comes and tries to kill me herself, so she can keep my mouth shut, and stop me giving away her secret. Then, when that fails, she sends this Colonel Rui to finish the job off. Now, when Rui doesn't show up, she'll send someone else after me. I've got to keep one step ahead of her! I'd better go and see His Majesty. I have to survive till tomorrow morning! Then I'll run away from this Palace, and never come back!'

He turned to the Fang girl.

'I've got to start a rumour in the Palace. I've got to pretend that Colonel Rui was in the plot with you and the Mu Family. Dearest. . . I mean, Miss Fang, tell me, what *were* you doing here tonight? Did you come here to kill the Emperor? Why didn't you bump off that Old Whore the Empress Dowager instead? She really *is* a monster.'

(Originally Trinket had meant to call Fang Yi his 'dearest wife', but in the heat of the moment he had been too overwhelmed by the seriousness of his situation, and had ended up letting a golden opportunity pass him by.)

'I suppose you have the right to know what's going on,' replied the Fang girl. 'We disguised ourselves as guards working for Wu Yingxiong, the Satrap's son, and pretended to be on a mission to assassinate the Emperor. Of course, we would have been more than happy to kill the Emperor ourselves. But the main point was to give the Emperor a good reason for killing Satrap Wu.'

III!

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Trinket gave an astonished sigh.

'Wow! What a brilliant plan! But how were you going to make it look like a plot by the Satrap?'

She explained how they had marked their weapons and their clothes with the Satrap's insignia. They were all sworn to say nothing if they were caught. They were to allow the Palace Guards to torture them, and only then were they to confess that they had been sent by the Satrap. It would be more convincing that way. As she spoke of their plans, her breathing quickened and a flush of excitement stole across her cheeks.

'Have you got a weapon with one of the Satrap's marks with you?' asked Trinket.

She produced a sword from beneath the quilt, but barely had the strength to lift it.

'It's a good thing I wasn't lying next to you,' said Trinket, with a big grin. 'You'd probably have murdered *me*!'

She glared at him.

Trinket took the sword and laid it next to the Colonel's corpse.

'See, perfect evidence! I'll tell the Emperor that Colonel Rui was in league with the intruders.'

Fang Yi explained to him why this was not a good idea: the mark on the sword was the one used by Satrap Wu's Chinese soldiers years earlier when they had fought *against* the Manchus, before the conquest. It would have been quite impossible for a Manchu guard such as Colonel Rui to be in possession of such a sword.

'Oh well, what *can* I use?'

After a moment's thought, Trinket decided to stuff the Colonel's gown with some of the presents given him at the party by the Little Traitor, Wu's son: these included pearl necklaces, a jade cock and hen (the 'cute little knick-knacks' he had been about to show the Little Countess), and wads of banknotes. Such things could quite easily be traced back to Wu, and would thus be very Incriminating.

He heaved up the Colonel's corpse, thinking he would move it out into the garden. But

just then he heard someone outside the door of his apartment, and gently lowered the body again.

'His Majesty demands Laurel Goong-goong's presence!' cried a voice outside.

'Just coming!' Trinket called out, delighted to have received this timely summons. 'I have to change, but I'll be ready right away.'

He slid the Colonel under his bed, and gestured to the Little

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Countess and Fang Yi to stay lying quietly on the bed. Then he took off his wet clothes, and changed into something dry. But, even though it was soaked through, he decided to keep on his black waistcoat.

Just as he was preparing to leave, it occurred to him that he could not entirely trust the Fang girl. Quickly grabbing the two copies of the *Sutra in Forty- Two Sections* and a handful of banknotes, he stuffed them into his inside pocket, then blew out the candle and set off.

Eunuchs and (juards

Of the four eunuchs waiting outside the door, Trinket was unable to recognize a single one.

'Laurel Goong-goong,' announced the eunuch who seemed to be in charge of the delegation, 'His Majesty has been asking for you since midnight. You'd best hurry along. And where is Colonel Rui? He's wanted too.'

Trinket felt a chill run down his spine.

'Is the Colonel back in the Palace?' he asked innocently. 'I haven't set eyes on him.'

'Really?' replied the eunuch. 'Then we'd better just hurry along without him.'

He turned around and set off.

'Why's he asking about Colonel Rui?' Trinket puzzled to himself. 'And anyway,' his thoughts ran on) 'what's he doing striding on ahead of me? I'm supposed to be a much more senior eunuch than he is. He ought to know the Palace rules by now!'

'Hey, Goong-goong,' he asked, 'what's your name? I don't remember ever setting eyes on you before.'

'Oh, we're just odd-job eunuchs,' came the reply. 'You wouldn't have had any occasion to meet us.'

'His Majesty wouldn't send any old odd-job eunuch to fetch me,' mused Trinket out loud. He also noticed that they were heading west, whereas the Emperor's bedchamber was definitely to the east.

'Are you by any chance lost?' he asked.

'No, His Majesty is at present in attendance on Her Majesty. He was concerned that she might have been unsettled by the recent break-in. We're on our way to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity.'

Trinket froze to a halt. As he did so, two of the eunuchs following him broke ranks and took up positions one on each side of him. He was surrounded, and outnumbered four to one.

'Of course it's not the Emperor-it's the Old Whore! She sent them to bring me in!' thought Trinket frantically. His heart was thumping wildly.

'So we're going to Her Majesty's quarters,' he said, trying to affect an unconcerned little simper. 'How nice! Every time I see her, Her Majesty always insists on giving me money or sweets or cakes or something delicious! She really spoils me!'

The eunuchs were relieved to see him walking on, and fell back into their previous formation.

'Last time I saw Her Majesty, I remember she gave me five thousand taels of gold and twenty thousand taels of silver. She wanted to reward me for dealing with Oboi. I hardly had the strength to carry it all away. She told me to come and collect it a bit at a time. She asked what I was planning to do with it,' he babbled on, all the time trying to think of an escape plan, 'and I

told her that what I liked best was sharing money with my friends. There's nothing I like more than sharing!'

'She couldn't have given you *that* much money!' said one of the eunuchs behind him.

'You don't believe me? Take a look, my friend!'

So saying, Trinket reached into his inside pocket and extracted a wad of notes, some for five hundred, some for a thousand taels, some for as much as two thousand. This brought the eunuchs to a halt. They could see by the light of their lamps that this was genuine money all right. They gazed at it, and held their breath in utter amazement. Before they could take another pace, Trinket extracted four notes, held them out, and said with his most charming smile:

'Their Majesties are always loading me with money! I couldn't ever spend it all! Here, have one each. It's your lucky day.'

The eunuchs simply couldn't believe their luck. They were too stunned even to reach out their hands to take the money.

'Honestly,' Trinket went on, 'with all this money, and no way of spending it all, I really do get quite depressed. And in a minute or two they'll be giving me more. . .'

'Laurel Goong-goong,' ventured one of the eunuchs, 'I think you're just having us on. . .'

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'Why should I want to do that? The other goong-goongs in the Catering Department are always getting money from me. Come on, don't be silly, take what you're offered!' The eunuch gave a little laugh: 'I'll take mine.'

'Hold on,' said Trinket. 'Let's shed some proper light on this.' He held the notes out directly under a lamp, and the eunuchs could now see beyond a doubt that they were notes of seriously large denominations-thousands upon thousands of taels. They gulped. Denied the normal joys of marriage and family, and disqualified from public service or a career in the armed forces, eunuchs had few genuine pleasures in life. The one thing they did value was

money.

Trinket raised his hand and rustled the notes in the breeze. 'Go on then!' he cried to the eunuch who had expressed interest.

The eunuch reached for one of the notes, but as he was about to touch it, Trinket let go of them all and they fluttered away on the breeze.

'Clumsy me!' cried Trinket. 'Quick now! Go for it! Finders keepers!'

The four eunuchs scrambled after the notes.

'Don't let them get away!'

As he uttered this last cry, Trinket ducked down, and, in a well prepared dash, disappeared through an opening in one of the rockeries. He knew these Palace rockeries. Once he was behind one of the artificial mountains and inside the carefully contrived miniature landscapes, which grew out of each other in an endless maze, he would never be discovered.

The eunuchs were too busy chasing banknotes to notice that he had gone. Two caught one note each, one caught two, and one was left empty-handed. During the ensuing squabble, the one holding two notes insisted (correctly) that Laurel Goong-goong had said 'Finders keepers!', and that therefore both notes were his. The one with nothing protested that there should be one note each. 'I'll be happy with the one thousand-tael note!' he cried. 'What one thousand-tael note!' said the first. 'You're not getting anything!' And so it proceeded to fisticuffs, and finally to cries of, 'Why don't we get Laurel Goong-goong to decide!'

But when they turned round to find him, Laurel Goong-goong was nowhere to be seen. They searched for him desperately, the empty-handed eunuch still grabbing the other by the collar and demanding his note.

Trinket was by this time yards away in the depths of a miniature mountain range.

'We're in serious trouble now!' he heard one of them say. 'Her Majesty said it was very important to bring in Laurel Goong-goong and Colonel Rui. Where can he have got to?'

'He must be somewhere in the Palace,' said another. 'He can't have got very far. But whatever you do, don't mention the money.'

Just then Trinket heard footsteps coming from the west, and shortly afterwards a voice:

'That break-in last night is going to mean trouble for all of us in the morning.'

They were clearly Palace Guards.

Trinket stole out of the rockery and whispered to them not to make a sound. They recognized him at once.

The first two were carrying lanterns, and Trinket could now make out that there were about fifteen or sixteen of them altogether. It must be the same platoon that had come a little earlier to his own room. He knew one or two of them and hailed them by name.

'See those four eunuchs over there?' he whispered craftily. 'They plotted with the intruders. Let's grab them. I'm sure we'll be well rewarded.'

The guards thought nothing of rounding up a few eunuchs. They blew out their lanterns, and lay in wait. Two of the eunuchs were searching for Trinket in the rockery, the other two were still engrossed in their argument over the notes. One of the guards gave a low signal, and they closed in. There were four guards for each eunuch, and they soon had all four eunuchs pinned to the ground. By dint of much grappling and punching the guards succeeded in silencing and immobilizing the eunuchs, who were utterly perplexed by this new turn of events.

'Take them in there and question them!' ordered Trinket, pointing to a room off to the

side. The guards dragged them in, and one of them lit a lantern. Trinket sat down, and the guards ordered the eunuchs to kneel, which they did after a lot more kicking and punching.

- 'What were the four of you plotting and scheming just now?'

began Trinket. 'What was all that I heard about one of you getting a thousand taels, and another two thousand taels? And how the 34 filthy Palace Guard dogs had killed quite a few of your friends from outside? Who are, these "outside friends", then? And why would you call the guards filthy dogs?'

The (now gravely insulted) guards had not missed the chance to put the boot in again a few more times.

'If they let in the assassins, then they deserve to be executed!' put in one of the guards. 'Let's search them, and see what they have on them!'

And so, needless to say, the four notes were discovered. When the guards saw what huge sums of money were involved, they let out a cry of astonishment. The average eunuch earned no more than five or six taels a month. After the guards had delivered a few more well-placed kicks, Trinket insisted on a proper interrogation.

'Who put you up to this?' he demanded. 'Whose orders were you following?'

'We've done nothing wrong!' one of the eunuchs managed to get out. 'It was the Empress Dowager who told us to—'

Trinket slammed his left hand across the eunuch's mouth and reduced him to silence again.

'Rubbish! Expect us to believe that? Another word and we'll kill you!'

With his right hand Trinket extracted his dagger and began tormenting the eunuch with it, running the blade several times threateningly close to his scalp. The terrified creature passed out on the floor.

'He says they were under orders from the Empress Dowager,' said Trinket to the guards. 'That . . . that could have very serious implications!'

'You don't mean to suggest that Her Majesty could have let the assassins in herself?' stammered one of the guards, pale-faced at the thought of such an outrage. They all knew that the Emperor was not her son, and that she was a woman of great cunning and determination. Could the Emperor have offended her in some way? This might be one of those sinister Palace intrigues, that could drag innocent bystanders like themselves down with it,

'Were you really sent by Her Majesty? This is very important, so be sure to tell the truth.' The wretched eunuch to whom Trinket addressed these remarks was still incapable of speech, and could only nod his head in desperation.

'And did Her Majesty give you these notes?' continued Trinket.

The three other eunuchs, who still had their wits about them, shook their heads.

'Let's get a few things straight. You came here on someone else's orders, right?' They nodded.

'Now: do you want to die, or do you want to stay alive?' This was a hard one to answer by nodding. One eunuch nodded, one shook his head, the third began by nodding, then shook his head, and finally ended up by giving his head a vigorous nod.

Trinket tried again: 'Do you want to die?' Three shaking heads.

Trinket took two of the guards by the arm, and led them outside.

This is a tricky one,' he whispered. 'What do you mean?'

'If we let them go, and word gets to Her Majesty, I'm afraid that every one of us will be sliced into pieces'

The two guards shivered. Then one of them raised his right hand, and made a swift stabbing

movement through the air. The other guard nodded silently, and added in a whisper: 'And what about the banknotes?'

'You can share the money amongst yourselves/ said Trinket. 'I don't mind telling you I'm scared by all this. I just want the whole thing settled, and me kept out of it I'm not interested in the money.'

That clinched it. The guards returned, and gave four of their comrades a few whispered instructions. They took the eunuchs aside, and made a pretence of being about to escort them back to the Empress Dowager's quarters. The eunuchs set off with them. The next thing they knew, Trinket and the others heard screams of pain coming from a little way off, and confused voices shouting: 'Assassins! Intruders!' 'Help! They've killed four eunuchs!' Presently the four guards returned, and reported nonchalantly to Trinket:

'Laurel Goong-goong, there's been another raid. Four eunuchs have been killed.'

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'I'm so sorry to hear that!' said Trinket, affecting a sigh. 'Did the intruders get away?' They disappeared without trace.'

Then I suppose there's nothing we can do about it. You'd better report the incident to Chief Intendant Oolong/

'Yes, Laurel Goong-goong!' cried the guards, barely stifling a laugh. Trinket himself burst out laughing, and eventually they joined him.

'Well done, my friends!' said Trinket.

Trinket and the Old Whore

Trinket hurried back to his quarters. He was almost there, when he heard a voice in the shrubbery:

'So, Laurel Goong-goong, and how are you?'

He would have recognized that chilling tone of voice anywhere. It was the Empress Dowager again. He turned to flee in terror. He had barely taken a few paces, when he felt a hand on his left shoulder, and his whole body went numb. It was as if a hundred-pound boulder had descended on him. He was rooted to the spot. He bent down to draw out his trusty dagger, but no sooner did he feel the hilt in his hand than another crushing weight descended onto his right upper arm. He yelped with pain. The Empress Dowager spoke. She sounded grim;

'Laurel Goong-goong, you're a clever lad, for one so young ... So, you got rid of four of my eunuchs, and even had the nerve to suggest that I'd done something wrong ...'

'Your Majesty,' stammered the terrified Trinket, desperately seeking for some means to stall her, 'kill me now, and you'll regret it...'

'What do you mean, regret it?' sneered the Empress Dowager.

'You think that by killing me you can keep your secret. But you see, the guards already know all about—'

'You mean that story of yours about my plotting to let in the assassins?' said the Empress darkly. 'And why on earth would I want to do a thing like that?'

'How should I know? But His Majesty might know.'

Trinket decided to gamble all on one last desperate throw.

There's a lot of strength in these hands of mine,' muttered the Empress Dowager angrily.

'I'm going to throttle the life out of you, you worthless scum!'

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'Go ahead. They are. strong hands, I'll give you that. Throttle me, and then when you've

done it, everyone in the Palace can start gossiping about why Your Majesty needed to do it; they'll wonder why you had to shut my mouth, what your secret was, your very special, very dirty secret. . . '

The Empress Dowager's hand was trembling with fury as she squeezed Trinket's shoulder. She took a deep breath.

'Why, even if those guards do know a thing or two, I'll simply tell Colonel Rui to execute the lot of them. I've got nothing to fear.' Trinket laughed. The Empress Dowager was surprised. 'How can you laugh, with death staring you in the face?' 'It's just that Colonel Rui isn't likely to execute anyone, under the circs ... Ha ha ha!'

'What do you mean?' 'I've already , . . '

He had been meaning to say 'put a knife through his heart', but, then had a bramwave.

Tve already had a word with him.' He laughed again. 'He's done some thinking. From now on he's going to listen to what / tell him, not you.'

'As if you could persuade him to do a thing like that, you litde whippersnapper!' snarled the Empress Dowager.

'I may only be a eunuch, I know. But it's not me he's afraid of, it's someone else.'

The Empress shuddered. 'You mean the Emperor?' 'Don't we all fear His Majesty?' 'What did you say to Colonel Rui?' 'Everything.'

'Everything?' repeated the Empress to herself mechanically. After a moment's reflection she asked: 'And where is he now?'

'Oh, a long way away. A very long way away And he won't be coming back either. It might be a very good idea for you to go and see him, Your Majesty, but then again, I'm afraid it might be rather difficult.'

She seemed thoroughly taken aback by this. 'You mean he's left the Palace?' Trinket was in full swing.

That's right. He said that things were getting on top of him, and he had to leave the world and all its bears behind—'

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'Snares,' the Empress corrected him. She humphed. 'So where's he gone then?'

'He said . , , 'Trinket had another brainwave. 'Something about some mountains, Tutai, Butai, Mutai, I can't exactly recall. , . ' The Wutai Mountains'7 snapped the Empress. 'Yes, that's it! The Wutai Mountains! Your Majesty, you seem to be very well informed!' 'What else did he say?'

'Nothing much really. He just gave me his word of honour, that whatever danger came his way, he'd do everything I'd asked him to do.'

'And what exactly did you ask him to do?' 'Oh, nothing much. Then he said he might be away for quite some time, and he'd be a bit short of cash. So I gave him notes for twenty thousand taels.'

'What did he agree to do?' 'I'd rather not say. Majesty.' 'You'd better.'

She tightened the pressure on his shoulder. Trinket gave a little 'Ouch!' and she loosened her grip, 'Come on, out with it!' Trinket sighed,

'He promised me that if ever anything happened to me here in the Palace, he would tell the whole story—everything I told him—to His Majesty. He'd have it all written down, and keep it in his pocket at all times, just in case. And we agreed that every two months, I'm to . . , ' He paused,

'Well?' The Empress Dowager's voice was trembling. 'Every two months I'm to go to the Bridge of Heaven . . . and find the old man who sells toffee-apples. I'm to say to him: "Have you got any Turquoise Toffee-Apples today, sir?" And he's supposed to reply: "Yes, a hundred taels a stick," Then I'm to say: "That's a bit expensive, isn't it! Would you sell me

one for two hundred." Then he says: "Certainly not! You still alive?" And I say: "Yes, tell me old man." And then he reports back to Colonel Rui.' The Empress Dowager humphed again. 'Colonel Rui must have taught you all that. A little urchin like you wouldn't know any of those underworld passwords.' Trinket could still feel the Old Whore's hand trembling on his shoulder. After a long silence, she asked him:

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"And supposing you don't turn up at the Bridge of Heaven, what then?"

'Colonel Rui said he'd wait ten more days, and then he'd know I was . . . well, dead. So he'd find a way to report everything to His Majesty. That way, even with me dead, at least his Majesty would be warned. Then he could think about vengeance.'

'Vengeance . . .' muttered the Empress Dowager.

'All this time,' Trinket went on, 'I've never breathed a word to His Majesty of the things I know. So long as I was alive, I didn't think I needed to trouble him.'

A sigh of relief escaped the Empress Dowager's lips.

'You've been a very good boy!'

'His Majesty has always been so good to me, and so have you, Your Majesty. All I ever wanted was for you to appreciate my loyalty, and reward me with a few taels now and then. That way, I thought everybody would be happy!'

The Empress gave a sinister chuckle.

'Still scrounging for tips, you shameless little urchin!'

But she seemed hugely relieved by what she had heard. Trinket saw that his little improvisation was working.

'Oh come on, Your Majesty, I'm not really greedy. I just want everyone to live happily ever after, me included! That's why tomorrow I'll be off to the Bridge of Heaven and give my message as arranged. Then Colonel Rui'll keep his mouth shut. And while I'm about it, I think I should . . . give the toffee-apple-seller another three thousand taels for the Colonel, and say it's from you, Your Majesty. . .'

The Empress Dowager humphed.

'That incompetent deserter! Give him my money! He's lucky I don't chop his head off!'

She released his shoulder, and said slowly:

'Laurel, are you loyal to me?'

Trinket fell to his knees, and performed an impressive series of kowtows. Even as he was protesting his undying loyalty, she bent down and struck him three times on the back, each time muttering something to herself. Trinket felt an instant faintness, and an intense desire to vomit. He made loud retching noises,

'Laurel,' the Empress Dowager began, 'do you remember that evening I was talking with the old eunuch Hai Dafu? Do you remember us mentioning something called Soft Crush karate? A single blow of Soft Crush, well executed, can destroy a man's body.'

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It is very hard to learn, and I'm certainly no expert But I feel like having a little try on you . . .'

Trinket could feel the blood pumping through his head. And then out it came, blood, water, vomited forth in great spurts.

'So all that time the filthy Old Whore never really believed a word I was saying!' he thought to himself, in between the gushings of vomit. 'And now she's going to do me in once and for all!'

'Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you. After all, if you were dead, who would go to the

Bridge of Heaven? I just wanted to hurt you a litde, make you a little less quick on your feet, ..'

'Most obliged, Majesty,' muttered Trinket.

He stood up slowly, then tottered back into a sitting position on the ground, and began vomiting all over again. The Empress Dowager laughed coldly, and disappeared into the shrubbery.

Trinket dragged himself to his feet, and staggered towards his room. He reached the window, and slumped panting over the window-sill. Then he began clambering in.

More Decomposing Powder

'Is that you, Laurel?' whispered the Little Countess. Trinket was not in the most cheerful of moods. 'Mother's! Of course it's not me!' 'She was only being friendly!' protested Fang Yi.

Trinket's body was by now half over the window-sill.

'I...'

That was as much as he could get out. The next he knew, he fell with a thud to the ground, and lay there incapable of movement,

'Aiyo!' the two girls cried. 'What's the matter? Are you hurt?'

The unmistakable note of concern in the two girls' voices seemed to have a miraculous effect on Trinket's spirits. He even managed a little laugh, which was followed quickly by another fit of panting.

'Who knows,' he thought to himself, 'perhaps die Old Whore never learned that Soft Crush stuff properly. Chin up, Trink!'

'My dear young ladies/ he finally said, 'dear sister, dearest wife, you are the ones who were really hurt. I had to get a little bit hurt too. After all, we're supposed to share everything, in sickness and in health, rill death us do part...'

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"Laurel,' said the Litde Countess, 'be serious. Where are you hurt? Is it bad?'

'It's very kind of you to ask, dear sister. To tell the truth, I was in a lot of pain, but the sound of your voice has made it all go away! It's a miracle!'

There you go again!' cried the Litde Countess.

Trinket got hold of a table and hauled himself upright.

'If the Old Whore finds Colonel Rui's corpse,' he was thinking to himself, 'I'm done for!'

He staggered to Old Hai's medicine chest, and found die familiar bottle containing the yellow Decomposing Powder, which he had already used to such good effect on the 'real' Laurel. Then he dragged the Colonel's body out from under the bed, and relieved it of any remaining money and valuables.

'It's been so scary,' said the Litde Countess, 'having that thing under the bed all the time you've been away.'

'I'm now going to perform a litde trick,' announced Trinket. 'Do you want to watch?'

'No thank you,' said Fang Yi.

'Then close your eyes.'

She did, and the Litde Countess followed her example, though from time to time she couldn't resist peeping,

Trinket took a little silver spoon from the medicine chest, and removed the stopper from die phial of Decomposing Powder. He tipped a small amount of die powder onto the Colonel's wound. In a matter of seconds the wound began to smoulder, then it gave off a disgusting stench, and a few seconds later a foul yellow liquid began to ooze from it. The wound spread as it gradually decomposed. The Little Countess let out an involuntary 'ugh!', and Fang Yi

was so overcome with curiosity that she too opened her eyes. What she saw rendered her quite incapable of closing them again.

As the yellow liquid spread, everything it came into contact with became soft and putrid.

The more it spread, the faster the whole corpse decomposed.

Trinket could see how appalled the two girls were by what they saw.

'If you ever disobey me, I shall sprinkle some of this magic powder of mine on your faces!'

'You're . . . you're just trying to scare us!' gasped the Little Countess.

Fang Yi glared at him, but could not mask her terror. Trinket

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walked up to her with a chuckle, and dangled the phial in front of her face, before putting it in his pocket.

Soon the Colonel's corpse had dissolved into two distinct halves. Trinket used the legs of a chair to push the two halves together, and within an hour the whole mush was no more than a yellow puddle.

The Old Whore can take a whole army to Wutai,' thought Trinket to himself. 'She'll never End her Colonel now!'

He fetched some water from the vat and began washing the floor but was soon overcome with a sense of weariness, and flung himself exhausted onto the bed.

When he awoke, it was already broad daylight. He had fallen asleep fully clothed at the two girls' feet. He jumped up,

'I've got to go to the Emperor's at once! The two of you must stay where you are. Don't move!'

He thought of climbing out through the window, but his back was still too sore. So he went out through the door instead, locking it after him.

Kang Xi, Imperial Detective

Trinket waited an hour in the Upper Library, until finally Kang Xi returned from his morning audience.

'Laurel!' he exclaimed as he came in. 'Well done! I hear you killed one of the intruders last night!'

Trinket paid his loyal respects, and wished his Sovereign a long and healthy life.

'What was the man's kungfu like? Tell me all about it.' Trinket invented a whole sequence of moves, using what he could remember of the fight between the Bo brothers and Xu the Eight-Armed Ape, which had been so vividly reconstructed by Father Obscurus and Brother Feng that day at Willow Lane. He described the Two Way Sweep, the Tiger's Leap, and the Cataract, Kang Xi clapped his hands.

'Excellent! Excellent kungfu! The very thing!' Trinket looked at the Emperor in amazement.

'Your Majesty, I had no idea you knew those moves!' 'Of course. And what did you counter with?' Trinket proceeded to flatter Kang Xi by claiming to have overcome the assassin using a number of moves the Emperor had taught him during their practice bouts, including such manoeuvres as Stork Preening Feathers, Breaking the Branch of the Plum Tree, and Purple Clouds. Kang Xi entered totally into the spirit of the thing, and even taught him one or two new, and more deadly, moves,

'You see, you should have got him here!' he cried, grasping Trinket by a Vital Point on his wrist, in between the two acupuncture points known as the Assembly and the Outer Pass, Trinket was instantly incapacitated,

'If only I'd known!'

'But seriously, Laurie/ said Kang Xi, 'who were these assassins?'
'I don't know. If you could recognize their style of kungfu, that should be a clue,'
'I am beginning to. It seems to point in one direction/'
He clapped his hands, and sent one of the eunuchs to summon Songgotu and Dolong, the Chief Intendant of the Palace Guards. They were already waiting outside the Library, and hurried in to perform their kowtow.
Dolong was a member of the Plain White Banner, a soldier of great Martial Arts prowess, who had served faithfully during the campaigns before the Manchus had finally entered the Pass. But Oboi had always kept him down. It was only after Oboi's fall that he had been promoted by Kang Xi to his present position, in charge of the Gate of Heavenly Purity, the Hall of Middle Harmony, the Hall of Supreme Harmony, and other central parts of the Forbidden City. There were six Intendants of the Guards, two each from the Plain Yellow, Plain White, and Bordered Yellow Banners. But Dolong was the one with the most power—and the most responsibility. He had been up all night, concerned that Their Majesties would hold him responsible for the unpardonable breach of security that had occurred. When he came in, Kang Xi could see that his eyes were red from exhaustion.
'Well, have they questioned the intruders?' he asked,
'Majesty, three of them were captured alive. At first they refused to speak. But then we tortured them. In the end they confessed . . . that their orders came from Satrap Wu!'
Kang Xi nodded, and humphed.
'We found the Satrap's mark on their weapons and on their clothes,' Dolong continued,
'Even if he did not send them himself, he must somehow have been involved.'
Songgotu confirmed his account. Kang Xi demanded to

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see the weapons and the clothes for himself. Dolong had already anticipated this request, and one of his guards was standing outside the Library with a bundle of the items, Dolong deposited them on the table, and withdrew a few steps. Manchu warriors were accustomed to battle and the sight of weapons. But there was the strictest possible taboo on the wearing of weapons in the presence of the Emperor, and Dolong was more than a little apprehensive about the danger to himself inherent in the present situation.

Kang Xi examined the swords. Sure enough, their handles had engraved upon them the full tide of the army commanded by Wu Sangui when he had served the Ming dynasty, more than two decades earlier. But that in itself was enough to arouse the Emperor's suspicions.

'Satrap Wu is a clever man,' he commented to Songgotu. Too clever to make a silly mistake like that. He would have known that one of these swords might easily fall into our hands,'
'Indeed, Your Majesty,' replied Songgotu. "You are most perceptive,"
Kang Xi turned to Trinket.
'Laurie, that intruder you killed, what kind of moves did he use?'
'The Two Way Sweep, and the Cataract.'
Kang Xi addressed his next question to Dolong.
'And what school of kungfu do those moves belong to?'
Dolong knew enough about Martial Arts to be able to answer without hesitation,
'Why, Your Majesty, those moves are part of the fighting style of the Mu Family, who used to rule Yunnan during the former dynasty,'
Kang Xi clapped his hands.
'Excellent! Excellent! My congratulations, Dolong!'

Dolong received this compliment with a barely visible smile, fell to his knees, and kowtowed,

'Now, if the Satrap wanted to break into the Palace,' Kang Xi went on, 'he would hardly have chosen to do it while his own son was in the Capital. That is my first doubt. Then, the Satrap is an experienced commander of men and a seasoned planner of campaigns. He would never have sent such incompetent fighters, or so few of them. That is my second. And what good would it do him to try and kill me anyway? Unless he were planning a rebellion. In

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which case, why hand me his son on a plate? That is my third doubt.'

Trinket was most impressed by his Imperial friend's powers of detection. It seemed that the Mu Family plot was a flawed one, and that Fang Yi had been wrong to be so confident in its success.

'Let's carry this one step further,' continued Kang Xi. 'Suppose the intruders were not the Satrap's men; but suppose they deliberately brought weapons with the Satrap's name on them into the Palace; what was their intention? Clearly they were trying to get him into trouble. Now the Satrap has done the Manchu Throne a great service. He has quelled uprisings throughout the South-West. In so doing, he has undoubtedly made many enemies. We must find out exactly who those enemies are, and who is behind this.'

Dolong and Songgotu applauded the Emperor's great wisdom, and seeing that he had no further orders for them, withdrew from the Library.

'Laurie,' said Kang Xi once the other two had left, 'do you want to be rich?'

Now there was a word to brighten Trinket's day.

'If you were to give the order, Your Majesty, I would have to obey .. '

Kang Xi laughed.

'Well, I do! I order it! I want you to take these swords, and the intruders' clothes, and their confessions, and show them to a certain person . . . Then you'll be rich.'

Suddenly Trinket understood what he was driving at.

'You mean, the Satrap's son?'

"Clever lad! Now off you go. What are you going to say to him?"

'I shall say: "Hey you! Wu! His Majesty has been very kind to you. But remember, His Majesty knows everything that goes on, in the furthest part of his Empire. So if you and your dad are thinking of stirring up any tarnardy trouble, forget it! Just behave yourselves and be good!"'

'Oh Laurie, you really are priceless!' said Kang Xi with a laugh. "'Stirring up any tarnardy trouble!" You took the words right out of my mouth, and added a little sauce of your own!' Trinket gathered up the pile of things on the table, left the Library in the highest of spirits, and set off back to his own room.

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Pangs of Jealousy

As Trinket was unlocking the door, he felt a sharp pain shooting up his back, and experienced a renewed desire to vomit. He dragged himself into the room, and sat down panting on a chair,

'What's the matter? Does it hurt again?' asked the Little Countess, 'The sight of your flowerlike face has made me feel better already,' returned the irrepressible Trinket,

'It's my sister-in-arms who has the flowerlike face/ protested the Little Countess playfully. 'If you remember, my face has a turtle carved on it, and is ugly as anything! It raised Trinket's spirits to hear her joking like this.

'How are we going to get out of here?' asked Fang Yi after a moment's silence. 'You must think of a way.'

But Trinket was beginning to enjoy having the two girls to come home to. Life had been rather lonely without them. He was in no hurry to see them go.

'We'll have to take things one at a time,' was his reply. 'You're both wounded, and if you try to escape now, it will be easy for them to catch you.'

Fang Yi gave a little sigh.

'I wonder how many of our men lost their lives last night? Do you know any of their names?' Trinket shook his head.

T could find out for you, though, if you want me to.'

Thank you/ said Fang Yi very quietly. 'I would/

Trinket had never heard her speak so nicely to him before. He found it somewhat puzzling.

'Yes/ added the Little Countess, 'She'd specially like you to find out if a man by the name of Liu managed to get away.'

'Liu?' said Trinket. 'Who's he?'

'He's our brother-in-arms. We all studied under the same Shifu. His name is Yizhou. Fang's . . . she's in love with him. So you must. . /

Suddenly she burst out laughing. Fang Yi was squeezing her under the arm, in an attempt to stop her from saying any more.

Trinket let out a little cry.

'Oh dear! I know who you mean. I'm afraid he's in serious trouble.'

'What do you mean?' Fang Yi burst out.

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'Well, if we're talking about a tall, good-looking young man, a little over twenty, excellent at kungfu . . .'

'Yes, that's him!' cried the Little Countess. (In fact Trinket had not the faintest idea who this Liu was. But anyone Fang Yi was in love with was bound to be tall and good-looking; and any brother-in-arms of the Little Countess had to be excellent at kungfu. So he couldn't go far wrong.) 'Sister Fang said she saw him being knocked down last night by three guards, and then they took him away. What's become of him?'

Trinket shook his head and sighed.

'Dearest brother Laurel!' said Fang Yi, her face a picture of misery. Tell us!'

'You little bitch!' thought Trinket to himself. "Never a nice word for me till now, and suddenly, when this boyfriend of yours is involved, I'm your dearest brother! I think you've got a little fright coming your way . . .'

He sighed again and shook his head tragically.

'Such a sad story!'

'What do you mean?' cried a distraught Fang Yi. 'Is he wounded? He's not. . . dead, is he?'

Trinket burst out laughing.

'How the hell should I know? I've never set eyes on this Liu or Pooh or whatever his smelly fart of a name is! How would I know if he's dead or alive? But I'll tell you what. Call me "darling husband" three times, and I might try and find out for you.'

Fang Yi had thought for a moment that her lover was dead, and her anger at Trinket was tempered with relief.

'Can't you ever be serious!'

'If I was to get hold of this Liu/ continued Trinket, regardless, 'I'd tie him up and beat him till his bum was black and blue. I'd make him tell me how he managed to worm his way into my "wife's" affections! Then I'd lift my sword high into the air and bring it down with a great whoosh on his—'

'You've killed him, haven't you?' cried the Little Countess.

'No!' teased Trinket, 'I just chopped his balls off, and turned him into a eunuch!'

The Little Countess had no idea what he was talking about. Fang Yi did, and blushed to the roots of her hair.

'You rotten liar!'

'Seriously now/ said Trinket, 'that pretty boy of yours has

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almost certainly been captured. If I did tell them to make a eunuch of him, I'm sure they would. So, my dear, do you want me to do something for you?'

Fang Yi's face was still flushed, and she was unable to form a reply. It was the Little Countess who spoke.

'Brother Laurel, surely you don't need to wait to be asked. Do this for us! Do the right thing, if you are a person of honour and courage!'

'No!' cried Trinket, with a wave of his hand. That's where you're wrong. I do need to be asked. The more a certain someone calls me "dearest husband" and "darling husband", the more inspired I'll be to do the right thing!'

After much hesitation, Fang Yi finally came out with:

'Dear Laurel, dearest brother Laurel, please do this for me.'

Trinket's face was unmoved.

'It's got to be "husband", . '

'This is very wrong of you!' protested the Little Countess. 'My sister-in-arms is betrothed to Liu. He's going to be her husband. So how can she call you husband?'

'In that case I'm very jealous/ was Trinket's reply. 'Most terribly jealous,'

'My brother-in-arms Liu is a fine young man,' went on the Little Countess,

'I don't care how fine he is! The finer he is, the more jealous Til be! Woe is me! I shall die of jealousy! Ha ha ha!'

And laughing hysterically, he picked up the bundle he had carried with him from the Library and walked out of the room, locking the door after himself again.

He mounted his horse, and set off with four junior eunuchs to Young Wu's residence in Chang'an Street West.

As he rode along, he kept waving his right hand in the air, and giving excited whoops of joy. Understandably, his escort could not imagine what it was he was so excited about. Little did they know that Laurel Goong-goong had received an Imperial order to make himself rich, and was about to lower his bamboo bucket deep into the Satrap's well!

Negotiating with the Little Traitor

When he heard that an Imperial Edict was on its way, Wu Yingxiong, the Little Traitor, hurried out to greet Trinket. He per-

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formed the requisite number of kowtows, and welcomed him into the main hall of his residence.

'His Majesty has asked me to show you one or two things,' said Trinket. Tell me, sir, are you feeling brave today?'

'Not very. In fact the slightest shock might be too much for me!'

'The slightest shock?'

Trinket stared hard at Wu and then smiled.

'But you seem brave enough when it comes to planning something big . . .'

'I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Goong-goong. I do most humbly beg you to enlighten me.'

His tone of voice was positively obsequious.

'Just how many men did you send on that mission to the Palace yesterday evening? His Majesty wants to know.'

Wu had heard of the assassination attempt, but this direct accusation came as a bolt from the blue. He fell trembling to his knees, and began kowtowing frantically out towards the courtyard (in the direction of the Imperial Palace).

'His Majesty has been so extraordinarily good to both my father and myself. We would do anything to repay his Majesty's great kindness. We would happily be his catde or his horses! We would willingly give our lives, if that was needed.'

'Come on, get up, man!' said Trinket gallantly. 'You can keep the kowtows for later. First I want you to take a look at these things.'

He opened his bundle and spread its contents on the table.

Wu stood up. When he saw what was on the table, he began to shake uncontrollably.

These . . . these

He picked up the confessions and read them through. They stated quite categorically that the assassins had entered the Palace at the express orders of his father the Satrap, with the clear intention of murdering the Manchu Emperor, and setting the Satrap on the throne. Wu was a young man of the world, and had already dealt with more than one crisis in his life, but this quite unmanned him. He fell to his knees again, in utter terror. This time he was kneeling directly in front of Trinket.

'Laurel. . . Goong-goong . . . this isn't true! We have been framed! Please . . ., please, Goong-goong, you must put in a word for us with His Majesty!'

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These weapons were brought into the Palace by rebels plotting to murder the Emperor! And they have your father's mark on them!"

'My father and I have many enemies,' pleaded Wu. 'One of them must have plotted this,'

There may be a grain of truth in what you say,' said Trinket gravely, 'But will His Majesty believe it?'

'You must put in a word for us, Goong-goong! Our lives are in your hands!'

'Get up off the ground, man!' said Trinket. 'I suppose those presents you gave me last night were to soften me up for this...'

Wu had in fact been in the process of standing up, but when he heard this latest accusation, he sank once more to his knees.

'Goong-goong, just a few words from you, and I'm sure His Majesty will see that we are innocent.'

'I'm afraid the whole thing has already got as far as Minister Songgotu and Dolong, Intendant of the Palace Guards. They've been to see His Majesty, and reported the

assassins' statements. It will be very hard to stop things now. There could be a way . . . But it might mean rather a lot of trouble for you
'Anything!' stammered Wu. 'I'll do anything, if you'll save me!

'Well, Erst of all, stand up properly and talk like a man!' Wu finally managed to stand up, but continued to do a lot of bowing and scraping.

'First, are you absolutely sure that these assassins were not your men?'

'Absolutely! How could I ever dare to even think of doing such a terrible, terrible, terrible thing!'

'All right, all right We're friends, and this time I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But if it ever comes to light that they were your men, and I get buried alive for sticking up for you, I shall make sure that every single member of your family has his head chopped off! Understand?'

'I swear I'm telling the truth, Goong-goong, I swear it!' 'So, in your view, who did it? Who sent the assassins in?' 'As I said, we have many enemies. It is really hard to tell.' 'If you want me to put your case to His Majesty, and you want him to believe it, you'll have to come up with a suspect.'

'Yes, I understand ... In restoring peace to the Empire my

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father offended several factions. There's General Li, Bash-ern Li; then there are the Ming Pretenders and their followers; and the Mu Family in Yunnan ..,'
Trinket nodded.

'All these various groups—what sort of kungfu do they use? Can you show me any of their moves? That way I could say to His Majesty that I recognized the style of fighting of the assassins, and your case would be that much stronger.'

'Yes, that's an excellent idea. My own knowledge of kungfu is, I'm afraid, very limited. I shall have to ask one of my men.'

With a quick bow, Wu hurried off.

A short while later he returned with one of his bodyguards. It turned out to be Yang Yizhi, the very man Trinket had befriended at the gambling table the previous evening. Yang bowed to Trinket. There was a sombre expression on his face.

'Friend Yang/' said Trinket, 'set your mind at ease. We were all at Prince Kang's together yesterday, and watched your fine display of kungfu. We can all testify that you were not one of the assassins.'

'Thank you for saying so, Goong-goong. But others might claim that what we did was by way of a diversion, to draw attention away from the intruders, , .'

'Hm. Yes, I suppose they could.'

'My master says you are willing to put in a word for us, Goong-goong. We would be eternally indebted to you. As for our enemies, they are many, and they have many different styles of fighting. The only ones with an easily recognizable style of their own are the Mu Family.'

'Pity we can't find one of them to demonstrate it for us,' commented Trinket.

The Mu style of boxing and swordplay is well-known throughout Yunnan. I can remember some of it, and can show you how it goes. Since the assassins were armed with swords, I suggest I start by demonstrating the Mu Family sword technique known as the Whirlwind.'

'I'd rather you stuck to boxing,' said Trinket. 'I'm quite out of my depth when it comes to swordplay.'

'Very well/ said Yang. 'But you must correct me if I go wrong. After all, you are the famous fighter that brought down Oboi the Marichu Champion!'

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He proceeded to give a demonstration of the Mu Family style of boxing. This style had been handed down from the original Duke Mu, through several generations, over a period of three hundred years. It was very distinctive. Although Yang was by no means an expert in it, he was quite capable of doing the basic moves.

When he came to the Two Way Sweep, and the Cataract, Trinket gave a little cry of appreciation.

'Excellent kungfu!'

He proceeded to imitate Yang's performance, and asked Yang if his own versions were recognizable.

'You have caught them exactly!' replied Yang,

'When I return to the Palace/ said Trinket, 'I can demonstrate them myself for His Majesty's guards.'

'Goong-goong, our whole family depends on you!' exclaimed Wu, bowing profoundly.

'Yes,' Trinket was thinking to himself, 'I know. And you're going to pay for it!'

He returned Wu's salutation.

'Please, no more of this bowing and scraping. We're friends, and I'll do what I can.'

Trinket picked up his bundle and made ready to leave. Then a thought occurred to him. He turned to Wu once more:

Tell me, is there a man of yours here in the Capital by the name of Lu Yifeng?'

'Why, yes, now you come to mention it, there is.'

Wu was rather taken aback by Trinket's question. He knew that Lu had managed to procure an appointment from his father the Satrap, by paying a bribe of some forty thousand taels (of which he, Wu Yingxiong, had received a cut of three thousand). But Lu was small fry; what could Laurel Goong-goong want with him? (He knew nothing, of course, about the confrontation between Lu and Xu the Eight-Armed Ape, which had had such terrible consequences for the elder Bo brother, Pine.)

'Your Mr Lu doesn't know how to behave himself, so I've heard, I'd like you to teach him a lesson,'

'Why, yes, of course. We'll look into it right away,'

Wu turned to Yang and gave orders for Lu to be brought in and given fifty strokes of the rattan.

As Trinket took his leave, Wu produced a large packet from his inside pocket, and presented it to him.

'How can we ever manage to repay you. Laurel Goong-

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goong? This is just a little token, which I hope you will distribute for us to Minister Songgotu, Captain Do long, and the other guards.'

They saw him out. As soon as Trinket had climbed into his sedan chair, he opened the package. It contained a hundred thousand taels.

'Hot momma's!' whistled Trinket. Time for a little division and subtraction here, I'd say.'

He helped himself to fifty thousand and stuffed it in his pocket.

Multiple Largesse

Trinket returned to the Upper Library and reported the success of his mission to Rang Xi. Young Wu had been overwhelmed with gratitude, he said, at the Emperor's wisdom and clemency, and so on and so forth.

'Good,' commented Kang Xi drily. 'Gave him a bit of a fright, did we, eh?'

'Made him piss in his pants, more like!' quipped Trinket. 'I told him he'd better tell that Rat Trap of a parent of his to smarten up his act a bit in future.'

Kang Xi nodded.

Then I told him how brilliantly clever and all-knowing you were, and how you spotted the Mu Family kungfu a mile off. He was absolutely flabbergasted!'

Kang Xi laughed.

'He came up with a tael or two,' Trinket went on. 'Fifty thousand, actually. He told me to keep ten thousand, and the rest was for the guards, for doing such a good job. Nice little stash . . .'

He produced the thick wad of notes: a hundred notes in denominations of five hundred taels.

'How could a young lad like you ever find a way to spend all that money?' asked Kang Xi.

'Little does he know!' thought Trinket to himself. Then he cleverly proposed to donate his share to the guards as well.

'We'd better say it's a reward from Your Majesty,' he went on. 'We don't want them thinking that the Little Traitor can buy them over.'

Kang Xi agreed to this 'generous' proposal, and the money

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was duly distributed to the appreciative guards and their Chief Intendant.

Dolong took Trinket to one side.

The men would like to show their appreciation,' he said, handing Trinket ten thousand taels, which Trinket made a great show of refusing.

'I'd like you to do something for me instead, though,' Trinket said. 'See if one of the captured men is someone by the name of Liu Yizhou.'

Butcher Qian, Again

When Trinket reached the entrance to his own rooms, he saw a junior eunuch from the Imperial Catering Department waiting for him.

'Laurel Goong-goong, that Butcher Qian is here. He wants to present you with another pig. This one is called a Swallow's-nest Ginseng pig,'

Trinket frowned.

'That China-root pig caused me enough trouble ... Is he trying to turn the Palace into a pigsty?'

But he thought he had better see what the man wanted.

When he reached the Catering Department, there was Butcher Qian, wreathed in smiles.

'Why, Laurel Goong-goong, that China-root pig of mine's done you a power of good! What a wonderfully ruddy complexion you've got today! I've brought you another.'

He pointed to an animal beside him. This time it was a live pig. A beautiful little white porker, wriggling around in a cage made of bamboo splints. Trinket had no idea what this was all about, but just nodded. The next thing he knew, Butcher Qian had taken him by the

hand and was busy taking his pulse.

'My oh my! You really are blooming! My word, what a healthy beat!'

Trinket felt him slipping a scrap of paper into his hand. He said nothing.

'Now this litde pig here needs very special feeding,' went on Butcher Qian. 'He needs to be given the best lees of wine for ten days. Then I'll come and take a look and see how he's getting on.'

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After a few more pleasantries, the butcher took his leave.

Trinket knew that he would be unable to read whatever was written on the paper. He could still at very best only decipher one or two characters—and they had to be written very large. He told the Catering Department staff to feed the pig, and made his way back to his rooms, 'Laurel... dear Laurel... did you . . .'

It was Fang Yi.

'Yes, I did/ said Trinket. 'So far there's no news of anyone called Liu having been caught,' Thank you for asking. Perhaps he's been killed! Anyway, if he was caught, he wouldn't give his real name.'

Trinket handed the note to the Litde Countess.

'Would you mind reading this for me?'

She took it and read:

' "Storytelling at the Ascension Tea-house: Heroes of the Ming." What does that mean?'

Trinket knew it was a message from the Triads,

'Surely you know the Heroes of tke Ming? You're one of the Mu Family yourself.'

'Of course I know the stories about the founding of the Ming.'

There's one part called "How Duke Mu shot three arrows and brought peace to Yunnan"—everyone knows that one; and then there's another called "How Laurel Goong-goong put his arms round two beautiful women." Do you know that one?'

Before they could even reply, Trinket had somersaulted onto the bed with his shoes on, and had wriggled under the covers between them. He put his left arm round Fang Yi's neck and gave her a good cuddle, and his right arm round me litde Countess's waist and squeezed her,

'You see!' he crowed. 'It's true!'

They both gave a coy cry of alarm, but he had them held fast, The Litde Countess tried to push him away. Trinket spun round, and planted a smacking kiss on Fang Yi's lips. 'Hm! Delicious!' he cried ecstatically,

Fang Yi struggled, but this only succeeded in bringing back the old pain in her ribs. She managed to get her right hand free and give him a quick box on the ear.

Trinket then sprung out of the covers, and this time threw

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his arms well and truly round the Little Countess, and kissed her too.

'Likewise delicious!'

He scrambled laughing across the room, grabbed his clothes and ran out, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER 11

/« which Lodge Master Wei offers to settle a Score with the Mu Family; successfully organizes an Escape; has a Narrow Scrape with the Fat Sow; uses a Pair of Trotters in a Novel Fashion; and meets Auntie Tao



Bean Sprout Lane South: a Life for a Life

Trinket's rooms were situated to the side of the Imperial Catering Department, west of the Gate of Heavenly Purity. Trinket, after winding his way north past Nurturing Nature Hall, then west through Longevity Gate, then north again past Longevity Hall and the Hall of Heroic Splendour, finally emerged at the Shenwu Gate, the 'Gate of the Divine Warrior', left the Palace, and made straight for the Ascension Tea-house.

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He sat down, and the proprietor served him tea. It was not long before Gao Yanchao, his Triad contact man, came sidling up to him, and gave him a meaningful wink. Trinket waited, and then, seeing Gao leave the tea-house, he took a few sips of tea, left his money on the table, and sauntered towards the door, muttering casually as he left:

'I'm afraid today's story doesn't really do much for me . . .'

There was Gao outside, waiting at the street corner, with two sedan chairs. He showed Trinket into one of the chairs, and followed him a little distance on foot, making sure no one was following them, then climbed into the other chair himself,

The bearers set off at quite a pace, and after half an hour or so came to a halt outside a small courtyard house. Trinket and Gao went in through the main gate, and were greeted by a whole assembly of Triad members. There were many familiar faces, including Big Beaver, Brother Li, and Tertius (back from Lodge meetings in Tianjin and Baoding), Brothers Fan and Feng, Father Obscurus the Taoist, and Butcher Qian.

They showed him into the inner hall, and Trinket—the Master of the Green Wood Lodge—was seated, Obscurus spoke first. He seemed rather agitated.

'Look at this, Master/ he said, handing Trinket a red visiting-card, decorated with a gold splash, and inscribed with several columns of characters in thick black ink.

The words. . . seem to know me . . .' Trinket faltered, 'but I'm afraid I don't really , . .'
 'Master,' put in Butcher Qian helpfully, 'it's an invitation. To a meal.'
 'That sounds fun,' commented Trinket. 'Who's treating us?'
 'The name on the card is Mu Jiansheng/ said the butcher.
 Trinket pulled a face,
 'Mu Jiansheng?' (He knew that Mu Jianp/Mg was the Litde Countess.)
 'He's the Young Count of the Mu Family.'
 Trinket nodded.
 'You mean the China-root pig's big brother?'
 'Exactly!' replied the butcher.
 'Are we all invited?'
 The invitation is very politely worded: "The presence of Lodge Master Wei of the Green Wood Lodge, and all brave Triad members of the Lodge, is requested at a banquet to be held

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this evening at Bean Sprout Lane South, within the Sun-Facing Gate."
 'Not Willow Lane this time?'
 'No. They seem to think it safer to keep changing venues.'
 'What do you think they'll do this time? Put something in the wine?'
 It was Brother Li who replied:
 The Young Count is an important figure in the Mu Family. He has the same rank as our Helmsman, I hardly think someone like that would stoop to such underhand tactics. But we should be careful all the same.'
 'Well, should we go or not?' Trinket wondered aloud. 'Hm, I like the idea of a slice or two of Yunnan ham, and some Yunnan stewed chicken . . .'
 The others exchanged silent glances. After a long pause, Big Beaver spoke:
 'We would like you to decide, Master.'
 'Why don't I invite you all out instead! We could have a nice feed in a restaurant, then dice, pretty girls . . . Of course, if you want to save me money, we could just accept the Mu invitation , . .'
 Trinket had managed to sound generous, and had at the same time avoided the responsibility of taking the decision.
 'It's very kind of you to invite us out,' said Big Beaver. 'But I'm afraid if the Triads turn down the Mu invitation, it won't look too good.'
 'So you think we should go then?' said Trinket.
 He glanced round at the others. There seemed to be a general, if slow, nodding of heads,
 'Then if you all say so, let's go! Nothing ventured nothing gained!'
 'We should take certain precautions,' said Brother Li. 'Some of us should drink wine, some of us tea, some nothing at all. Some should avoid the meat, some the fish. That way, if they are trying to poison us, we won't all fall into their net at once.'
 They continued to discuss their plans for the evening. By the evening watch. Trinket had changed out of his eunuch's costume into something more dignified and Lodge Master-like, and, climbing into a sedan chair, off he set, with the others crowding round him.
 It was less than a mile to Bean Sprout Lane. When they arrived, they heard festive music coming from inside rather a grand

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gateway, where a dozen or so men were lined up to receive them. Foremost among these was a young man of twenty-five or six, a tall, thin fellow, with a vigorous, manly air, who now stepped forward and introduced himself as Mu Jiansheng.

'I am honoured to welcome Lodge Master Wei.'

By now Trinket was quite used to highfalutin compliments and was able to pull off this kind of encounter rather convincingly. After all, the Young Count was certainly no grander than either Prince Kang or Little Traitor Wu. He brought his hands smarmily together and bowed.

'You pay me too great a compliment, sir!'

Meanwhile, he was sizing up his host. The young man had a slightly swarthy complexion, but otherwise there was certainly a visible resemblance between him and his sister. Mu Jiansheng for his part had been briefed on Trinket by the trusty Mu retainer Maple Bo, who had painted a none too flattering picture of the young Lodge Master, describing him as a foul-mouthed, jumped-up little urchin, who knew no kungfu, and owed his position entirely to the Helmsman's favouritism. Seeing Trinket now, however, the Young Count could not help being impressed by the young fellow's calm, self-assured manner.

He led the way on into the inner hall. Here the chairs were spread with red damask covers and brocade cushions. As they took their seats, the Triads noticed that among the dozen or so Mu Family retainers lined up behind the Young Count were Su Gang (the Magic Hand), and Maple (the sole surviving Bo brother). Introductions were made, and Big Beaver and the others could see that the Young Count was making a big effort to be friendly.

Scented tea was served, and the musicians struck up again. In the middle of a rather solemn ceremonial piece, the Young Count announced, 'Let the banquet begin!', and led them on into another inner room. His retainers closed the doors behind them.

A large octagonal Eight Immortals table had been set in the middle of the room, with two smaller tables on each side. The tables were spread with elaborately embroidered cloths, and laid with tableware not quite as grand as at Prince Kang's, but stylish enough. The Young Count made a slight bow, asked Trinket to be seated, and introduced a ruddy-faced, vigorous old man with wispy white whiskers and piercing eyes, by the name of Liu Dahong. This, he explained, was his Shifu.

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'The Triads have been making quite a name for themselves recently . .,' said the old man, When he spoke, he boomed. It was the sort of voice ordinary men could only emulate by shouting.

'And as for Lodge Master Wei,' the old man went on, 'clearly we have among us an up-and-coming young hero, a veritable prodigy in the Martial Arts fraternity!'

'I'm afraid I'm more of a clumsy clot!' quipped Trinket. 'I certainly made a fool of myself the other day, when Maple Shifu twisted my arm.. I just about tamardied myself in my up-and-coming pants! What a little wimp I must have looked! Ha ha ha!'

The others listened in appalled silence to this exhibition of Trinketian argot, and Maple looked decidedly ill at ease. But old Shifu Liu erupted in a loud bellow of laughter.

'Frankly spoken, sir! Now that's what I call a hero, a man of parts! You've already earned a third part of rny respect!'

'I'd be happy with a tenth!' cried Trinket. 'Just so long as you think me better than a beggar, or a clown, or a monkey!'

'I see Lodge Master Wei likes to joke!' replied the old man.

Father Obscurus had already recognized Shifu Liu as the renowned Iron Dragon, the kungfu Master who had done so much to save the Mu Family when they were on the run

from the Manchu troops. He knew that this old man ranked second only to the Young Count in the Mu Family. He bowed to him and said:

'It is indeed a great honour for us today to meet one of the true heroes of our age!'

'Father Obscurus pays me too great a compliment,' returned old Liu, unable to conceal his pleasure.

The Mu Family knew the names of their guests, Obscurus observed. They had clearly done their homework.

They took their seats, and noticed that there was still one seat empty at the high table. Just as the Triads were wondering which famous kungfu Master they were going to be presented with next, the Young Count announced:

Tell them to bring in Mr Xu. I should like our friends to see him, so that they can set their minds at ease.'

Su Gang went into the next room and returned leading an elderly man, with bent back and unsure step. Big Beaver and the others recognized the man at once.

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'Brother Xu!' they cried out in astonishment.

It was indeed Xu Tianchuan, the Eight-Armed Ape, the Triad Brother they had all but given up for lost. His complexion was extremely sallow, his wounds were still not completely healed, but none the less it was Xu, and he was obviously out of mortal danger. They crowded round him excitedly, plying him with questions.

The Young Count showed Xu to the seat "above" his own. As he sat down, Xu made a bow in the direction of Trinket,

'Greetings, Lodge Master.'

'Greetings, Brother Xu,' returned Trinket, clasping his palms together. 'I don't suppose the medicated plaster business has been too busy of late?'

Xu sighed.

'No business to speak of at all, I'm afraid. The Satrap's dogs got their teeth into me, I'd be a dead man now, if Count Mu and Liu Shifu hadn't saved me!'

The Triads listened to this aghast,

'So it was the Satrap's men who did it?' said Brother Fan.

That's right. They broke into my medicine shop and carried me off. That filthy cur Lu Yifeng began abusing me, and stuck one of my own plasters over my mouth. He said he hoped I starved to death!'

The Triad Brothers expressed their profoundest apologies to the Mu Family, who it now turned out, so far from having been old Xu's kidnappers, had in fact been his saviours.

'Say no more,' said Su the Magic Hand gruffly, 'We were acting on Count Mu's orders. Any enemy of the Satrap is a friend of ours.'

Trinket meanwhile was musing to himself along somewhat different lines:

'Smart fellow, this Count! He knows I've got his sister under lock and key; so now he's gone and "saved" our Brother Xu. Soon he'll be asking for his sister back! I'd better pretend I haven't spotted his little game . . .'

He asked Xu how his wounds were healing.

'Slowly but nicely, thank you.'

Maple scowled at Trinket. Trinket pretended not to notice,

Generous helpings of food and wine were served. The Triads, who had by now put aside all of their earlier suspicions, ate with a hearty appetite, and filled their cups enthusiastically.

Old Iron Dragon Liu tossed back three cups, and gave his whiskers a little twirl:

'Gendemen, which of you is in charge of the metropolitan district?'

Brother Li replied that Lodge Master Wei was in charge.

Liu nodded.

'Good, good .,.'

He drank another cup, and continued:

'But can he accept the responsibility in a serious matter such as this?'

'Uncle,' said Trinket, 'whatever it is, just say it. Cut the crap. I'm only a junior, I know. But I think I can shoulder the odd little load. Just don't dump too much on me all at once, or I'll end up looking like Lodge Master Squash-me-all-flat. . .'

Triads and Mu Family alike frowned at this latest instance of urchin-talk, and looked at each other in horror. Old Liu laughed darkly as he replied:

This matter concerns the death of Brother Pine. As we all know, he died at Xu Tianchuan's hands ... I think we may need to ask your Helmsman to advise us how to resolve this matter once and for all.'

Xu leapt to his feet.

'Count Mu, Liu Shifu,' he declared bravely, 'it was you who delivered me from the hands of the Satrap's men, it was you who saved me from a fate worse than death. My gratitude knows no bounds. Pine's death was my doing, though I never meant to kill him. I will gladly repay his death with my own!'

He turned to Brother Fan, and held out his right hand:

'Lend me your dagger!'

Everyone knew what he had in mind. To 'settle the matter' there and then, by slitting his own throat.

'Wait!' cried Trinket 'Hold on a minute, Brother Xu. Sit down, and calm down. You're too old to let yourself get carried away like this! Now, tell me, am I or am I not Lodge Master Wei of the Green Wood Lodge?'

Disobeying a Lodge Master was a very serious offence for a Triad. Xu bowed to Trinket.

'Your word is my command, Master.'

Trinket nodded,

That's more like it. Fine is dead and gone, and nothing will

bring him back, not even your death, It'd simply be chucking good money after bad . . .'

They all looked at him aghast, wondering what appalling thing he was going to say next.

Trinket continued unabashed, addressing himself to the Young Count:

Tell me, Count Mu, when you came up from Yunnan to the Capital, surely you brought a few more people with you? There seem to be one or two men missing, somehow

'What are you driving at, Lodge Master Wei?'

'Oh, nothing in particular, I just thought a big shot like you would have one or two more people around, you know, just in case. You never know what these Tartars might try and do to you

Iron Dragon Liu cast a glance in his direction,

'My young friend,' he said to Trinket, 'you seem to be hinting at some mystery. Please be so good as to enlighten us,'

'You flatter me! I'm more hysterical than mysterious. Most particularly hysterical and

unheroical. . .'

To be precise, my young friend,' said the Young Count, 'you seem to be implying that one of our men may have been taken prisoner by the Tartars. Is that it?'

'Oh, not really. It must be the wine. A little goes a very long way with me. I get a bit woozy, boozy, mystical, hysterical, whatever. Put it down to the wine. I'm probably just drunk and talking a lot of tarnardy twaddle!'

'Young friend,' said old Iron Dragon Liu, 'if indeed you an a friend, will you please stop beating about the bush and say whatever it is you have to say!'

'Bush? What bush?' protested Trinket. 'I'm talking about Peking! It's such a tricky, sticky sort of place, and if you don't know your way around it, you never know—people do have a way of disappearing in the middle of the night. . .'

Old Iron Dragon shot a glance at the Young Count again.

'So?'

'So/ Trinket replied, 'I've heard that the Forbidden City is one big maze! Gateway after gateway, hallway after hallway—if you just go crashing in, and don't happen to have an Emperor or an Empress handy to guide you around, before you know where you are, you're lost! Stuck for life! Up to your ears in Tartar sauce . . . The trouble is, I'm not sure if Their Imperial Majesties are available for daytime guided tours. Or night-time ones either, for that matter.

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But you could always try your luck. After all, Count, you're a bit of a big shot, aren't you? Why not try and see what happens? You'll probably scare the Emperor to death, and that Old Whore the Empress Dowager!'

The assembled company had never in their lives heard the Empress Dowager referred to as an Old Whore, Big Beaver, Tertius, and the others found it all rather novel, and could barely suppress a smile.

'As a matter of fact/ Trinket continued, 'I've got a friend who works in the Palace. He's attached to the Guards. Does a fair bit of gambling, actually. He told me there was a break-in last night. Some people tried to kill the Emperor, apparently. They were caught, and they confessed. They said they were working for you . . .'

'What?' cried the Young Count.

His right hand trembled, and he dropped his wine-cup on the floor, where it smashed into pieces,

'I'd already guessed as much, mind you/ continued Trinket. 'After all, you Mu Family were very big under the Ming dynasty, you'd be just the people to do something heroic like try to bump off the Tartar Emperor!'

'It's more likely to have been the Satrap's men/ said Iron Dragon Liu. 'His son is in town, and I wouldn't put it past him—'

'What a shame!' Trinket interrupted. 'In that case, I'd better get word to that friend of mine, make sure those men are given a hard time. Tamardy! Anyone who works for that traitor deserves it!'

'My dear fellow/ put in Iron Dragon Liu quickly, 'can you give me the name of your friend in the Palace? Where exactly did you say he works?'

'Oh, he just cleans the floors for the Guards, makes tea, pours water, that kind of thing. He's nobody important, I'm afraid. People usually call him Warthead. Nobody bothers with his real name—if he's even got one! When I heard die assassins were tied up, I asked him to smuggle them in a snack or two. But now I know they're the Satrap's men, I'll get him to slice them up a bit!'

That was only a guess of mine/ said Iron Dragon Liu, rather feebly. 'You never know. Whoever the intruders were, they must have been brave men to break into the Palace at all. Perhaps you ought to ask that friend of yours to help them out a bit anyway. That might be rather a River and Lake sort of thing to do, don't you think?'

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'Warthead would do anything for me,' boasted Trinket. 'Whenever he loses at cards, I always lend him money. So whatever it is you want, I'm sure he'll do it—for me.' Iron Dragon breathed a sigh of relief, Thank goodness for that. I wonder how many men were caught, and what their names are? You can't help admiring them. Perhaps your friend could find out how they are faring? I should be most obliged, Lodge Master, dear friend.'

Trinket slapped his own chest.

'Easiest thing in the world! It's just a shame that these are the Satrap's men. If they were your men, Count, I'd go one further. I'd try and get one of them out for you—that way, we could settle scores, you know, a life for a life ... It could even solve Brother Xu's little problem . . .'

Iron Dragon cast the Young Count another glance, and nodded slowly.

'We don't know for sure who these men are,' said the Young Count, 'but one thing is certain: they showed great courage in trying to kill the Tartar Emperor, and they clearly stand on our side! I think I can say, Lodge Master Wei, that if you were able to find a way to rescue them, I should be eternally indebted to you, and this whole unfortunate matter with your Brother Xu would be forgotten.'

Trinket turned and looked at Maple.

'But Sir Maple here may not forget so easily. Next time we meet, for all I know he'll grab me by the arm again and squeeze the living daylights out of me! He'll have me bawling my poor little tamardy heart out again! Not my idea of fun . . .'

Maple leapt to his feet.

'Lodge Master Wei! Rescue our . . . our, , , those poor brave men trapped in there: and I will take a solemn oath: if this hand of mine should ever offend you again, may it be cut off at the wrist and presented to you as my personal punishment!'

'Please, please!' cried Trinket. There's really no need for that! What would I do with your hand anyway even if you did chop it off? And besides, I'm not even sure if my friend Warthead can pull this rescue job off. These men are in serious trouble, they're probably in shackles and leg-irons, with hundreds of men guarding them/

'Whether your friend succeeds or not/ cried the Young Count, 'we will still be eternally indebted to you both for trying!'

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After a short pause, he continued.

There is one other matter, A day or two ago, my own younger sister went missing, I'm very worried about her. You Triads are very well-connected here in the Capital. If you get wind of anything, or see any chance of rescuing her from whatever predicament she is in, I should also be eternally grateful!'

'No problem at all,' said Trinket. 'Set your mind completely at rest. Come, I think we've drunk enough of this wine. I'd better go and find my old friend Warthead. Tamardy, it's about time he and I threw the dice together again!'

He produced a set of four dice from his inside pocket and rolled them on the table. Four Fours, four lots of four winking little red dots. Trinket clapped his hands.

'Crimson House! Our luck's in! Let's just hope their house isn't crimson with too much blood already!'

Everyone shuddered at this somewhat macabre remark.

Trinket bowed.

'I must be going, I'd like Brother Xu to come with me, if that's all right?'

'Of course!' said the Young Count. 'And we insist on seeing all of you on your way. That's the least we can do/

So Trinket, Xu the Eight-Armed Ape, Big Beaver, Brother Li, and all the other Triads walked out of the door, and the Young Count, Iron Dragon Liu, and the other members of the Mu Family, having seen them off, and Trinket into his sedan chair, went back inside.

Settling the Score

The Triads returned together to their 'safe' courtyard house. As usual Big Beaver was the most agitated about the recent news,

"Lodge Master Wei,' he said, 'this certainly looks like a Mu Family break-in/

'I'm sure it was/ said Trinket. 'Did you notice they didn't seem a bit surprised when I told mem about it. But no one outside the Palace knows about it. It's been kept top secret/

'Well I think they deserve our admiration for trying/ said Father Obscurus. 'It must have taken a lot of courage to get in. And getting out will be even harder. Lodge Master, do you really think we can do it?'

Trinket had already been contemplating this very problem.

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There seemed small chance of getting the main band of assassins out; but he had a couple of Mu Family girls stowed away in his own bedroom. It might be feasible to get them out. In answer to Father Obscurus's gloomy prognostication, he smiled and said:

'We won't be able to get many of them out, but we might be able to manage one or two.

Even one would be enough to settle the score, and get Brother Xu off. And then there's that young lady Butcher Qian smuggled in. Brother Qian, I want you to come to die Catering Department first thing tomorrow morning with two more pig carcasses. Big ones. We'll take them to my rooms and stuff them with you know what. . . Then I'll make a big fuss in the kitchen, and complain that the meat's gone off, and you can take them away again/

The Butcher clapped his hands.

'Sounds like a brilliant plan, Lodge Master!'

Trinket said a few comforting words to Xu Tianchuan.

The Emperor's Plan

Trinket arrived back at the Palace, and entered by the northern Gate of the Divine Warrior, Two eunuchs came out to welcome him.

'Quickly, Laurel Goong-goong! His Majesty has sent for you!'

'What's the matter?'

'It must be something important. He keeps asking for you. He's in the Upper Library/

Trinket went directly to the Library and found Kang Xi pacing up and down. The Emperor looked happy to see him.

Tarnardy, Laurie, where the devil have you been all day?'

'Majesty, I've been so worried about the assassins! You said we should track down the masterminds behind the plot, and deal with them quickly, or we're sure to have more trouble on our hands. So I've been doing a little plain-clothes detective work in town/ 'Well done! And did you discover anything?' 'I've been out there most of the day, but I'm afraid I still didn't spot anyone suspicious. I'll try again tomorrow/ 'It may get us nowhere, you rushing around town/ replied the Emperor. 'Besides, I have another idea. Just now Colonel Doiong was here, and he tells me they've been interrogating the three prisoners all day and no amount of torture can get a word out of them. They still swear blind that they're the Satrap's men. I

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was thinking, rather than go on torturing them, which probably won't get us anywhere, why not just set them free/ 'Let them go? Just, . . just like that?' 'They were clearly acting on orders. The important thing is to catch the people who gave the orders, and round them up. Otherwise, mark my words, this thing will not end here/ He smiled. 'So: we'll set the little wolf-cubs free, and they will lead us to Mother Wolf, . / Trinket clapped his hands in delight. 'Brilliant! A stroke of genius!' 'Don't overdo it!' said Kang Xi, laughing. 'The difficult part will be to follow them without being seen ourselves. That's where you come in, Laurie. I'm going to put you in charge of that. I want you to pretend to be their saviour. You rescue them, and they'll take you straight to their leader/ Trinket thought this over for a second or two. 'I'm not sure .. / 'I know it's all rather dangerous/ said Kang Xi. 'You mustn't let them suspect you even for a moment, or they'll kill you in cold blood. If only I wasn't Emperor, dammit, I'd do it myself! It all sounds so tamely exciting!' 'If those are your orders, Majesty, then I'll do it. Nothing frightens me.' Kang Xi patted him on the shoulder. 'I always knew what a smart, brave fellow you were, Laurie . . . You look so young, I'm sure they'll never suspect you. I'd thought of choosing a couple of guards and sending them along, but they'd have been spotted straight away. This plan of mine will only have one chance of working. We've got to get it right first time, Laurie! Having you do it is going to be almost like doing it myself!' As he grew up, the young Emperor had come to feel more and more frustrated at not being able to 'do things himself, at having to preserve his 'Imperial person' from danger. Through Trinket he could at least experience vicariously some of the excitement of this hazardous escapade. 'You must be as convincing as possible,' Kang Xi continued. 'It mightn't even be a bad idea to kill a couple of guards, just to prove your credentials. I'll put Doiong in the picture, and give him special instructions to let you pass out of the Palace.' Kang Xi was rubbing his hands together in his excitement

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'Laurie,, pull this off, and I'll give you anything you want!1 'I just want to please you, Majesty! That's all I want. And to be sent on your next dangerous

errand!

'Excellent! Good man!' exclaimed the delighted Kang Xi. 'Oh Laurie, if only you weren't a eunuch! Then I could make you one of my Great Ministers or something!'

Trinket reflected on this possibility for a moment.

Thanks for the thought, Your Majesty,' he said. But secretly he was thinking to himself: 'You may be wonderfully pleased with me now. But wait till you find out who I really am! Wait till you know that I'm not a eunuch after all! You'll be wonderfully angry with me then\'

'Majesty, I've got one favour to ask you.'

'What is it? Do you want to be a Minister?'

'Oh no! It's just.. . Well, I'm going to do my very best, and I'll always be your most loyal and brave servant, but just supposing something went terribly wrong.. . Would you forgive me? Would you spare my life?'

'Just be loyal to me,' said Kang Xi, 'and you'll never have any cause to worry. I'll make sure that head of yours stays firmly attached to your neck!'

The Emperor had a good laugh.

Curly-Beard, Pale-Face, and Tattoo-Chest

As Trinket left the Library, he pondered this unexpected turn of events,

'Now the Emperor has ordered me to set free the prisoners, so I can take my time with the Little Countess and Fang Yi. As for them taking me straight to their leader, why, I've just been with their leader, having a few drinks ... I wonder if I should have told the Emperor the truth? Should I just hand over the Mu Family, including that turtle the Count and his old Shitu, and have the lot of them arrested? No, I don't think so. If I did, my Shifu the Helmsman would never forgive me. A Triad Lodge Master betraying one of the Mu Family. . . Tamardy! This is all getting too complicated and difficult! What do I want to go on being a Triad Lodge Master for? Why don't I just quit?'

After all, life wasn't so bad in the Palace, he reflected. It was rather pleasant being the Emperor's favourite and having everyone sucking up to him. In fact there wasn't even really too much wrong

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with the idea of being a (theoretical) eunuch for the rest of his life. But then he remembered the Empress Dowager, and gave an involuntary shudder.

The Old Whore will stop at nothing till she's done me in. I'd never last long in the Palace.'

As he was thinking these thoughts, he had reached the Guardroom next to the Hall of Heavenly Purity. It so happened that his old friend Zhao Qixian was on duty that day. The previous day Zhao had been distributing money for Trinket, and today he had received another reward from Colonel Dolong, which he understood had come his way because Trinket had been saying good things about him to the Emperor. When he saw Trinket coming, he jumped up to greet him.

'Laurel Goong-goong, what good wind blows you here?'

'I've come to have a look at those rogues you've got locked up/ said Trinket with an affable smile. Then he put his mouth close to Zhao's ear and whispered:

'His Majesty wants me to help with the interrogation, and see if I can't worm out of them who was behind their little plot.'

Zhao nodded, and whispered back:

'None of the three will say a word. We've broken two whips on them already, and they still stick by their story that the Satrap sent them.' 'Let me have a go/ said Trinket.

He went in to find three big fellows strapped to the pillars of the room, their naked bodies bleeding and bruised. One of them was a man with a large curly beard, the other two were younger men, one pale-skinned, the other tattooed all over his body. (On his chest he had a tattoo of a ferocious-looking tiger's head.)

'I wonder which one of these two is Fang Yi's young man?' thought Trinket to himself. He turned to Zhao.

'I have a sneaking feeling you may have arrested the wrong men. Leave us alone for a moment.'

Zhao went out, closing the door behind him.

'Now/ began Trinket, 'tell me your names.'

Curly-Beard glowered at him.

Think we'd give our names to a dirty little pup of a eunuch like you?'

Trinket lowered his voice to a whisper:

I'm here to help a friend by the name of Liu Yizhou get out of here . . .'

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He observed the three men looking at one another in utter astonishment.

'Who sent you?' asked Curly-Beard.

'Is one of you Liu Yizhou or not? If so, then I might have something more to say. If not, you can forget it.'

They looked at one another again. They were obviously wary of falling into some kind of trap.

'Who are you?' asked Curly-Beard.

'I've been sent by two friends. One of them is called Count Mu, the other is Iron Dragon. Do you know them?'

'Everyone in Yunnan and Sichuan has heard of the Iron Dragon!' cried Curly-Beard. 'As for Count Mu, he is the son of the Young Duke, and since his father's death has been wandering on River and Lake, Nobody even knows if he is still alive.'

He shook his head sadly.

'Well, if none of you know the Count or Iron Dragon personally, that means you can't be their friends. And I suppose you don't recognize this either?'

Trinket proceeded to execute a passable version of the Two Way Sweep and the Cataract. The young man with the tiger tattooed on his chest could not help letting out a gasp of astonishment.

Trinket halted his little routine.

'Well?'

'Nothing.'

'Who taught you those moves?' asked Curly-Beard.

'My woman did.'

Curly-Beard gave a snort of contempt.

'What kind of a woman would a eunuch like you have?'

It appeared that Curly-Beard might be beginning to have second thoughts about Trinket.

He had at least stopped calling him 'a dirty little pup',

'Why shouldn't a eunuch have a woman? If the woman wants to be had, what business is it of yours? I'll tell you her name. It's Fang. Fang Yi. ..'

The pale-faced younger man suddenly let out a great bellow:

That's a lie!

Trinket could see the man's veins bulging on his neck, and his eyes breathing fire. That must be Liu, he thought to himself. Not a bad-looking fellow, but a trifle daunting in his

present overwrought state.

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'What do you mean a lie?' he went on. 'I told you, her name is Fang, she's descended from one of the Four Paladins that fought with Old Duke Mu. One of our matchmakers was a gentleman by the name of Su Gang, they call him the Magic Hand. Another one was one of the Bo brothers, Maple. His Elder Brother Pine was killed recently, and Maple was a bit short of cash for the funeral, so he took on a few odd jobs like matchmaking,' Pale-Face was looking as if he was about to spontaneously combust.

'You . . . you . . . you . . .'

'Quieten down, Brother!' said Curly-Beard. Then turning to Trinket he continued:

'You certainly seem to know a thing or two about the Mu Family.'

'Well I ought to, seeing I'm getting married into it!' replied Trinket, 'Mind you, my woman—that's the one who used to be Miss Fang—she wouldn't marry me at first, said she was betrothed to some Liu fellow. Then she heard how Liu had turned out bad, and gone to fight for that traitor the Satrap, and got caught breaking into the Palace. So she decided to dump him for me

Pale-Face was getting more and more agitated.

'I . . . I . . . I . . .'

Curly-Beard shook his head,

'And what about you? It's hardly the most glorious thing in the world to be a eunuch working for the Tartars!'

'You're right there,' agreed Trinket. 'Be that as it may, my woman asked me to find out if this Liu fellow is alive or dead. If he's dead, she'd like to burn some paper money for him. But it seems that none of you is Liu, so I'd better be on my way. Our wedding's this evening . . .'

He turned to go,

Pale-Face opened his mouth,

'I'm—'

'Don't fall for it! It's a trap!' shouted Curly-Beard.

Pale-Face was struggling to contain himself. He was foaming at the mouth, and spat in Trinket's face.

Trinket ducked, and as he made for the door, made a mental note of what had been used to tie the three prisoners to the pillars: strong lengths of ox sinew. They'd have some trouble getting free from those.

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Tale-Face is obviously Liu,' he thought to himself. 'He was about to say so, only old Curly-Beard stopped him,'

Another moment's reflection, and he had hatched a plan.

'Wait for me here/ he said to the three men, 'I've got to report back to my woman.'

Zhao Qixian was waiting for him in the outer room.

'I think I'm getting somewhere with those three,' said Trinket. 'Don't torture them any more for the time being. I'll be back shortly.'

A Libation

Trinket thought the girls must be getting hungry. On his way back, he dropped in at the

Catering Department and gave orders for a big spread to be served in his rooms. He said he wanted to celebrate with some of the guards. They would be discussing confidential matters, he added, and should not be disturbed.

He unlocked the outer door, and tiptoed into the inner room. He heard the Little Countess give a tiny cry and sit up.

'Why have you been so dreadfully long?' she asked in a whisper.

'I've got good news!' announced a gleeful Trinket.

'What good news?' asked Fang Yi, lifting her head from the pillow.

Trinket lit a candle on the table. He could see that Fang Yi's eyes were red from crying.

'Good news for you!' he said, heaving a sigh. 'Lousy news for me! Goodbye to a lovely wife, when I just about had her in the bag! That Liu of yours is alive and kicking, I'm afraid to say.'

Fang Yi let out a little cry of joy.

The Little Countess also seemed delighted:

'Is Brother Liu unharmed?'

'Well, let's just say he's alive, I can tell you, he's lucky to be that. Ever since the guards caught him, he's insisted on sticking to his Satrap story. It's a shame, really. He'll be executed anyway, but this way he'll die with his reputation ruined! Everyone on River and Lake will despise him as a traitor.'

Fang Yi propped herself up in bed.

'We'd thought of that beforehand. We just wanted to strike a blow against the Satrap, and to revenge Duke Mu and the true Ming

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Emperor. Our own lives and reputations seemed of little importance.'

Trinket stuck his thumb up in the air.

'Bravo! Shows guts! Now listen here, Miss Fang, we've got some very important business to discuss. Supposing I do manage to get your Liu fellow out--what then?'

There was a momentary gleam of hope in Fang Yi's eyes, and her face grew flushed.

'If you really can save him, I'll do anything, anything, to show my gratitude!'

There was something wonderfully plucky about the way she said this.

'Very well then,' said Trinket, 'let's make a deal. And I'd like the Little Countess to witness it for us. If I save your friend Liu, and deliver him safely to Count Mu and Iron Dragon--'

'You mean you know about them?' interrupted the Little Countess.

'Of course I do! Everyone does!'

'I know you're a good person!' cried the Little Countess. 'I know you'll save Brother Liu for us!'

Trinket shook his head.

'No, I'm not a good person. I'm just making a deal. This Liu friend of yours is not a petty thief, you know. He tried to kill the Emperor! Rescuing him is going to be a very dangerous assignment. If I get caught, do you have any idea what'll happen to me? Do you have any idea what'll happen to all my family--my grandpa, my grandma, my mum and dad, my three brothers, my four sisters, my aunties and uncles and cousins? Off with their heads, that's what! Every one of them! And do you have any idea what'll happen to all my worldly goods--my gold, my silver, my estates, my wok, my trousers, my socks, my shoes--what do you think will happen to them? Confiscated, the lot of them! Taken! Gone!'

The Little Countess accompanied this tragic recital by nodding her head every time he asked her if she had 'any idea', and muttering sympathetically, 'Yes, I know.'

'You're right,' said Fang Yi. 'It really isn't fair to ask you to do something so dangerous.'

But... if Brother Liu dies, I won't want to go on living! I suppose we'll just have to let fate take its course!

Tears were coursing down her cheeks.

'Don't do that!' cried Trinket. 'Don't go upsetting your dear little self! Don't cry! It breaks my heart, to see those pearly tears

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running down your flowerlike face! Oh Miss Fang, I'd do anything for you! I promise I'll save him for you. Let's swear an oath. If I fail, I'll be your ox or your horse for the rest of my days! And if I succeed, you'll be my wife for the rest of your days! There! My word is my troth!

Fang Yi stared at him wide-eyed, and the colour drained from her cheeks. Her face was almost white.

'Brother Laurel/ she began, 'if you can save Brother Liu, I'll do anything . . . Bring him back to me alive, and for the rest of my days I'll.. , I'll serve you, Til obey you in everything! But I can't ... I can't. . . '

They heard footsteps outside the door.

'Laurel Goong-goong, the meal you ordered is here!'

'Very good!' said Trinket, and went to the outer door. Four junior eunuchs deposited everything—twelve dishes, including one particularly delicious-looking steamed Yunnan chicken, wine, plates, bowls, and chopsticks—in the outer room, gladly accepted their tip of one tael each, and took their leave.

Trinket carried the food into the bedroom himself, and drew a table up to the bed. He filled three cups with wine, and three bowls with rice.

'Miss Fang, just now you were saying something . . . ?'

With some help from the Little Countess, Fang Yi had managed to sit up. The flush had returned to her cheeks, and she sat there with head bowed. Finally she said, in a scarcely audible voice:

'What I meant was, I can't see what someone like you would want to get married for—I mean, with all your duties in the Palace . . . But anyway, if you can save my friend's life, for the rest of my days I'll be ... your companion.'

Trinket looked at her. In the warm glow cast by the red candle, her face was positively radiant, like a piece of lustrous jade. She seemed in that moment indescribably lovely. Trinket was only a boy, but he couldn't help being quite transported by her beauty. He smiled.

'What you meant was, you can't see why a eunuch should want to get married. Well, I think that's something for the eunuch to worry about, not you. Let me ask you again: will you or won't you be my wife for the rest of your days?'

A little frown crossed Fang Yi's brow, and a momentary flash of anger lit up her face. This was followed by a long silence, during

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which she seemed to be struggling to reach some kind of decision. Finally she spoke.

'All right! I'll do anything! I wouldn't even have to be your wife! Have your way with me if you want to, and sell me off to a whore-house! I'd gladly do whatever you say!'

Anyone else would probably have taken offence at this. But Trinket, having been born and raised in a whore-house, didn't see anything very unusual about her proposal. He laughed. Very well then, let's all drink to it! The three of us! Come! Sister! Wife!'

Fang Yi had learned over the past day that she had underestimated this eunuch. Watching him rip open the Colonel and dissolve his corpse with the powder, and witnessing how respectfully the other eunuchs all treated him, she was beginning to realize that he was something a little out of the ordinary. It had broken her heart to watch Liu being captured, unable to go to his aid because of her own wounds. The two of them, though not yet actually married, were deeply in love and had already sworn themselves to each other. If this eunuch could bring her true love back from the jaws of death, she would gladly endure any suffering! And besides, the chances were that he only wanted to have her as an ornament, to show her off, perhaps steal the occasional kiss and lick the lipstick off her lips. So why not go along with it? She raised the wine-cup.

'Very well, I'll drink this cup with you. But I warn you, if you don't save my Brother Liu, I'll have your head!'

Trinket loved the way her face dimpled when she smiled. He raised his cup.

This is a solemn oath. There's no going back on it. If I rescue Liu, and you betray me . . .'

Fang Yi's face became serious.

'I swear by Heaven and Earth,' she declared solemnly, 'that if Laurel Goong-goong can save Liu Yizhou and bring him safe out of danger, I, Fang Yi, will marry Laurel Goong-goong, and be true to him. Even if he can never be a proper husband to me, I will serve him faithfully all my days as his wife. If I betray him, may I be hacked to pieces and never born again.'

She poured a libation of wine from her cup onto the floor.

'And may you, Little Countess, be my witness.'

Trinket was ecstatic. He turned to the Little Countess:

'Do you have a true love I could rescue for you?'

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'No! Certainly not!'

'What a pity!'

Trinket went on to describe to the Countess the two other assassins taken prisoner. Curly-Beard was, it transpired, a distinguished retainer of the Mu Family called Wu Lishen, a kungfu Master, known to the Martial Arts community as the Shaker Lion, (Trinket had already observed that he did a great deal of head-shaking.) The younger man with the tiger on his chest was called Ao Biao, He was known as the Blue Tiger, and was one of Wu's disciples. The Little Countess pleaded with Trinket to rescue the two others while he was about it.

'Do they have pretty women waiting for them?' asked the incorrigible Trinket. This is starting to sound like a lot of fun!'

Suddenly something came whizzing towards him through the air, crashed into his forehead, and fell to the ground, where it smashed to smithereens. It was Fang Yi's wine-cup. Blood and wine trickled from his forehead down his face.

'Come here and let me have a look at that cut/ said the Little Countess, alarmed.

'I'm not coming anywhere near you two!' cried Trinket. 'My own wife just tried to murder me!'

'I'd have been angry myself,' said the Little Countess, 'after the things you said.'

'Oh, I see!' said Trinket, laughing loudly. 'Now both of my womenfolk are starting to get jealous!'

The Little Countess raised her cup in the air and threatened to follow Fang Yi's example.

Trinket wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. The sight of the Little Countess trying to be cross, with a little smile still playing on her face, combined with the charming spectacle

of Fang Yi looking almost repentant, more than compensated for the ache he felt on his forehead.

'Go on, throw!'

'All right then, I will!'

She raised her hand in the air, but instead of throwing it she emptied the contents of her cup all over Trinket's face. He made no effort to avoid it, but just stood there letting the wine run all over his face, then stuck his tongue out and began licking the mixture of wine and blood that came trickling down,

'Hmm! Delicious! Blood courtesy of wife number one; wine courtesy of wife number two; what a yummy combination!'

The two girls both burst out laughing, first the Little

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Countess, then Fang Yi, who took out a handkerchief and, after examining his wound, cleaned it up for him.

They were hungry now, and between them did justice to the excellent food before them.

After dinner, Trinket yawned.

'Which of my two wives should I sleep with tonight?'

Fang Yi pulled a face.

'For goodness' sake be serious! If you so much as try getting into bed with me, I'll. .. I'll kill you with my sword!'

Trinket stuck out his tongue.

'One of these days you probably will kill me!'

He carried the leftover food into the outer room. Then he came back in, spread a mat on the ground, and lay down on it fully clothed. He was exhausted, and within minutes had fallen fast asleep.

Plotting the Escape

Trinket awoke early the next morning feeling surprisingly warm and cosy. He opened his eyes, to find that someone had thrown a padded quilt over him, and placed a pillow under his head. He sat up, and could just make out, through the bed-curtains, the figures of the Little Countess and Fang Yi, lying fast asleep side by side.

He stood up and stole across to the bedstead. Drawing the curtains, he beheld a sight of the most soul-bewitching beauty. The two girls complemented each other wonderfully: Fang Yi was enchantingly seductive, in an almost coquettish way; the Little Countess, though in fact the younger of the two, possessed a graver and more sedate beauty. The two of them together were like pearl and jade, a perfect combination. Trinket felt an irresistible desire to kiss them both, but was afraid of waking them.

'Tamardy!' he mused to himself ecstatically. 'If I had these two as my wives, I'd really live happily ever after! They never had girls as pretty as this at Vernal Delights!'

He crept over to the door. As he opened it, it creaked very slightly. Fang Yi awoke at once,

'Laurel. . . Good morning!'

'Don't you mean husband?'

'You haven't rescued him yet. . .'

'Don't you worry: I will.'

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The Little Countess also awoke.

'What are you two chattering about so early in the morning?' she asked sleepily.

'We couldn't get to sleep,' said Trinket. 'We've been awake all night, talking.'

He yawned, and patted his mouth somewhat affectedly.

'I'm so tired! It's been a long night! I'd better try and get some sleep.'

He gave a good stretch.

Fang Yi flushed.

'Silly boy! As if I could bear to talk to you for more than a few minutes

Trinket ignored this remark and asked Fang to write him a little note to give to Liu. It would help him to win the prisoners' trust, he said.

That sounds like a good idea. But what should I write?'

'Oh you know, anything really. How you're going to marry me, what a wonderful person I am, how brave and good, and how I'm going to rescue him for your sake, because you asked me to.'

He found Old Hai's writing implements, spread a sheet of paper on a little table, and pushed it towards the bed.

Fang Yi sat up in bed, and took the brush in her hand. Suddenly she burst into tears.

'I don't want to write that!'

Trinket felt sorry for her, and relented.

'Oh well, write whatever you like. I can't read anyway. Perhaps on second thoughts it's better if you don't tell him you're marrying me. It's bound to make him mad.'

'I bet you can read,' said Fang Yi. 'You're tricking me.'

'If I can read, I'm a rotten turtle, not your husband!'

Fang Yi tried again, but broke down in tears a second time.

'Oh all right!' said Trinket, in a sudden fit of magnanimity. 'I'll rescue him, and then you can marry him! I'm buggered if I'm going to spend my life competing with him! Even if you did marry me, you'd only be mooning for him all the time. You'd end up sleeping with him anyway. You'd might as well get on with it, marry him, and live happily ever after. Tamardy! Put down whatever you like. I don't care.'

Fang Yi looked at him out of big, tear-filled eyes. A happy little wraith of a smile crossed her face, mingled with real gratitude. She wrote a few lines, and folded the paper.

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There. Please would you give him this.'

'I like that!' Trinket thought to himself. 'I've been downgraded to plain old you already! She didn't lose much time dumping me!'

But he decided not to make a fuss. He took the message, put it in his inside pocket, and walked out of the room, without even looking back. If he was going to play the part of the hero, he might as well do it properly.

The officer on duty in the Guardroom now was Trinket's other friend, Zhang Kangnian. Zhang had already been briefed the previous evening by Dolong about Trinket's secret mission. He greeted Trinket with a knowing wink, and drew him aside to a secluded spot by a large rock.

'How are you going to manage this "escape", Laurel Goong-goong?' he asked.

Trinket took one look at Zhang's friendly face and realized he could not possibly kill him just to establish his own credibility with the prisoners (as the Emperor had suggested).

Luckily he now had Fang Yi's message, which should do the trick just as well.

'First I'll go in and interrogate those three turtles,' he said in reply to Zhang's question.

'After that I don't know; I'll play it by ear.'

He made his way into the room where the three prisoners were being held. They looked weak and dispirited. The effects of two days without food or water were beginning to tell.

There were seven or eight junior guards keeping watch over them.
'His Majesty has decided to have these three executed at once,' Trinket said to the guards.
'Go and fetch something for them to eat and drink. They must die on full stomachs, or we'll have three hungry ghosts on our hands.'
Several of the guards went to do his bidding.
'At least we'll die glorious deaths!' bellowed the curly-bearded Shaker Wu. 'Faithful to our master the Satrap! Not filthy Tartar lackeys!'
One of the guards gave him a few lashes with a whip, and cursed the name of the Satrap.
Throughout this Liu Yizhou was staring frantically at the ceiling, mumbling something inaudible.
The guards came back with the food and drink.
'Don't give them too much to drink!' said Trinket. They mustn't die drunk, or they won't feel the pain!

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Shaker Wu ate and drank his fill. Ao Biao, his much-tattooed disciple, ate his food, and with every mouthful uttered some foul execration. Liu Yizhou grew paler in the face than ever. He was unable to swallow his wine, and after eating half a bowl of rice, shook his head and ate no more.
'I want to be left alone now with the prisoners,' ordered Trinket. 'His Majesty has ordered me to ask them one or two last questions.'
Zhang took the hint and led his men off.
The minute the guards were out of earshot, Trinket gave a little cough, and turned to face the three prisoners. A conspiratorial smile spread across his face.
'Damn you, you dirty little gelding! What's so funny?'
It was Shaker Wu who spoke.
'None of your business,' replied Trinket. 'Just a little private joke of my own.'
Suddenly Liu Yizhou spoke up:
'Goong-goong . . . I'm the one! It's me! I'm . . . I'm Liu Yizhou!'
Trinket stared at him in silence.
'Hold your stupid tongue!' cried both Wu and Ao Biao together.
'Goong-goong!' continued Liu undeterred. 'I beg you, save me ... Save us!'
'Coward!' cried Wu. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'
'He said he'd been sent by our people to save us!'
'And you believed him?'
Wu shook his head.
Trinket laughed.
'Sir Wu,' he said, 'the Shaker Lion, if I'm not mistaken? Would you do me a favour, and try not to shake your head at me quite so often!'
Wu started.
'How do you . . .'
Trinket laughed again.
'And you, Brother Ao Biao, the Blue Tiger, isn't it? The Lion's favourite disciple? Honoured to meet you!'
Both Wu and Ao stared at him in disbelief.
Trinket took the folded message from his inside pocket and held it out in front of Liu Yizhou.
'Whose is this writing?'

Liu read the message, and as he did so an expression of hope and joy spread across his face. This is from my sister-in-arms, Fang Yi! She says Goong-goong has come to rescue us and we are to do whatever he tells us!

'Let me see it!' muttered Wu.

Trinket handed him the paper, thinking to himself that it most probably contained all manner of extravagant declarations of love. Wu read it aloud:

"Dear Brother Liu: The bearer of this letter, Laurel Goong-goong, is one of us. He is a brave and honourable friend, and has come to save you from certain death! You must do whatever he says. Your sister, Fang Yi." Hm, she has even written our secret Mu Family mark. It must be genuine.'

'Of course it's genuine,' said Trinket.

'Goong-goong, where is she?' asked Liu Yizhou.

'In a very safe place,' replied Trinket (thinking to himself, 'Yes—safely tucked up in my bed!'). 'When I have rescued you,' he went on aloud, 'I'll rescue her, and the two of you will be reunited.'

For all his earlier blustering, when it came to the crunch, Liu had been undone by his terror of death. It was fear that had driven him to reveal his identity. He now started blubbing like a baby, sobbing his heart out, and swearing his undying gratitude to Trinket. Shaker Wu, whose courage had not faltered for a moment, was still in need of convincing.

'Would you please tell us your name?' he asked. 'And why you are doing this for us?'

'In the circumstances, I think I ought to tell you,' replied Trinket. 'My friends all call me Warthead. That's because I used to be covered in warts. I have a very good friend called Trinket, who is Lodge Master of the Triad Green Wood Lodge. He told me that a Triad by the name of Xu, the Eight-Armed Ape I think he's known as, got into an argument with one of your men about Prince Somebody-or-other, and ended up killing him. Your man's name was Pine Somebody-or-other. Anyway, your Mu people were very upset about it. You can't bring back the dead, so my friend Trinket asked me if I could rescue you. He said that might help to settle the score'

Shaker Wu knew about the scrap with the Triads, and all this accurate inside information finally convinced him of the genuine-

ness of Trinket's mission. He kept shaking his head and nodding by turns, and ended up apologizing for his earlier rudeness.

'Forget it!' said Trinket gallantly. 'What we've got to do now is think of a way out of here!'

'You just tell us your plan,' said Liu Yizhou. 'We'll do whatever you say, Goong-goong.'

That's the whole trouble,' thought Trinket to himself. 'I haven't got a plan.'

'What do you think?' he asked, turning to Shaker Wu.

'With all these pesky guards around, we don't stand much of a chance during daylight,' replied Wu. 'It had better be tonight. If you can manage to cut us free, we can try to get out under cover of darkness.'

'Good thinking/ said Trinket. 'But it still won't be easy'

He walked up and down the room, deep in thought.

'Let's just make a dash for it!' said Ao Biao. The worst they can do is kill us!'

'Be quiet, Brother Ao/ said Liu Yizhou. 'You're disturbing Goong-goong's concentration.'

Ao Biao scowled angrily at Liu.

Trinket's Cunning Plan

What was going through Trinket's mind was this: if he could drug the guards, then the prisoners could escape without his having to kill anyone. He went out into the ante-chamber and asked his friend Zhang Kangnian if he could lay his hands on any opiate. It turned out that Zhang had a supply ready mixed. It had been prepared for them to use on a secret mission. Colonel Rui Dong, acting on the Empress Dowager's orders, had sent them to apprehend a man who was something of a fighter, and they had thought it prudent to use the drug rather than rely on their own kungfu skills. The man had been none other than Hochabo, the Head Bannerman of the Bordered Red Banner. The Empress Dowager, so Zhang explained, had wanted to get hold of a copy of some Sutra or other that he possessed. Colonel Rui had duly extracted the Sutra from him, and then afterwards suffocated him, by sticking mulberry-bark adhesive paper over his mouth and his nose.

'So the Old Whore was after that Sutra again!' thought Trinket to himself. That must be the copy I found on the Colonel's body I wonder why he didn't give it straight to the Empress

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Dowager? Perhaps she sent him off after me again in too much of a hurry?'

Zhang went to get the drug, and Trinket gave orders for the kitchens to prepare a meal for him and his friends the guards.

Presently Zhang returned with a large packet—it must have weighed at least half a catty.

This should be enough to put several hundred people to sleep!' he whispered to Trinket.

'For one person, you only need to tip a tiny bit, this much,' (he held out a fingernail), 'into a cup of tea or wine.'

Zhang told the guards to set a couple of tables, as Laurel Goong-goong was going to treat them to a big meal.

'Set the tables in the room right in front of the prisoners,' said Trinket. 'I'd like to watch them drool while we stuff ourselves!'

Presently senior and junior eunuchs and serving-boys from the Imperial Catering Department brought in the food.

'You just stand there and watch us while we eat!' cried Trinket, addressing the three prisoners with a hearty laugh. 'If it's really too much for you and you start yelping like dogs, who knows, I might even toss you a scrap!'

The guards joined in his laughter.

'You're the dogs!' cried Shaker Wu. 'Damn the lot of you! When the Satrap raises arms in Yunnan, and storms the Capital, you'll all be lolled and thrown into the river to feed the turtles!'

Trinket meanwhile had walked over and was standing right in front of Wu. He reached inside his jacket with his right hand and took out a large pinch of the powder, then picked up the wine jug in his left hand. He raised the jug high in the air and cried:

'Well, you treacherous scum, any of you fancy a drink of wine?'

Shaker Wu was still in the dark as to Trinket's intentions.

'Who gives a damn if we drink or not?' he bellowed. 'Once the Satrap gets here, you are all dead men!'

'Oh yeah?' cried Trinket.

He raised the jug high in the air and poured a little into his own mouth.

'Good wine!'

Then, in such a way that only Shaker Wu could see what he was doing, he tipped open the

lid of the jug and used his finger to flick the powder from his right hand into the wine.
Closing the lid

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he raised the jug high in the air again and gave it a good shake, thereby ensuring that the drug was properly dissolved in the wine.

Shaker Wu now had the picture.

'A proper man dies proud! He doesn't beg for mercy!' he cried, 'Go on, I'll drink! I'll drink the whole damn jug!'

'So you would like a drink!' laughed Trinket 'Well, I'm not giving you one! Ha ha ha!'

And he went over and began pouring wine for the guards, making sure they each had a full cup. They all raised their cups and were about to drink when there was a loud cry from the door.

'Her Majesty has summoned Laurel Goong-goong! Laurel Goong-goong!'

The Old Whore's after me again!' thought Trinket, putting his wine-cup down with a jolt. He went out to find four eunuchs waiting for him, their leader a big, nasty-looking fellow with a large protruding belly and puffed-out chest. Trinket fell to his knees:

'At Her Majesty's service!'

'Her Majesty wishes to see you at once on urgent business!'

'Of course! Of course!'

Trinket did some very quick thinking. His strongest weapon was inside the room, dissolved in the wine.

'Come in here a moment/ he said to the eunuchs. 'There's something that will interest you greatly.'

He ushered all four eunuchs into the room where he and the guards had been about to tuck in to their banquet. The big eunuch made some disapproving remark or other about wasting Catering Department resources.

'But His Majesty specially asked me to reward these guards for having caught the assassins! Come on, join us! At least have a drink with us!'

The big eunuch refused, and insisted that the Empress Dowager was urgently awaiting Laurel Goong-goong's presence.

With a little support from Zhang Kangnian, Trinket succeeded in wearing down the eunuch's resistance, and eventually had him drinking a cup, and then the other three eunuchs and all of the guards followed suit. Trinket raised his own cup, as he did so screening it with his left sleeve and tipping the contents down the inside of his gown. Fearful that one cup would not be enough to put them out, he urged them all to drink another, and went round again with the jug.

The big eunuch protested strongly that they should be on

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their way, and that anyway he was not much of a drinker. As he spoke, Trinket noticed that he was beginning to sway from side to side, and deduced that the drug was beginning to take effect. Suddenly Trinket himself doubled up as if he was in pain.

'Aiyo! My stomach!'

The guards were by this time beginning to feel dizzy. One of them cried out:

'What's going on here? Has someone put something in the wine?'

'It's you, isn't it?' Trinket shouted angrily at the big eunuch. The Empress Dowager sent you

here to poison us, didn't she!

The eunuch denied this vigorously but Trinket called on me guards to seize him.

The guards themselves were starting to sway from side to side, and incapable of taking action of any sort. There was a series of thuds as two eunuchs crashed to the floor unconscious, to be followed shordy by the other two and the entire company of guards, including Zhang Kangnian. As they fell to the ground and collapsed in a heap, they brought down the tables and chairs with them. Trinket leapt on top of the big eunuch and gave him a kick for good measure. He groaned and lay there, his hands and feet twitching, his eyes staring helplessly in front of him.

Trinket ran to the door and closed it, then he drew out his trusty dagger and proceeded to stab all four eunuchs in the chest. Liu Yizhou gasped in astonishment. Next Trinket used the dagger to cut free the three prisoners. The blade sliced through the lengths of tough ox smew as if they had been strips of the softest noodle.

The three men had been tortured and bound, but their injuries were only superficial. They were now impatient to get away

'Laurel Goong-goong,' asked Liu Yizhou, 'how do we ... get out of here?'

Trinket ordered Shaker Wu and Ao Biao to change into guards' uniforms, and Liu to put on the clothes of the big eunuch. They obeyed without hesitation.

'Come with me/ said Trinket. 'Whatever anyone says to you, act dumb! Say nothing!'

From his inside pocket he produced a packet of Decomposing Powder. He dragged the big eunuch's body over to a corner of the room, stabbed it a few more times, and then sprinkled the

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powder directly into the wounds. That would hasten the decomposition process. Then he opened the door, and led the three out.

He closed the door behind them, and they all set off towards the Imperial Catering Department.

The Escape

The Catering Department was situated to the east of the Hall of Heavenly Purity, not far from the Guardroom. They reached it quickly, and found Butcher Qian waiting for them. He had brought two of his assistants, who were carrying two large, carefully prepared pig carcasses.

'What the devil are you playing at!' cried Trinket, a convincing scowl on his face. 'I asked for a couple of decent hogs, not these worn-out lanky sows that look like they've had seventeen or eighteen litters of piglets! Tamardy! I hope you realize your job's on the line!

Butcher Qian stooped low and made a convincingly abject apology.

The other Catering Department eunuchs assumed that the problem lay in the lack of accompanying 'presents' (since the pigs seemed plump enough) and joined in with a chorus of:

Take these foul-looking animals away! They're fit for nothing but fertilizer!'

Trinket waved to his companions (Shaker and Ao Biao dressed as guards, Liu as a eunuch) and ordered them to see the butcher to the door, and make sure he never came back.

Butcher Qian was not in on this latest twist in Trinket's plot, and gave a perplexed frown:

'Please forgive me this once, Goong-goong, I'll. . . I'll come back with some really big fat porkers next time, I promise! And I'll make sure I bring the right presents . . . Please forgive me!'

'If I want any more pork from you, I'll let you know!' snapped Trinket. 'Now, get going!' Butcher Qian hurried out, the three ex-prisoners following behind him, and Trinket bringing up the rear. When they reached the covered walkway and there was no one in earshot, he whispered:
'Brother Qian, these three men are from the Mu Family! I want you to take them to Count Mu's place, and tell your Triad

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Lodge Master Wei that Warthead has done the favour he asked for. Once they've escaped, there will be a big hunt on for them, and you'd better not come anywhere the Palace.' The five of them hurried to the northern Gate of the Divine Warrior. The guards on duty at the gate recognized Trinket and let the party through. When they were a little way from the Palace, Trinket took his leave of the others and returned. As he passed back through the gate, he explained to the guards that the Empress Dowager had personally asked him to escort these men out of the Palace. They were bearing secret instructions from Her Majesty. The guards believed Laurel Goong-goong implicitly.

Mission Accomplished

When Trinket returned to the Guardroom, he found them all still lying unconscious on the ground. He splashed some cold water on Zhang Kangnian's face, and slowly succeeded in reviving his friend.

'Laurel Goong-goong,' said Zhang, with a perplexed smile, 'I don't understand how I can have got drunk so quickly.'

He looked around him, and saw to his astonishment that the prisoners had all gone.

'It was the Empress Dowager,' explained Trinket. 'She sent that eunuch to drug our wine, and rescue the prisoners.'

Zhang had himself provided Trinket with the drug. But although this fact was still fresh in his memory, and although he found Trinket's story highly incredible, his brain was too befuddled for him to be able to say anything very articulate.

Trinket reminded Zhang that it was his superior officer, Colonel Dolong, who had instructed him to cooperate in the release of the prisoners. Dolong had said that it was a secret plan of the Emperor's, to track down the true perpetrators of the crime. But there were no written instructions from Dolong to that effect, and the guards would still be held officially responsible for the prisoners' escape. And besides, said Trinket, had anyone seen a written Edict from the Emperor to Dolong?

'You mean Colonel Dolong may have made the whole thing up?' asked a shocked Zhang, his teeth chattering with fear.

'I'm not saying that/ said Trinket. 'Just that when it comes to the crunch, Dolong may try to put the blame for this on your

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shoulders. And if things go wrong, and the prisoners don't lead diem to the true ringleaders, His Majesty may want to kill a few people, just to make the escape look plausible.'

This was in a way partly true: Kang Xi had instructed Trinket to do away with a few guards, to enhance the credibility of die Operation.

Poor Zhang was now terrified, and feil to his knees, kow-towing and crying:

'Save me, Goong-goong!'

Trinket helped him to his feet.

'It's quite easy: we'll just lay the blame on these four eunuchs. We'll say the Empress Dowager sent them. His Majesty will be happy to leave it at that. He will probably even want to reward you.'

Zhang thanked Trinket profusely for saving his life.

They splashed water on the faces of the other guards and woke them all up. The guards were filled with indignant rage when they were informed that the Empress Dowager's big eunuch had drugged them, killed his fellow eunuchs, and made off with the prisoners. Privately they wondered why the Empress Dowager should have wanted to set the prisoners free. Unless of course she herself had sent them on their assassination mission in the first place . . . But such a suspicion was one that no one dared voice openly. Needless to say, thanks to the Decomposition Powder, there was no actual trace of the big eunuch, and everyone assumed that he had escaped with the prisoners.

Crazy about a Coward

'Brother Laurel, what's the news?' the Little Countess asked Trinket as soon as he returned.

'Erodiar Laurei has no news,' replied Trinket, 'Your daring might have though!'

After a little more of this teasing banter, Trinket finally communicated to the girls that Liu Yizhou was out of danger.

'I said I'd do it,' declared Trinket, 'and I have. My word is my bond.'

Fang Yi seemed overjoyed at the news. She uttered a brief prayer of thanksgiving to Heaven and Earth. Her reaction caused Trinket pangs of jealousy. But he said nothing.

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'What did he say when you saw him?' asked Fang Yi.

'Oh nothing much. He just begged me to get him out.'

Fang Yi pouted.

'Did he ask how I was?'

Trinket put his head to one side and pondered,

'No. I told him you were somewhere safe, and that he needn't worry. I said I'd be sending you to see him soon.'

'Yes!' said Fang Yi, with a significant nod of the head. Suddenly two fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

'What are you crying for?' asked the Little Countess.

'I'm just so happy!' sobbed Fang Yi.

'Tarnard!' thought Trinket to himself. 'I can't understand how you can be so crazy about that big coward!'

Then he remembered that he had better at least appear to be searching for the prisoners' ring-leaders, and left the Palace once more, this time heading for the Bridge of Heaven district.

United Front

The area of Peking by the Bridge of Heaven is home to a motley assortment of pedlars, acrobats, street performers of every imaginable kind, and all sorts of other denizens of the River and Lake world. As Trinket approached he saw a platoon of twenty policemen with two constables at their head, pushing their way through the crowd. They were dragging after them five ragged pedlars in chains, and were holding seven or eight sticks of small red candied crab-apples, which they had clearly impounded from the pedlars.

Trinket suddenly realized what was going on. The Empress Dowager was rounding up every

pedlar in town in an attempt to get hold of his 'contact' with Colonel Rui. He ducked into a side-alley. As he did so he heard a bystander mutter with a sigh:

'Nowadays even selling toffee-apples is a crime!'

Trinket was about to question the Speaker when he heard a cough, and saw another man come sidling up to him. It was a stooped, white-haired old man, who on closer inspection turned out to be none other than Xu the Eight-Armed Ape. Xu gave Trinket a meaningful wink, turned around, and set off. Trinket followed him.

When they came to a more secluded place, Xu stopped and spoke:

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'Lodge Master Wei,' he began. 'Wonderful news!'

'So he's already heard of the rescue!' thought Trinket to himself with a smile.

'It was nothing!' he replied, with becoming modesty.

'Nothing!' exclaimed Xu. 'I'm talking about the Helmsman! He's here in the Capital!'

Trinket was completely thrown by this.

'My Shifu ... in Peking?'

'Yes. He arrived yesterday evening. He asked me to arrange an immediate meeting with you. Lodge Master.'

'Of course!'

It was over six months since Trinket had last seen his Shifu, Helmsman Chen Jinnan, and in that time he had done absolutely no kungfu practice whatsoever. His Shifu was not going to be pleased. He decided to play for time:

'Right now I'm on an errand for His Majesty. I have to report back to the Palace first. then I'll be able to go and see the Helmsman.'

'He says he can't stay long in Peking. He says you must see him at once!'

Trinket could see he had no option but to go with Xu directly to the place where the Triads had gathered to welcome their relief.

'If I'd known he was going to turn up like this, I'd have done better to stay put in the Palace, out of his reach . . . ' he thought to himself.

They reached the alley, to find numbers of Triads posted at the entrance and along the street as sentries. There were more of them guarding each doorway as they entered the house.

The Helmsman was sitting in the rear hall, holding council with a group of senior Lodge members which included Brothers Li and Fan, Big Beaver, Father Obscure, and Tertius.

Trinket hurried in and fell to his knees.

'Shifu! I deserve to die at your hands!'

Chen Jinnan laughed.

'You're a good lad! Everyone has been singing your praises!'

Trinket stood up, saw the friendly expression on the Helmsman's face, and breathed a sigh of relief.

'Are you well, Shifu?'

Chen Jinnan smiled.

'Very well, thank you. How's your kungfu coming on? Is there anything you don't understand?'

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All the way there Trinket had been wondering how he was going to deal with this exact question. The Helmsman was too smart to fool around with. He would have to adopt a more subtle approach.

Well yes, there are bis of things I can't quite ßgure out. Luckily you're here now, Shifu, and I can ask you to explain them for me!

'Excellent!' exclaimed the Helmsman. I want to spend a bit more tirne with you during this stay of mme, and give you a few lessons.'

As he was saying this, a Triad Brother guarding the door came hurrying in to announce the arrival of Count Mu Jiansheng and Liu Dahong, the Shifu of the Mu Family. The Helmsman seemed very pleased.

'Come,' he said, rising to his feet, 'we must go out to greet them.'

'I can't meet them in these clothes/ said Trinket, who had never before encountered the Mu Family. In his guise äs Palace eunuch. The Helmsman told him to wait in the back room.

Trinket eavesdropped äs the Triads received the Mu Family delegation, hearing the boorning voice of old Liu Dahong express-ing his great joy at finally meeting the famed Helmsman, and Chen Jinnan's self-effacing reply. Liu went on to say how much he wished to thank Lodge Master Wei for the great favour he had done the Mu Family in asking his friend in the Palace to rescue their rnen. The Helmsman apparently still loiew nothing of all this. Next it was Shaker Wu's turn to sing the praises of Warhead. Finaliy Butcher Qian, who had accompanied the Mu delegation, gave the Helmsman a brief account of the whole episode.

The Helmsman was greatly pleased to hear of these exploits, and decided that since the Triads and the Mu Family were allies in the struggle against the Tartars, he ought to put them fully in the picture.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I cannot bring myself to deceive you in this matter. The truth is that this Warhead, the Palace Eunuch who saved you, is in fact my own disciple, Lodge Master Trinket Wei!'

He called out:

'You'd better come out and say hello to these gentlemen, Trinket!'

Trinket came out of his hiding-place at once. The astonish-ment among the members of the Mu Family can be imagined, äs

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the Young Count and old Shifu Liu; on the one hand, and the released prisoners on the other, saw for themselves that Lodge Master Wei and Palace Eunuch Warhead were one and the same person.

Trinket apologized to the three ex-prisoners for having used a false identity, but Shaker Wu was most insistent that he had done the right thing.

"Dangerous measures for dangerous tirnes! Acted like a true hero! Ha ha ha!"

He seerned to find the whole idea quite exhilarating, stuck his thumb up in the air, and started wagging his head interminably and making a series of exclamations of admiration.

Shaker Wu and Liu Dahong had studied with the same kungfu Master, and Shaker had quite a reputation on River and Lake. The Helmsman was needless to say delighted to hear his young disci-ple being so highly praised by a Martial Arts veteran. He was also pleased to see in this new development a hope for improved rela-tions between their two factions of the Resistance. One of his prin-cipal reasons for hurrying to the Capital from Henan had been precisely to try to heal the rift between his Triad organization and the Mu forces in Yunnan.

Just äs the Helmsman was conternplating the potential of a united front, old Liu made a remark which threw everything into disarray:

'Helmsman,' he said, intending to pay Chen the highest com-pliment he could think of, 'when Prince Gui's heir is proclaimed Emperor of a restored Ming dynasty, you will surely be the man chosen to be his Chief Minister!'

The Helmsman munibled a polite reply, but Tertius immedi-ately leapt into the fray, insisting that in the event of a Restoration it was in fact the heir of Prince Tang, currently in Taiwan, who had the right to be proclaimed Emperor. And so on and so forth, und! the two factions, so far from being united, were at each others' throats again, arguing over the very issue that had led to the earlier fatal altercation between Pine and Xu Tianchuan.

The Helmsman tried to make the peace, knowing that the Manchus would be the only ones to beneh't from this divisive squabbling, but old Liu was not to be stopped. He delivered a booming and impassioned plea on behalf of the descendants of Prince Gui, v/ho had so tragically given his life after his wretched days of exile in Burma. The old man was in tears, and emotions

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were running high. Chen Jinnan tried one last argument to restore the peace:

My friends, let us not allow ourselves to be divided like this before we have even achieved our shared goal! Let us first drive the Tartars from our land! And before we do that, let us first kill that traitor Satrap Wu, and avenge the deaths not only of Emperor Yong Li, but also of Duke Mu, who died with him!

It was a clever move on his part. Not only had he referred to Prince Gui by his Imperial title, he had also alluded to the Young Count's father, Duke Mu Tianbo, who had been put to death defendmg his Emperor's final stand in Burma. And he had focused on the Satrap, a man loathed if anything more ferociously by the Mu Family than by the Triads, since it was the Satrap who had per-sonally ordered the execution of the Gui Tretender and of his devoted Duke. The Young Count and his retainers responded by crying enthusiastically 'Yes! Death to the Traitor!'. Some wept openly, others shook with visible excitement at this prospect of revenge.

'We can debate the rights and wrongs of the successssion at a later date/ added the Helmsman. Tor the present, let us agree on one thing: whoever kills the Satrap will command our ailegiance!'

'Agreed!' cried the Young Count. He and the Helmsman exchanged a solemn oath to this effect.

The Mu Family delegation drank a few cups of wine and took its leave. As they went, Trinket gave them sorne parting words of advice:

'Count Mu, I think it would be wise if you were to move from Bean Sprout Lane. The Tartars may track you down . . .'

The advice was gratefully received.

When they had gone, the Helmsman took Trinket aside into a private room, and asked him how his kungfu had been progress-ing. Trinket tried to avoid answering, instead reminding his Shifu that he was expected back in the Palace at any moment, and adding a few carefully chosen words of flattery. The Helmsman was used to the blunt ways of River and Lake, and tended to believe that people meant what they said. He was genuinely touched by his young friend's words. He had little understanding of Trinket's riature, which had always been crafty, moulded by years spent first in a whore-house, then in the Palace—both places where deceit and duplicity flourished.

Trinket went on to criticize the Young Count's tactics—the

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much too obvious attempt to lay the blame on the Satrap, the use of marked weapons and clothes, the way their kungfu moves were so easily recognized, and so on. So impressed was

the Helmsman by his young disciple's precocious mastery of strategy (when in fact all Trinket was doing was repeating word for word what the Emperor had said to him a day or two earlier), that he began to think it might no longer be so important for him to be proficient at kungfu—which was exactly what Trinket had hoped to achieve. After all, there were enough good fighters among the Triads already. In fact, the Helmsman was altogether so impressed by Trinket's courage and intelligence, that he even began to reconsider his original plan, which had been to replace him as soon as possible as Master of the Green Wood Lodge. He had only nominated the boy in the first place as a ploy to avoid further dissension between rival factions within the Lodge. Now Chen was beginning to think that the boy was turning out to be surprisingly promising. A few more years, and he might be more than a match for the other Lodge Masters.

'Off you go then!' he said. 'You'd better report back to the Palace. Come and see me again tomorrow, and I'll teach you some kungfu.'

Trinket beat a hasty retreat.

The Qreat Sage Onion

He found Kang Xi in the Upper Library reading state documents.

'Well,' said the Emperor, when he saw Trinket come into the room, 'did you find anything out?'

'Your Majesty,' replied Trinket, 'your suspicions were correct. The people behind the plot were the Mu Family from Yunnan.'

Trinket's Version of events was that he had drugged the guards, and then, when the Empress Dowager had sent four eunuchs to 'kill the prisoners', he had taken it upon himself to kill the eunuchs in front of the prisoners' own eyes (in accordance with Kang Xi's earlier plan). Then he had escaped with the prisoners.

'I wondered what was going on!' exclaimed Kang Xi with a laugh. 'Just now Colonel Dolong reported that it was one of Her Majesty's eunuchs who had let them out. But it was you all along!'

'You mustn't teil Her Majesty that I killed those eunuchs of hers,' said Trinket. 'Or my life will be in danger. She already holds it against me that I respect you more than her—which doesn't make

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sense to me! Anyway, what right does she have to send her eunuchs in there without your permission?'

Kang Xi reassured him that he would not mention it to the Empress Dowager. Trinket told him the names of the three prisoners, and of the Young Count and his retainers, and their address in Bean Sprout Lane. He went on to explain that they had planned all along to cause trouble for Satrap Wu, and thereby avenge the deaths of Prince Gui and Duke Mu. They had never intended to härm Kang Xi, whom his Chinese subjects considered an exceptionally wise young ruler.

'Come come!' said Kang Xi, secretly pleased by Trinket's flattery. 'You're making that all up.'

'No, honestly, that's what they said. The people hated Oboi. They thought he was a heartless monster, and they praise Your Majesty for having put him to death! They all say you're as great and wise as the Great Sage Onion . . . I'm not sure what that means, but I think it's supposed to be a compliment!'

Kang Xi burst out laughing.

Tamardy, Laurel! You really do manage to get things tied round your neck! The Great Sages

Yao and Sun! They were two of the Great Emperors of Ancient Time, famous for their virtue and wisdom!

Whoever they were, Trinket was pleased to have brought a complacent smile to the young Emperor's face.

'But all the same, we can't let those Mu folk get away with it,' said Kang Xi. 'Send for Dolong.'

Trinket went off to fetch him, and Kang Xi gave Dolong Orders to go out and arrest the members of the Mu Family. Trinket was then told to brief him, and Dolong was shocked to learn the true identity of the three men he had been holding prisoner. He set off to do his duty.

'Laurel,' said Kang Xi, 'I want you to come with me now to visit Her Majesty.'

Trinket looked very nervous at the thought of seeing the Empress Dowager.

'Don't be scared!' said Kang Xi. 'I'll be there to protect you.'

'Yes, Majesty!'

An Unexpected Change of Employment

They reached the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity, and Kang Xi went in to pay his respects to the Empress Dowager. He reported the true

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identity of the intruders, and that he had expressly ordered Laurel to let them go, with a view to acquiring this information.

The Empress Dowager smiled.

'Laurel, you're a very capable little fellow!'

Trinket fell to his knees and kowtowed several times.

'It was all His Majesty's ideal. All I did was follow his orders.'

The Empress Dowager studied him for a moment, then gave a little humph.

'I dare say you've been gadding about all over Peking ... I wonder, have you been to the Bridge of Heaven by any chance, to see the acrobats? Did you buy any toffee-apples?'

Trinket knew that she'd had every toffee-apple-seller within a mile of the Bridge of Heaven rounded up, and all their heads chopped off, just to be sure that none of them went to the Wutai Mountains and passed a message on to Colonel Rui. The thought of how ruthless she was made him shudder with fear.

'I said, did you buy any toffee-apples?' she repeated with a sinister smile.

'Well, as a matter of fact, Your Majesty, there's been a bit of trouble down at the Bridge of Heaven these last few days, and all the toffee-apple-sellers seem to have been rounded up.

There must have been some criminals among them, I suppose. Quite a few of the old sellers have changed to selling peanuts, or cakes, or something else. I recognized some of them.

Then there was this one queer-looking fellow who said he was off to some mountain or other to sell vegetarian buns to the monks

The Empress Dowager got Trinket's point, and snarled back at him:

'You are a clever little fellow!' She turned to Kang Xi. 'I've been thinking. I'd like to keep this clever little eunuch here with me . . . What do you say to it?'

This request took Kang Xi completely by surprise. The last thing he wanted to do at this moment was to part with Laurel. But, although the Empress Dowager was not his natural mother, he had grown up under her care and regarded her with great filial respect. He did not dare go against her wishes.

'Laurel, didn't you hear?' he said. 'Her Majesty wants to do you a favour. Aren't you going to thank her?'

'Yes Majesty, of course Majesty!' cried Trinket, who had almost died when he heard what

the Empress Dowager was

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proposing. His one and only thought, now more than before, was of escape. And of never returning to the Palace ever again in his entire life. He fell to his knees yet again, and began kowtowing.

'Your Majesties, I thank you both for your great kindness!'

'Don't you warn to serve me?' asked the Empress Dowager, with a chilling laugh. 'Do you only ever want to serve the Emperor?'

'I am devoted to both Your Majesties!'

That's fine then. From now on, you don't need to bother with the Imperial Catering Department. You're just to stay here with me.'

'Yes, Your Majesty. Much obliged, Your Majesty.'

Kang Xi himself was thoroughly unhappy about this arrangement. He made a few perfunctory remarks, and took his leave. Trinket followed him out.

'Laurel, come back!' cried the Empress Dowager. The others can perfectly well look after the Emperor. I need you for something here.'

'Yes Majesty!'

Trinket watched Kang Xi disappear out of sight, thinking to himself:

'Now that you're gone, I'm done for! I'll probably never see you again!'

He felt himself about to burst into tears.

Sister Swallow

The Empress Dowager sipped her tea, and studied Trinket. She could tell he was terrified.

'So,' she said at last, 'when is that man coming back from Wutai—the vegetarian-bunseller?'

'I don't know, Your Majesty.'

'When are you planning to see him again?'

'I arranged to see him in a month's time,' Trinket improvised. 'But not at the Bridge of Heaven.'

'Where?'

'He said he'd find a way of letting me know nearer the time.'

The Empress Dowager nodded her head.

Then you'd better stay here with me until you hear from him.'

She clapped her hands together softly, and one of her maids-in-waiting appeared from an inner chamber.

This maid-in-waiting was an exceedingly plump woman of

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thirty-five or so, but quite sprightly on her feet. She had a big round face like a full moon, small eyes and a large mouth. She giggled as she came in, and curtsied to her mistress.

The Empress Dowager introduced Trinket to her.

This is the eunuch Laurel. He is a cheeky little fellow, and very mischievous, but I've taken a liking to him.'

'Yes, Ma'am! He seems very smart. Hey, little boy, my name's Liu, Swallow Liu. But you can just call me Big Sis Swallow.'

Tat Tamardly Sow more like!' Trinket thought to himself.

'Yes, Sis Swallow!' he said. That's a good name for you, you're like a pretty little bird on the

wing!

None of the Empress Dowager's servants had ever spoken like that before. But what did Trinket care? He had a premonition that he was done for anyway.

Swallow gave a little giggle.

'What a cute way of talking he has!'

'And an even cuter way of running wild!' snapped the Empress Dowager. 'What do you think, Swallow, how are we going to keep him under control?'

'Give him to me, Your Majesty. I'll think of a way.'

'No.' The Empress shook her head. 'He's much too slippery a customer for you. I sent Colonel Rui after him, but he managed to scare the Colonel off. I sent four of my eunuchs, and he had them all killed by the guards, every one of them. I sent another four, and he killed them too, goodness only knows how!'

Swallow clicked her tongue.

'My oh my! He really is a naughty boy! Your Majesty, I think we'd better chop his legs off. . . Then he won't be able to get up to so much mischief!'

The Empress sighed.

'I think you may be right.'

Trinket bolted for the door.

His left foot had no sooner reached the threshold, when he felt a tug on his pigtail, and his head was jerked upwards. He somersaulted backwards, then landed on the ground. A foot planted itself heavily on his chest. . . a fat foot, in a red satin shoe embroidered with gold thread. Sister Swallow was standing over him.

'Take your smelly foot off me, you dirty old slut!' cried Trinket in the heat of the moment.

By way of reply, Sister Swallow pressed her foot down even

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harder, and Trinket felt his ribs go crunch and the breath go out of him.

'I've taken rather a fancy to the smell of your feet, little boy!' laughed the Fat Sow. 'I think I'll chop them off and have a good smiff!'

Trinket knew that the Old Whore hated him enough to give the order for this dreadful thing to happen! Then she would have him carried, foot-less, to his rendezvous and secretly send an assassin with him to Wutai to bump off Colonel Rui. He must not panic. He had to think very fast.

'Your Majesty,' he said with a sly smile, 'you're welcome to chop off any bits of me you like, I'm sure a few Laurel-amputations wouldn't matter much to anyone. But there is just one little thing: the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. . . Tee-hee!'

He gave a series of strange little squeaks. As he had anticipated, the Empress Dowager reacted smartly to the mention of the Sutra, and rose to her feet.

'What are you trying to say?'

'Just that it would be such a pity to lose those copies of the Sutra . . .'

The Empress turned to Sister Swallow.

'Get off him!' she commanded.

The fat maid-in-waiting removed her left foot from Trinket's chest, inserted it under his back, and flicked him over. Then she gripped him by the nape of the neck with her left hand, lifted him up into the air, and dropped him with a great thud to the ground. Trinket was like a helpless child in her hands. He was now even too scared to utter the words 'filthy slut' that kept forming themselves on his lips.

'Who have you heard talking about the Sutra?' asked the Empress Dowager.

'Why should I tell you anything,' replied Trinket, 'when you're about to chop off my feet?'

'If you're a smart boy you'll answer Her Majesty nicely!' said the fat maid.
'Why should I, when I'm going to die anyway? Torture me. I'm not scared.'
The Fat Sow took hold of his left hand and gave a sinister laugh.
'Little boy, you've got such pretty, long fingers
'Go ahead, cut them off! What do I care!'

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This was followed by an ear-piercing scream of pain as the Sow took hold of his Index finger, and squeezed it so viciously that she almost snapped the bone. All the while she was inflicting this excruciating pain, tightening her vice-like grip on Trinket's finger, she had a big beaming smile on her face.
Trinket was weeping with pain.
'Your Majesty,' he gasped, 'kill me and get it over with! Forget about the Sutra!'
'You tell me what you know about the Sutra,' replied the Empress Dowager, 'and I will spare you!'
'I won't! I don't care if you kill me!'
The Empress Dowager frowned. This little brat was a real thorn in her side.
'Swallow,' she said slowly, after a long pause, 'if he won't talk, gouge out both of his eyes.'
'Certainly, Your Majesty/ said Swallow with another of her beaming smiles. 'Do this one first. Oh my poor little boy, what a pretty, clever little eyeball, so bright and shiny, like a little ball, so lovely the way it moves round! I'm afraid when I've taken it out, it won't be such a pretty sight any more!'
She put her thumb against his right eyelid, and started softly pressing.
Trinket felt a shooting pain in his eye, and changed his tune.
'I surrender! Don't hurt my eyes! H! talk!'
The Sow took away her thumb and gave another of her hideous smiles.
There's a good boy! You talk nicely to Her Majesty now. She loves you.'
Trinket rubbed his right eye, blinked it a few times, then closed his other eye and squinted with the right one at the Sow, shaking his head and muttering:
'No, she doesn't!'
'Of course she does! Stop playing games, and talk to her nicely.'
'Look what you've gone and done! You've ruined my eye!' moaned Trinket. 'Everything looks different. Your body looks almost human, but on top you've got a head like a big fat pig!'
The Sow reacted to this by giggling.
'What fun! I'd better do the same to the other eye . . .'
Trinket shrank away from her.
I'd rather you didn't! Thanks all the same!'

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He closed his right eye, squinted at the Empress Dowager with his left, and shook his head. She scowled at him angrily, wondering to herself what gar-goyle the little brat was going to compare her with.
'Go on, Swallow, poke that other eye out, before he starts seeing something else!'
'But if I can't see, how am I to fetch the Sutra for you?'
'Have you got one?' cried the Empress Dowager eagerly. 'Where did you get it from?'
'Colonel Rui gave it to me. He told me to keep it in a very safe place. Whatever happened to me, I was never to let anyone see it. It was bound in red silk with a white border.'
The Empress Dowager was not sure whether to believe Trinket. It was true that she had

sent Colonel Rui to kill Hochabo, the Head Bannerman of the Bordered Red Banner, and to steal his copy of the Sutra. On his return, she had been in so much of a hurry to send him off again to murder Trinket that she had forgot-ten to ask him for the Sutra. If what Trinket said was true, she had cause to be both pleased and angry: pleased that she now had a clue as to the Sutra's whereabouts, angry that die Colonel should have given it to Trinket.

'In that case,' she said to Trinket, 'I want you to go with Swallow and find that book for me. If it is what you say it is, we'll spare your life, and you can go back to the Emperor and never set foot here again! The sight of you only makes me angry.'

Swallow took hold of Trinket's right hand.

'Come on, little boy, let's be going!'

Trinket tried to shake her hand off.

'Let go of me! I'm a man, you're a woman! Stop trying to feel me up!'

She had used virtually no force, and yet her hand stuck to his like a limpet and Trinket was unable to free himself.

'You're just a eunuch,' she said, with one of her appalling grins. 'You're not a man! And even if you were, you're hardly even old enough to be my son.'

They set off together. When they reached the covered walkway, Trinket's heart was thumping. He was desperately trying to think of a way of escaping from the clutches of the Sow.

'It's no good trying to get out my dagger—she'll notice the slightest move, and I don't stand a chance against her. She obvi-ously knows a thing or two about fighting. She can't have been

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around when the Old Whore fought with the Old Turde, or she'd have joined in. She must be new in the Palace. She probably arrived in the last few days, or the Old Whore would have sent her to kill me, and not come herseif.'

As these thoughts were running through his head, a sort of a plan began to form itself in his mind. He made an easterly turn and started leading her towards the Upper Library, beside the Hall of Heavenly Purity. He would appeal to the Emperor to save him! It was his only hope! He was counting on the fact that she was new in the Palace and wouldn't know where they were going.

With his second step, he feit her hands dose around his neck.

'And where do you think we are going to now, dear boy?'

She accompanied this with one of her pig-like snuffling giggles.

To my room, to get the Sutra,' replied Trinket.

'So what are we doing heading towards the Upper Library? You weren't thinking of sneaking off to the Emperor by any chance?'

Trinket couldn't restrain himself.

'You fat pig!' he cried. 'You would have to know your way around!'

'I know this part of the Palace.'

She seized Trinket by the neck and yanked him round into a westerly direction.

'There, off we go! Careful now, dear boy, we don't want to damage die flowers!'

She was all smiles, but her grip was devastating, and Trinket yelped with pain. He thought his neck was going to snap in two.

There were two eunuchs further down the walkway, and when diey heard this they turned around.

'Her Majesty's Orders,' whispered the Sow to Trinket, 'were that if you tried to escape, or made a noise, I was to kill you!'

Trinket decided it would be no use to call out for the Emperor, since Kang Xi would be

unlikely to defy the Empress Dowager anyway. His only hope was to bump into a couple of guards and get them to help him dispose of the Sow.

Suddenly he felt an elbow digging into his ribs.

'What are we plotting now?'

Trinket walked on reluctantly towards his room. He was worried about the two girls. They were still weak from their wounds, and he feared that the Sow might take their lives too if

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she became aware of their presence.

When he reached the door, he unlocked it clumsily, deliberately making a lot of noise with the key, and exclaiming loudly:

'Slut! Fat Sow! One day I'll get even!'

He pushed the door open as noisily as possible. . 'Whether I give you the Sutra or not, I know she'll kill me. I'm not that stupid!'

'If she said she'll spare you, she probably will. She might just gouge your eyes out though, and chop off your legs . . .'

'And what about you, you big fat pig! Do you think she'll let you live? Once you've killed me, she'll kill you. You'll know too much to stay alive.'

Sister Swallow paused for a moment, as if seriously contemplating Trinket's remark, but then shoved him forward. He stumbled into the room.

'Hurry up!' she said. 'Get the book!'

She shoved him again, and followed him as he stumbled on into the inner room. Trinket quickly scanned the interior. The first thing to greet his eyes was two pairs of ladies' slippers neatly arranged by the bed. It was evening, and there were no lamps lit. The Sow had still not spotted the slippers.

'Drat!' thought Trinket to himself, and at the same moment hurled himself forward and on to the ground, to push the slippers under the bed. Then on a sudden impulse he wriggled under the bed himself. Perhaps he could deal with the Fat Sow somewhat as he had dealt with Colonel Rui. He was just pulling in his right leg, in order to extract the dagger from the side of his boot, when he felt the Sow's hands close around his ankle.

'What are you up to now?'

'I'm getting the book. It's under the bed.'

She let him go, thinking that he could hardly get away from her under the bed. Trinket curled up in a ball and took the dagger from his boot.

'Come on! Give it here!'

'Oh no!' came a muffled cry. 'It looks as if mice have been down here! Aiyo! They've chewed the book into little pieces!'

'Come out of there! Stop fooling about with me!'

The Sow reached under the bed, but could feel nothing. Trinket was curled up against the wall. She began crawling under the bed herself. Trinket now had the dagger in his hand. He stabbed at her. As the blade made contact with the back of her hand, the

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Sow reacted with the speed of lightning, seizing Trinket by the wrist and squeezing it so tightly that his hand went limp and he dropped the dagger on the floor.

'Trying to kill me, were you? Very well then. Out with one of your eyes!'

She gripped his throat with her right hand and began to throttle him, at the same time attacking one of his eyes with her left hand.

'A snake!' yelled Trinket.

'What?' gasped the Sow.

Then she gave a great scream, and the hand on Trinket's throat loosened its grip. The Sow's body writhed, and she lay still.

Trinket scrambled out from under the bed, surprised and delighted by this sudden turn of events. He heard the Little Countess's voice:

'Are you all right?'

He drew apart the bed-curtains, and there was Fang Yi sitting on the bed, holding the handle of her sword in both hands and panting. She had driven the long blade of the sword down through the bolster and the rope bed-support, right up to its hilt. It had gone straight into the Sow's back and out through her heart. Her fat buttocks were still protruding from under the bed. Trinket gave them a kick, and they did not budge.

'Dear. . . dear sister, you've saved my life!' he exclaimed joyfully. Then he clambered onto the bed and stabbed the Sow twice more through the bolster with his dagger, for good measure.

'Who was that horrible woman?' asked the Little Countess. 'She said she was going to gouge your eyes out!'

'She works for that Old Whore the Empress Dowager/' replied Trinket.

He turned to Fang Yi.

'Is your wound hurting you?'

She frowned.

'I'll be all right.'

In fact the effort she had made had opened her wound again. She was faint with pain, and beads of sweat stood out on her brow.

A Pair of Feet in a Pair of Shoes

'We don't have much time,' said Trinket. 'It won't be long before the Old Whore sends someone else after me. We must think of an escape plan quickly. The two of you had better dress up as eunuchs,

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and we'll all try and sneak out.'

He turned to Fang Yi.

'Do you think you can manage to walk?'

'I'll try.'

Trinket produced two sets of clothes and told them to put them on.

He dragged the Sow's body out from under the bed, and sprinkled Decomposing Powder on it. Then he put away his dagger, made a bundle containing banknotes, gold and silver ingots, two copies of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections, his kungfu primer, the sleeping potion, and of course the remains of the powder.

The Little Countess was dressed first, and climbed down from the bed.

'You make a very handsome eunuch!' said Trinket. 'Here, let me do your pigtail for you.'

He braided her hair, and the Little Countess then did the same for Fang Yi. Soon both girls were ready. Fang Yi was taller than Trinket, and his clothes were rather a tight fit on her. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she couldn't help laughing.

'We won't be able to get out of the Palace tonight,' said Trinket. 'But we must find a place to hide. The Old Whore will be after me.'

After a moment's thought, he decided to take them to the room where he and Kang Xi had held their sparring matches—the 'cake-room'. The Little Countess hobbled along, using a door-bar as a crutch. Fang Yi had to be helped by Trinket, who put an arm round her, and

half-supported, half-hugged her. Luckily it was growing dark already, and they only ran into one or two junior eunuchs on their way. When they reached the room, they breathed a sigh of relief. Trinket barred the door and helped Fang Yi into a chair.

'We'd better not talk here,' he whispered. 'It's not like my room. There's a passage-way outside.'

Gradually it grew darker and darker, until they could hardly see each other any more. Fang Yi started fiddling with her hair, and suddenly gave a little sigh.

'What's the matter?' whispered Trinket.

'Nothing, I seem to have lost a hairpin.'

'Oh dear!' whispered the Little Countess. 'It's my fault. I took it out when I undid your hair, and left it on the table. It's the silver one Liu gave you, isn't it?'

'It really doesn't matter. It's only a hairpin.'



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Trinket detected the note of sadness in her voice, and his mind was already made up.

Chivalry must be observed through to the bitter end.

'We'll be dreadfully hungry by morning,' he said. 'Til go and find us something to eat.'

'Don't be long!' whispered the Little Countess.

Trinket slipped out. He was afraid the Empress Dowager might have already sent someone to his room, so he hid outside and listened for any noise, before climbing in through a window. He could see the silver hairpin lying on the table, shining in the moonlight. It was a cheap little thing, and he mentally berated Liu Yizhou for giving such a beautiful lady such a worthless present. Then he put it in his pocket, stuffed some cakes into a little cardboard box, and put that inside his gown.

He was about to climb back out of the window, when his eye was caught by something on the ground by the bed. It was a pair of crimson satin shoes embroidered with gold thread. And in each of the shoes was a foot.

Trinket nearly jumped out of his skin with fright. It was certainly a terrifying sight to see in the pale moonlight, a pair of amputated feet in bright red shoes! Trinket quickly figured out what had happened. The ground sloped down towards the bed, and when the Fat Sow's body had decomposed, the pus had obviously trickled down under the bed, and left her feet—the Sow's trotters!—stranded high and dry. He thought of kicking them into the ooze, but it had already dried out. The remaining powder was in the other room, in his bundle. Suddenly an impish idea entered his head.

Tamardy! Once I get out of here, I may never see the Old Whore again! Why not play one last trick on her! One that will give her a real fright!

He found one of his gowns and wrapped it round both of the amputated feet, in their shoes. Then he climbed out of the window and stole towards the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. Green and Qrey

As he approached the Empress Dowager's compound, he thought it safer to make a detour and go through the shrubbery. He was both carried away by the sheer impudence of what he was planning, and at the same time terrified of the possible consequences if

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he should get caught. Step by step he drew nearer to the Empress Dowager's bedroom. His hands were sweating with fear.

'Til just leave the trotters outside the door,' he thought to himself. 'She'll find them there

tomorrow. It's too dangerous to go inside.'

As he crept forwards, he suddenly heard a man's voice:

'What on earth can Swallow be up to? She's been away too long.'

'A man?' thought Trinket in the greatest surprise. 'In the Old Whore's bedroom? And he doesn't sound like a eunuch either. Has she got a boyfriend? Ha ha! Old Trink's about to catch the Whore in the arms of her lover!'

Actually he was far too scared to catch her doing any such thing. But his curiosity was aroused. He couldn't just leave the trotters and go.

He crawled forwards stealthily on all fours to where he had heard the voice coming from. The man coughed.

'I'm afraid things may have gone wrong. That boy's a crafty devil, I'm surprised you let Swallow go with him on her own.'

'Swallow's kungfu is ten times better than his,' replied the Empress Dowager. 'And she's very cautious. They probably had to go a long way to find the Sutra, that's all.' .

'Let's just hope they get it! If they don't. . .'

The man's tone was extremely gruff, almost threatening. Trinket was more puzzled than ever.

Who on earth would speak to her like that? Surely it can't be the Old Emperor, come back from Wutai?'

That seemed highly unlikely.

'I did everything I could,' the Empress Dowager continued. 'I could hardly go wandering off with a little eunuch myself. All my maids and eunuchs would have insisted on trailing after me.'

'Couldn't you have waited till after dark? Couldn't you have sent for me?'

'I didn't want to risk revealing your presence here.'

The man gave a hollow laugh.

'In a matter as important as this? I hardly think so. You were probably afraid I would take the credit for it.'

Trinket could control his curiosity no longer. He stole up to the window, and, peeped through a crack. This was the kind of thing he'd done plenty of times as a child at the whore-house. Then it

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had been to peep on a customer jumping on his mum; now he was spying on the Empress Dowager with her lover!

He had a side-on view of her sitting in her chair, and he could see a maid walking up and down the room, with her hands behind her back. There did not seem to be anyone else present.

'Where's the man got to?' wondered Trinket.

Then the maid turned round.

'I can't wait any longer,' she said. 'I'm going to look for myself.'

The very first syllable gave Trinket a violent shock. It was a man's voice. The man's voice that he had been listening to. He was still unable to see the speaker's face.

'I'll go with you,' said the Empress Dowager.

'Still don't trust me, do you!'

'Of course I trust you! But Swallow can be a tricky customer, and I think it would be safer if there were two of us.'

'You may be right. Let's go then.'

The Empress Dowager nodded, and went towards the bed. She lifted up the mattress and removed a wooden panel from underneath it. Something flashed in the lamplight, and then

Trinket saw her holding a short-sword. She slipped it into a sheath and put it away in a large inside pocket.

'So, she has a secret compartment in her bed!' thought Trinket. 'And keeps a sword there, ready for murderous occasions like this!'

He watched the two of them as they stole out into the night, leaving the door ajar. The lamps were still burning inside the room.

'I know,' thought Trinket with glee. Til put the Fat Sow's trotters in the Old Whore's secret compartment! When she comes back to put her sword away, she'll find them there and die of fright!'

It struck him as a brilliant plan. He crept into the room, and lifted up the mattress. Under it he found the wooden panel, a foot wide and two feet long, with a brass ring in it. He put his finger in the ring and lifted it, to reveal a rectangular compartment, within which he saw to his absolute amazement no less than three copies of the (by now familiar) Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. Two of these were the ones he had acquired from the division of Oboi's property, though they no longer had their jade cases. The third was bound in white silk, bordered with red. This must be the copy

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Trinket had heard the Old Whore talking about to Hai Dafu, the one the Old Emperor Shun Zhi had given to his favourite Lady Donggo, and which the Empress Dowager had stolen from Lady Donggo when she murdered her.

Trinket was absolutely delighted.

'Whatever it is that's so tamarly special about these Sutras, for some reason people seem to think they're worth their weight in gold! Time for old Trink to help himself to one or two, I'd say, and give the Old Whore a bit more of a scare!'

He removed the three Sutras and put them inside his jacket, then took the trotters out of the gown he had wrapped them in and placed them in the compartment, carefully replacing the wooden panel. He spread the bedding out on top of the panel, and kicked the gown under the bed. He was about to leave the room when he heard the sound of a door creaking and somebody entering.

They had returned far sooner than he had thought possible! Trinket had no time to think. He ducked terrified under the bed. He was hoping against hope that the Old Whore had come back to fetch something she had forgotten, and would leave again as soon as she had found whatever it was, to go away in search of her bete noire—himself! And he was hoping and praying that the forgotten item was not one she normally kept in her secret compartment.

The footsteps sounded light and fast, as though only one person was coming into the room. That one person seemed to be a woman, judging from the pale green slippers and silken trousers which now came into view. It was probably a maid-in-waiting. The feet approached the bed. Trinket pulled out his dagger, ready to take her life if necessary.

Then to his surprise she walked away from the bed and he heard her rummaging in drawers, opening a wardrobe door, searching for something. There was a ripping sound as she broke open a couple of boxes with some sharp implement.

This can't be one of the regular maids/ thought Trinket to himself in some alarm. Whoever she is, she seems to have come here to steal something. Perhaps the Sutras? She's obviously got some kind of a knife. I'd better be careful.'

He heard her rummaging in some boxes, then breaking open several more. Her searching became more and more frantic. Trinket had more or less decided to abandon his hiding-place, and chuck the Sutras out from under the bed for her, when he heard more

footsteps outside the room, and the Empress Dowager's voice muttering:

Til bet that slut Swallow has gone off with the Sutra herself!

The intruder heard the voice too. It was too late for her to escape. Trinket heard her open a wardrobe and jump inside, pulling the door closed after her.

Tm beginning to wonder if you ever sent Swallow to get the Sutra

It was the maid-with-a-man's-voice who spoke. 'How am I to know you're not making it up?'

'What are you trying to say? What else would I have sent her to do?'

Tve no idea what you were up to. Perhaps you just wanted to get rid of her . . .'

The Empress Dowager gave an angry snort.

Trust you, my own brother-in-arms, to say something as stupid as that! Swallow is my own sister-in-arms, how could I even think of doing such a thing?'

'You?' sneered the man's voice. 'You're a vicious scheming bitch, that's what you are! You'd stop at nothing!'

They were speaking in hushed tones, but it was the dead of night and Trinket could hear every word they said. All this talk of brothers- and sisters-in-arms had him more puzzled than ever. When the two of them entered the room, and discovered the chaos of upturned boxes and ransacked drawers, they both let out a shocked cry.

'Someone's been to steal the Sutras!' cried the Empress Dowager.

She rushed to the bed, lifted the bedding, and removed the panel. When she saw that the Sutras were gone, she let out another cry. Then she saw the trotters.

'What's this?' she gasped, horrified.

The maid-with-a-man's-voice reached into the compartment.

This,' he said, 'is a pair of women's feet.'

They're Swallow's feet!' cried the Empress Dowager. 'She's been killed!'

'So, I was right after all,' sneered the man's voice.

What do you mean?' cried the Empress Dowager, both shocked and angry.

'You are the only person who knew where the Sutras were hidden. You killed her and you put her feet in here!'

'Stop talking such utter rubbish! The thief can't be far away.

We must go after him.'

She turned and looked around the room. The wardrobe seemed to catch her eye, and she began walking slowly towards it.

By now, Trinket's heart was thumping so hard he thought it would burst out of his chest.

The flickering candlelight was reflected from the Empress Dowager's sword. He knew that when she reached the wardrobe, she would open it, she would use her sword, and the woman inside would have nowhere to escape.

The Empress Dowager was by now only two feet from the wardrobe. Suddenly there was a great crash, and the entire wardrobe came toppling down on top of her. She leapt backwards, and clothes of every colour came flying out of the wardrobe after her, winding themselves around her head. As she tried to extricate herself from the various garments, another great bundle came hurtling towards her, and Trinket heard her utter a piercing cry. In the midst of the bundle he could see a dripping sword. The woman hiding in the wardrobe had tipped it over, thrown dress after dress at the Empress Dowager, and then finally had pounced on her and struck.

The maid-with-a-man's-voice at first stood riveted to the spot. Then when she heard the

cry, she went into the attack. Trinket saw the maid in green tumble out of the bundle of clothes, and emerge still clutching her sword dripping with blood. She threw herself now at the man-maid, and the two were soon embroiled in close combat.

From under the bed Trinket watched the progress of the fight, grey trousers and black satin shoes versus green trousers and shoes. The green shoes darted in and out with lightning speed, the black shoes advanced and retreated more heavily. It was an intense struggle, but without any sound of weapons clashing. The Empress Dowager meanwhile was lying motionless on the ground, apparently dead.

One of the candles went out, and the room grew darker still. 'In a minute the other two candles will go out,' thought Trinket, 'and I'll be able to make a dash for it.'

The two were still locked in a hushed and deadly conflict. They both seemed to be afraid of arousing the Empress Dowager's maids and eunuchs. Another candle went out.

Trinket could hear bits of table and chair flying round the room. Then he saw a flash as the maid in green's sword went hurtling upwards and impaled itself in one of the beams of the roof. The two combatants were now grappling with each other hand to hand on the floor.

Trinket could see them more clearly. They were

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fighting within a small space, going for each other's eyes, chest, throat, Vital Points, wrists. Trinket prayed for the last candle to go out. Even if he had made a dash for it now, the other two would probably have been too stunned to stop him. But he did not have the courage. For a second or two the last candle guttered. The woman uttered a low cry. Then the light flared up again, and Trinket could see the 'maid' in grey trousers astride the one in green, 'her' right forearm pressed down against the other's throat. Green's left arm was also pinned to the floor and out of action, and all she could do was jab wildly with her right, each time meeting with a block from her opponent. Slowly but surely she was being throttled. Her right hand grew weaker and weaker, and she kicked out with her feet, but it was only a matter of time before it would all be over.

'Once Grey Trousers has killed her,' thought Trinket to himself, 'I'll be the next to go!'

This one thought galvanized him into action. He scuttled out from under the bed, and drove his dagger straight into Grey Trousers' back. He ripped the deadly blade upwards, opened up a large gaping wound, then leapt clear.

Grey Trousers let out a great cry, jumped in the air and lunged, grabbing Trinket's head with both 'her' hands. Trinket's tongue popped out of his mouth, and for a moment everything went black before his eyes. The maid in green came flying through the air and brought the edge of her right palm slicing down on the left side of Grey Trousers' neck. Then with her left hand she seized hold of her opponent's hair and tugged at it with all her might. The whole head of hair came away in her hand, revealing a shining bald pate. It was a wig. Grey Trousers' hands went limp, Trinket was free, and with a few convulsions Grey Trousers sank in a heap to the ground, blood gushing from the wound in 'her' back. 'She' was evidently dead.

Thank you, Goong-goong,' panted the maid in green. 'You saved my life!'

Trinket nodded, and scratched his own neck in utter perplexity. He touched the bald pate.

'So ... she ...'

'She was a man dressed up as a woman,' replied the maid in green. 'Up to no good.'

A voice could be heard outside calling for help. This time it

was neither a man's nor a woman's, but that mixture of both that characterized the voice of

a eunuch.

The maid in green put her right arm round Trinket's waist, and with her left broke a pane in the window and leapt through the opening. She took aim, and threw something out into the night. There was a nasty thud and a cry, and the eunuch fell to the ground, struck by a deadly dart.

The maid slung Trinket over her shoulder, and set off at a great pace in a northerly direction. She ran through the Gate for Nurturing Splendour. Trinket was quite a weight, and she was only slightly built herself, but she carried him as effortlessly as if he was an infant. She ran past the Rain Flower Pavilion, past the Hall of Precious Splendour, to the edge of the burning-ground by the Palace of Established Happiness. There she put him down.

The Burning-Ground

This burning-ground, just inside the Western Iron Gate, was where the Palace refuse was incinerated. At this hour of the evening it was deserted.

'Goong-goong,' said the maid in green, 'tell me your name.'

'Laurel.'

The maid let out a little gasp.

'So you're the one who caught Oboi! You're the Emperor's favourite.'

Trinket smiled modestly. He had hardly had a chance to study this maid until now. He reckoned she must be about forty years old.

'And what is your name?' he asked.

She hesitated.

'Fate has brought us together. Why should I deceive you? My name is Tao. In the Palace they call me Tao Gong-e. Tell me, what were you doing under the Empress Dowager's bed?'

'His Majesty sent me to catch Her Majesty with her lover!'

Trinket was never short of answers.

Tao gave a surprised smile.

'Did His Majesty know that the maid was a man?'

'He knew something was going on, but not the whole story.'

'Well, I've killed her now,' said Tao. 'When they find out, all hell will break loose. They'll close the Palace gates and launch a big search. I must try to get away while I can. Goong-goong, we will

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meet again some day.'

Even as she said this, they could hear the beginnings of a hue and cry, with drums and gongs sounding throughout the Palace.

'It's too late to escape. You go and pretend to join the search. I'll return to my room and go to bed.'

So saying, she picked Trinket up again and flew with him through the Palace grounds, turning past the Hall of Heroic Splendour, and westwards. Then she put him down.

'Take care!'

She set off again and was soon lost to sight.

The drums and gongs grew louder and louder, and voices could be heard shouting from all over the Palace. Trinket feared for the safety of the Little Countess and Fang Yi, and hurried back to the room where he had left them hiding.

'It's me!' he called out from the door. The two girls were scared out of their wits.

'What's happening? Have they come to get us?' whimpered the Little Countess.

'No,' replied Trinket. 'The Old Whore is dead! It's a madhouse out there! I'll be glad to get

back safe and sound to my own room!'

To your own room? But. . . we've killed two people there!' cried the Little Countess.

'Don't be afraid. Nobody knows anything about that. Let's go!'

He lifted Fang Yi onto his back, took his bundle in his left hand, and set off. They went stumbling along, and soon ran into a group of guards. Their leader held up his torch, and cried out:

'Who goes there?'

'It's me! Laurel Goong-goong!' called out Trinket. 'You'd better hurry to the Emperor's room. What's happened?'

The guard recognized Trinket and, handing the torch to one of his comrades, fell humbly to his knees.

'Laurel Goong-goong, there's been some trouble in the Empress Dowager's Palace.'

'You'd better be off then. I'll be along later.'

The guard bowed and hurried away with his men.

Luckily the girls were dressed as eunuchs, and no one had paid them any attention even though Fang Yi was slung over Trinket's shoulder.

'You two stay hidden here,' said Trinket, when they finally

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reached his apartment. 'Whatever you do, don't change out of those clothes.'

He put his bundle away in a chest, and hurried out, locking the door behind him. He then made his way towards the Emperor's sleeping quarters, in the Hall of Heavenly Purity.

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CHAPTER 12

In which Trinket confides in Kang Xi, and is sent on a Mission to the Wutai Mountains; a Lady Warrior tells him her Story, expounding the Significance of the Sutras, and warning him of Dangers Ahead; and his Party is waylaid in a Strange Place by Ten Riders of the Mystic Dragon



Trinket comes Clean

Hearing the hue and cry, Kang Xi had thrown on some clothes and risen from his bed, to receive a somewhat garbled report of the night's events from one of the guards. The first thing he said when he saw Trinket enter the room was:

'Is Her Majesty safe and sound? Tell me what has happened.' 'Her Majesty sent me back to my own room for the night, and told me to report for duty in the morning,' lied Trinket. 'I've only just heard about it. I was on my way to find out more . . .'

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'I must call on Her Majesty myself/ said Kang Xi. 'You'd better come along with me.'

Kang Xi quickly changed into a formal robe. As they hurried out together he asked Trinket why he had not gone straight to the Empress Dowager's apartment, since he was now in her service.

'I heard the gongs and all the noise and the Erst thing I thought was that another group of assassins had broken in and that you might be in danger!'

Kang Xi glanced at Trinket's dishevelled appearance, and was touched by this evidence of his friend's devotion—not for one moment guessing that it was the result of the time he had spent squashed under the Empress Dowager's bed.

They continued on their way through the Palace grounds, with an escort of eunuchs fore and aft carrying lamps, and in a little while ran into a guard who delivered a breathless report:

'Assassins have broken into the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity! A eunuch and a maid have been killed!'

'And has any harm been done to Her Majesty?' enquired Kang Xi anxiously.

'Her Majesty is safe! Colonel Dolong has her apartment surrounded with guards!'

Kang Xi breathed a sigh of relief.

'Dolong can bring in as many guards as he likes,' thought Trinket to himself. 'I'm afraid it's too late.'

It was not far to the Empress Dowager's. Their route took them past the Hall of Nurturing the Mind, and the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate. When they arrived, the place was bright as day with the light of lanterns and torches. Nothing, not even a mouse, would have been able to force its way through the phalanx of guards that surrounded it. Seeing the Emperor

approach, the guards all fell to their knees. Kang Xi waved to them to rise and walked on in. Trinket lifted the portiere, and Kang Xi stepped inside to a scene of devastation. Broken boxes and furniture littered the room, and two corpses lay in pools of blood on the ground. He was visibly shaken.

'What about Her Majesty?' he gasped, his voice trembling with terror.

A faint voice came from the bed:

'Is that the Emperor? Don't worry, I am unharmed.'

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That's the Old Whore's voice all right!' thought Trinket in utter disbelief. 'She's still alive, dammit! What an idiot I am! I should have stabbed her a few times myself to make sure! If she's alive, I'm dead meat!'

Once more his thoughts turned to escape. But he knew he'd never succeed in getting past that phalanx of guards. He stood there, his knees turning to jelly, his head swimming. He could feel himself on the verge of toppling over.

Kang Xi meanwhile had approached the bed.

'Your Majesty, I have failed in my duty! And those worthless guards deserve to be severely punished!'

'It was . . . nothing . . .' panted the Empress Dowager. 'Just a eunuch and a maid fighting . . . They ended up killing each other. It had nothing to do with the guards.'

'Are you really all right, Your Majesty?' asked Kang Xi.

'There's nothing the matter with me,' she replied. 'I'm just sick of the sight of these worthless servants of mine . . . You don't need to stay.'

Kang Xi sent for an Imperial Physician to take her pulse. All this while Trinket had been skulking behind Kang Xi, terrified in case the Empress Dowager should spot his presence or recognize his voice.

'There's no need for a doctor,' she said. 'All I need is a good sleep. Leave the two . . . corpses . . . where they are. I don't want people making a racket in here. You can go now, and tell the others to leave me alone.'

Her voice sounded very feeble. She seemed hardly able to breathe. She had clearly been seriously wounded.

Kang Xi had been about to order a full investigation into the disturbance, and into the identity of the two corpses. But he dared not go against the Empress Dowager's wishes, and withdrew meekly from her apartment, the terrified Trinket trailing behind him, sidling along close to the wall.

Most of the way back, Kang Xi had his head bowed in thought, but eventually he looked up and saw Trinket following close behind him.

'What are you doing here? Why aren't you with Her Majesty? You work for her now.'

'I thought I ought to leave her in peace. She didn't seem to want people hanging around.'

When they reached Kang Xi's apartment, the Emperor dis-

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missed all his other eunuchs, then told Trinket to stay behind. He paced up and down the room, back and forth, and from one side to the other. Finally he spoke.

'Laurel, why do you think those two would have been fighting?'

'I haven't got the slightest idea,' replied Trinket. 'Palace eunuchs and maids are like that, they're a bad-tempered lot, always fighting and arguing. You wouldn't know, they always do it behind your back.'

'Well you'd better let everyone know that this ugly business is not to be talked about. We

don't want to upset Her Majesty.'

Trinket took his leave, thinking to himself, This time I may really never see you again.' As he left the room, he turned, to see Kang Xi smiling at him.

'Come here, Laurel.'

Kang Xi opened a golden casket at the head of his bed and took out two little cakes.

'Here, you must be hungry after everything that's happened!'

Trinket looked at him. To think that one day his friend the Emperor might himself be in grave danger! The Old Whore was a ruthless enemy, and there was definitely a diabolical plot of some kind afoot in the Palace. She had kept a man hidden in her room, disguised as a woman! One day she might try to kill the Emperor himself. And concerning all of this, the Emperor—his friend the Emperor—was utterly in the dark. Suppose he himself, Trinket, were to die at the Old Whore's hands? Then there would be no one left to warn the Emperor. He had a duty to tell him everything he knew! He had visions of Kang Xi's body lying dead on the ground, his bones all broken. He suddenly burst into tears.

What's the matter?'

There was a concerned smile on the Emperor's face. He patted Trinket on the shoulder.

'You want to stay with me, don't you? Don't worry, that can be arranged. In a few days' time, when she's better, I'll have a word with her. To tell the truth, I really miss you too!'

Trinket put the cakes on the table and took hold of both of Kang Xi's hands. His voice trembled:

'Misty—can I call you that again?'

Kang Xi laughed.

'Of course you can! I always said that when there was no one

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else around we should drop the formalities. I know what it is: you want to fight, don't you? Come! On guard!'

As he said this, he turned his hands around, and adopted an upside-down grip.

'It's not that/ said Trinket. 'Fighting can wait. It's something else, something very important. Something I need to tell my dear friend Misty. Something I could never talk about to His Majesty . . . His Majesty would certainly chop my head off.'

Kang Xi found all this highly intriguing. He put his hands on Trinket's shoulders and guided him to the edge of the bed, where they sat down together side by side.

'Come on then, speak up!'

'Promise you'll be Misty, not Majesty?'

'Promise. At this moment I'm your good friend Misty, I'm no one's Majesty! I can tell you, being a Majesty all day long, without a single real friend in the world, can be very tiresome.'

'All right then,' said Trinket, 'I'll tell you. And even if you want to chop my head off, you won't be able to.'

Kang Xi smiled.

'Why ever should I want to chop your head off? Why should one friend want to kill another?'

Trinket heaved a long sigh, and began:

'Well, here goes. First of all, I'm not really Laurel. I'm not really a eunuch at all. The real Laurel is dead. I killed him.'

'What?'

Kang Xi looked utterly flabbergasted.

Trinket proceeded to give him a brief account of his life to date: where he had been born,

how he had been captured and brought into the Palace, how he had blinded Old Hai Dafu, how he had impersonated, and then killed, Laurel, and how Old Hai had taught him kungfu.

Kang Xi's first reaction was hysterical laughter.

'Tamardy! Come on then! Undo your trousers and let's have a look!'

He needed more than his friend's word. Trinket did as he was told. He untied his trousers and let them fall to the ground.

Kang Xi was now able to see with his own eyes that Trinket was decidedly overqualified for the role of eunuch . . . He roared with laughter, and made light of the whole thing.

This is a rum state of affairs! Well well well! I think we can let bygones be bygones—after all, killing a junior eunuch isn't that



serious an offence! But what about the future? We obviously can't have you, in your current state, running around the Palace like a eunuch any more, that's for sure! I shall have to see about making you an Intendant of the Palace Guards or something. Oolong's been pretty incompetent anyway/

Trinket did his trousers up again.

That's very kind of you/ he said, 'but I'm afraid I'd be no use at all as a guard. And there's something else very important I have to tell you. It's to do with Her Majesty/ 'Her Majesty? What do you mean?'

Even as he asked, Kang Xi sensed that there was worse to come.

Trinket braced himself, and launched into an account of what he had heard Old Hai and the Empress Dowager talking about, that fateful night in the garden outside the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity.

When Kang Xi learned that his own father, the Old Emperor Shun Zhi, was still alive, and that he was living as a Buddhist monk in the Pure Coolness Monastery on the Wutai Mountains, his shocked surprise and ecstatic delight can be imagined. His whole body began to tremble. He seized Trinket by both hands and asked in a shaking voice:

'Are you . . . sure all this is true? My father . . . the Old Emperor. . . still alive?'

That's what I heard them saying/ Kang Xi rose to his feet.

Why, this is the most wonderful news!' he declared in a loud voice, 'Wonderful, wonderful news! Laurel, at first light, we must go! You and I will set off for Wutai to see him! We will kneel before him, and beg him to return to the Palace!'

It had always been Kang Xi's great regret (in an otherwise pampered life) that his parents had both died when he was so young. Often he would lie awake at night weeping as he thought of them. This was the most unbelievably happy news—if he could only bring himself to believe it!

'I don't think Her Majesty would approve of such an expedition/ said Trinket. There must be some very important reason why she's been keeping you in the dark for so long/ 'What do you think it could be?'

With every second, fresh doubts were rising in his mind, and they began to cloud the unmitigated joy he had at first felt.

'I don't understand Palace affairs/ said Trinket. 'All I can do is repeat the rest of what I heard the two of them say that night.'

Then do so! At once!

Trinket went on to describe in lurid detail how the two Empresses, Shun Zhi's favourite Empress Donggo, and the Empress Kang, had met with their deaths. Kang Xi jumped to his feet and cried:

'You're saying ... the Empress Kang was murdered?'

Trinket observed the change in the Emperor's expression. His eyes were blazing with rage, his cheeks were twitching uncontrollably.

'I... I don't know for sure/ he said, somewhat shakily. 'That's just what Old Hai and Her Majesty said.'

'What exactly did they say? Go over it again.'

Trinket had an excellent memory for detail, and was a brilliant mimic. He reproduced the content and tone of the conversation to perfection.

He paused for a moment, but Kang Xi was silent. Finally he spoke.

'My own mother! Murdered!'

'Was the Empress Kang your mother?' gasped Trinket.

Kang Xi nodded.

'Go on/ he said. 'Don't leave anything out.'

There were tears streaming down his cheeks.

Trinket went on to describe the Soft Crush karate technique used to murder not only Empress Donggo, her little boy Prince Rong, and her sister the Lady Zhen, but also Empress Kang. He told how Old Hai had extracted the information from the undertaker, and had then sent the undertaker to Wutai to inform the Old Emperor; how the Old Emperor had ordered Old Hai to track down the killer; how Old Hai and the Empress Dowager had fought through the night. He did not dare admit that it was he himself who had delivered the coup de grace, but said instead that the blind old eunuch had been no match for the Empress, and that she had finally killed him.

Kang Xi struggled to compose himself. He cross-questioned Trinket again and again about that evening, and finally convinced himself that the boy was telling the truth. He looked up thoughtfully.

'Why have you kept this a secret from me until now?'

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'I was too scared/ replied Trinket. 'But just now I made up my mind: tomorrow I'm going to run away, and never come back. And then I thought of you all on your own here and I knew I had to tell you.'

'Why are you going to run away? Are you afraid of her?'

There's something else I have to tell you. That maid who's lying dead in her room, the one who was killed last night. . . that's not her maid at all, it's a man! She called him her brother-in-arms!'

After all that Kang Xi had learned during the past few minutes, he was not even especially shocked to learn that this maid was a man. After all, the eunuch in front of him was not a eunuch.

'And how do you know that?' he asked.

'It's all part of the plot/ replied Trinket. 'For some time now, the Empress Dowager has been trying to have me killed.'

He went on to tell Kang Xi how Colonel Rui, Sister Swallow (the Fat Sow), and the four

eunuchs had one after another been sent to do away with him; how he'd overheard the man's voice arguing with the Empress Dowager that evening, and how they'd ended up fighting. It was the Empress who had killed him, Trinket said, herself suffering serious wounds in the process. His story was, needless to say, larded with inventions and riddled with omissions. There was no mention, for instance, of Tao Hongying (Green Slippers), or of the fact that it was he, Trinket, who had killed Colonel Rui and the Sow, and stolen the Sutras.

Kang Xi pondered all of this.

'So, this man was some sort of brother-in-arms of Her Majesty's? It sounds as if she was acting on someone else's orders. I wonder who that person could be? Perhaps whoever it was got wind of the fact that she had this man in her bedroom . . .'

Trinket could see which direction the Emperor's thoughts were heading. In the circumstances he did not feel like engaging in any speculations as to the Old Whore's sex life. He shook his head, indicating that he had no idea who was behind it all.

'Send for Colonel Dolong/ said Kang Xi.

Trinket wondered if the Emperor was about to issue orders for the Old Whore's arrest and execution. If so, should he run for it, or stay and help his friend?

When Dolong received the Emperor's summons, he was beside himself with anxiety.

Everything seemed to be going wrong

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at the same time. Even if he managed to survive this latest crisis with his head still connected to his shoulders, it was beginning to look extremely unlikely that he would emerge with the same hat sitting on that head, or the same button of rank sitting on that hat . . . He hurried post-haste to the Hall of Heavenly Purity.

Things have calmed down at the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity,' Kang Xi informed him. 'You can dismiss your men. Her Majesty says it disturbs her to have so many guards on duty outside her apartment.'

Dolong was hugely relieved to have escaped the Emperor's wrath. He could not help noticing a strange expression on Kang Xi's face, but for the time being at least he, Dolong, had survived unscathed. He hurried off to carry out his orders.

Kang Xi still had a large number of unresolved doubts, and continued to ply Trinket with questions about the previous night's affair. Eventually word came that the guards had been dismissed.

'Come,' he said to Trinket, 'we must go back to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity under cover of darkness. I want you to come with me on a secret mission!'

In the first place, Kang Xi felt the need to see things for himself before rushing to form a judgement. He should not condemn the woman who had reared him merely on the evidence of this eunuch who had turned out not to be a eunuch at all. Secondly, this offered him a rare opportunity for adventure, something he had long felt the lack of in the confines of the Forbidden City.

'But she has already killed her brother-in-arms,' protested Trinket. 'She's probably just sleeping and regaining her strength. There won't be anything much to see.'

'We must at least look. Otherwise, how will we know there's nothing to see?'

Kang Xi slipped into some less formal attire, and put on some thin-soled cloth boots. Now he was dressed as he had been in the old days, when he and Laurel had fought. He took a short-sword from the head of the bed, and slung it from his waist. As they left by the side gate outside the Hall of Heavenly Purity, the host of guards and eunuchs on duty outside

fell to their knees.

'I want all of you to stay exactly where you are! No one is to move!' ordered the Emperor. All two hundred of them stood obediently to attention and remained rooted to the spot.

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Night Mission

All was quiet in the garden outside the Empress Dowager's apartment. Kang Xi crept to the window and listened. He heard the Empress Dowager coughing. Confused emotions surged through his breast. Part of him wanted to rush in and fling his arms around her and sob his heart out; part of him wanted to throttle her and squeeze the truth out of her. . . about his father's death, his mother's death . . . Part of him prayed that Trinket's story was false; part of him hoped that it was true. He was shaking uncontrollably, chilled to the bone, his flesh shivering.

There was still a candle burning inside, and a flickering light showed through the paper panes of the window. Kang Xi could hear a maid's voice:

'Your Majesty, I've finished the stitching.'

The Empress Dowager cleared her throat.

'Wrap the maid's body ... in the roll of bedding . . . '

'What about the eunuch's body, Your Majesty?'

'I said the maid!' snapped the Empress Dowager. 'I never said anything about the eunuch!'

'Yes Ma'am!' replied the terrified maid.

This was followed by the sound of a body being dragged across the floor.

Kang Xi could contain his curiosity no longer. He tried to peep through a crack in the wooden casement, but found that every single crack had been sealed with putty.

Remembering the age-old River and Lake trick, first told him by Trinket (who had learned it from Whiskers Mao on their way to Peking from Yangzhou), he moistened his finger with spittle and gently (and silently) rubbed a small hole in the paper window-pane.

Through his peep-hole he could now see the Empress Dowager sitting in bed behind a partly closed embroidered bed-curtain, while a young maid was trying her best to stuff a body into a large cloth sack. The body was dressed in maid's clothes, but the head was shiny and bald. The maid finally succeeded in pushing the bald pate into the sack, then after a moment's hesitation picked up the wig and threw it in too.

'Your Majesty, I've wrapped up the ... body ...'

'Have all the guards outside gone away? I thought I could hear someone'

The maid went to the door and looked outside.

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There's nobody there, Ma'am.'

'Well then, you're to drag the sack to the Lotus Pond, put four large stones inside it, and then . . . tie it up . . . ' she coughed, 'tie it up with rope and then . . . ' more coughing, 'push it in the pond.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

The maid's voice trembled with fear.

'When you've pushed it into the pond, dig up some earth and throw it into the water, so that no one can see the body.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

The maid with difficulty dragged the sack out of the room and set off into the garden.

'It seems Trinket was right about this maid being a man,' thought Kang Xi to himself. There's obviously something very shady going on, or why would she want to throw the body into a pond?'

He reached out and held Trinket's hand in his own. They could each feel how cold and clammy the other's palm was.

There was an audible splash as the body slid into the pond, followed by the sound of earth being thrown into the water. Minutes later the maid returned. Trinket had recognized her voice from the very first. It was his old flame Blossom, she of the honey-cakes.

'Did you manage it all right?' asked the Empress Dowager.

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'What will you say tomorrow if they ask you what happened to the other corpse?'

'I... I don't know anything about it. . .'

'Of course you must know something about it: you work here, you're my maid!'

'Yes! Yes, Ma'am!'

'What do you mean, "Yes!"?'

The Empress Dowager sounded angry.

'I saw the one wearing maid's clothes stand up ... She wasn't dead, she was only wounded.'

Blossom's voice trembled. 'You were asleep, Your Majesty, and I didn't want to wake you.'

The wounded maid just got up and walked out... I don't know where she went. . .'

The Empress Dowager gave a sigh.

'Yes! That's what happened! Buddha be praised! She didn't die after all, she just walked out of the room! Heaven be praised!'

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'Yes, Ma'am, Heaven be praised!' repeated the unfortunate maid. 'Earth be praised! She didn't die after all!'

A Secret Assignment

Kang Xi and Trinket stood there waiting for a while. There was no further sound. It seemed that the Empress Dowager must have gone back to sleep. They crept away silently, back to the Hall of Heavenly Purity. The contingent of two hundred guards and eunuchs was still there, standing stiffly to attention. They had taken the Emperor's orders extremely literally. 'At ease!' said Kang Xi with a laugh. But his laughing command had a bitter ring to it. He walked into his bedroom and stared deeply into Trinket's face. A tear stole down his cheek.

'So that's what she . . . she . . .'

Trinket could think of nothing to say.

Kang Xi brooded silently for a while. Then he clapped his hands. Two guards appeared in the bedroom doorway.

'I have a confidential mission for the two of you,' said Kang Xi. 'You are not to breathe a word of this to a soul, understand? I want you to go to the Lotus Pond in the garden of the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. You'll find a large sack in the pond. I want you to drag it out. Her Majesty is sleeping. Don't make a sound, don't wake her up, or I'll chop off your heads!' The two guards bowed low and went to do his bidding. Kang Xi sat on the bed deep in thought.

Presently the guards returned, dragging a large, dripping sack. They waited with it outside the bedroom door.

'Did you wake Her Majesty?' asked Kang Xi.

'No, Your Majesty!' chorused the guards.

Kang Xi nodded.

'Bring it in!'

They deposited the sack inside the room, and were dismissed.

Trinket waited until they had gone, then closed and bolted the door. He untied the sack and dragged the body out. The face was beardless, but beginning to show unmistakable signs of stubble. From this, from the protruding Adam's apple, from the flat chest, there was not the slightest doubt that this was a man, a strong, heavily-built man, a man who, judging from his bulging knuckles, had spent much time boxing. Such a person could only

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have succeeded in masquerading as a maid for a very short period. Even as a male, he was an ugly hulk.

Kang Xi bared his short-sword, and slashed open the man's trousers. What he saw there rilled him with rage. He began angrily hacking at the man's thighs and genitals, leaving them a bloody pulp.

'Her Majesty . . .' began Trinket.

'What Majesty?' cried Kang Xi indignantly. That slut drove out my father, murdered my mother, defiled the Palace with her filthy behaviour, slept with this vile creature, and you call her Majesty? I should hack her into a thousand pieces, execute her entire clan, and confiscate every penny they possess!'

Trinket let out a long breath.

'Phew!' he thought to himself. 'Maybe I'm saved from the clutches of the Old Whore after all!'

Kang Xi stabbed the body a few more times, but this was still not enough to vent his rage. He was on the point of sending his guards to arrest the Empress Dowager for questioning, but thought better of it. It would be very rash to betray the fact that he knew his father was in retreat on Wutai.

He turned impulsively to Trinket.

'Laurel, tomorrow you and I will go to the Wutai Mountains!'

'Yes, Your Majesty!'

Trinket was delighted at the idea of going on a trip with Kang Xi, and at the thought of getting out of the confines of the Forbidden City.

But Kang Xi's impulse was short-lived. He was by now sufficiently grown-up and wise to know that an Imperial Expedition of any kind would inevitably be a cumbersome affair, involving months of planning and an escort of hundreds of guards. Besides, there was always the danger that the Empress Dowager (if she was plotting something) might take advantage of his absence from Peking to usurp power. And finally, just supposing his father was not still alive, or was alive but not in the Wutai Mountains, he would make a laughing-stock of himself by going there now.

'Perhaps not,' he said, shaking his head. 'I don't think I can go. I can't leave the Capital. Laurie, you'll have to go for me.'

'Me? All on my own?'

Trinket sounded very disappointed.

'You must go. I want you to find out the truth. I want to know for sure that my father is there. Then I'll deal with that slut, and

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afterwards we can both go to Wutai without putting him in any danger.'

Trinket could see that this was a more sensible plan, and reluctantly he agreed to go.

'Court eunuchs are not normally allowed to leave Peking,' said Kang Xi, 'unless they are accompanying the Emperor. I think I'll have to make you a Palace Guard, Laurie. It'll look a bit odd, though, if you suddenly stop being a eunuch, without any explanation. I'll have to make an announcement and say that you were only pretending to be a eunuch on my orders, so as to catch that scoundrel Oboi. Now that he's out of the way, there's no need for you to pretend any more. Come to think of it, Laurie, since you're not a eunuch any more, if you studied a bit, one day I really could make you one of my Great Ministers!'

'Excellent!' cried Trinket. There's only one snag. The sight of a book gives me a terrible headache. Perhaps I could be one of your Little Ministers?'

Kang Xi sat down at a table and began writing a letter to his father. In it he begged forgiveness for not having known until now that his father was still alive, and communicated his intention of visiting him in the mountains and escorting him back to Peking, where he could once more rule over his devoted subjects.

He had reached this point in the letter, when it suddenly occurred to him that if his emissary Laurel did get captured and this letter were to fall into the wrong hands, disaster could ensue. He took the sheet of paper, lit it in the flame of a candle, and burnt it to ash. He began again. This time it was a straightforward Imperial Edict requesting all concerned to give aid to Lieutenant-Colonel Trinket Wei of the Palace Guards, by Imperial Command wearer of the Yellow Jacket, proceeding on an Imperial Commission to the Wutai Mountains.

Having written the Edict, he affixed the Imperial Seal to it, and handed it with a smile to Trinket.

There. I've given you your first official appointment. Have a look.'

Trinket blinked at the Edict. Apart from his own name there was a grand total of three characters he recognized.

'Sorry, I can't read it, Majesty. But if you gave me the appointment, it must be a good one!'

Kang Xi read the Edict aloud for his benefit. Trinket stuck his tongue out in astonishment.

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'Wow! A Lieutenant-Colonel! And wearing the Yellow Jacket! Not bad for a start!'

The Getaway

As Trinket took his leave of Kang Xi and made his way back to his own apartment, first light was dappling the eastern sky. He opened the door quietly.

Fang Yi had been awake since Trinket left them, and greeted him gladly on his return. The Little Countess awoke and sleepily informed him how worried they had both been for his safety.

'All is well!' announced Trinket. 'Now we really will be able to make our getaway at last!'

The morning bells could be heard, as the gates of the Palace were opened and courtiers began to troop in for early audience. Trinket lit a candle and inspected the two girls' disguise. It still seemed quite convincing.

The trouble is, you're both too pretty!' he quipped. 'Better rub a bit of dirt on your faces!'

The Little Countess was reluctant to do this, but Fang Yi agreed to go through the motions. Then Trinket wrapped up the three Sutras he had taken from the Empress Dowager's room, and handed Fang Yi her silver hairpin.

'I believe this is yours

She blushed and held out her hand.

'You mean you went through all that danger to get this for me . . .'

She sounded moved, and looked positively moist-eyed. She turned away in embarrassment. 'It wasn't that dangerous,' said Trinket, reflecting to himself that if he hadn't gone to get her the hairpin, none of the other things would have happened, including his entitlement to wear the Yellow Jacket!

He set off with the two of them, leaving the Forbidden City once more through the northern gate, the Gate of the Divine Warrior. In the still dim early morning light, the guards on the gate paid scant attention to the two young eunuchs accompanying the familiar figure of Laurel Goong-goong.

Once they were out in the street, Trinket hired three small sedan chairs, and told the bearers to take them to Chang'an Street West. They got out there, and Trinket hired another chair. This

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carried them to within two alleyways of the Triad headquarters, and here they dismounted. The girls told Trinket they should be making their way south to join a friend in the city of Shijiazhuang, in Hebei Province. They invited him to accompany them. Trinket (tempted though he was by the thought of roaming around the countryside with these two delectable young ladies) had other more pressing affairs to attend to. He persuaded them to come in with him for a moment, to rest and eat, and then think about their future plans.

The guard at the entrance to the Triad house let them through, and Brother Gao ushered the three of them in, looking somewhat bemused by the two new little eunuch companions that the Lodge Master had in tow. Trinket explained who they really were, and Gao promptly showed them to a seat and served them tea. He took Trinket aside.

The Helmsman has had to leave Peking early. He went last night.'

This was a huge load off Trinket's mind. He had been dreading the thought of having to face another kungfu inquisition from his Shifu; and he had been unable to resolve in his own mind his latest dilemma, whether or not to inform the Helmsman of the new (and very important) mission on which he was being sent by the Emperor. He still managed an excellent display of disappointment, and stamped his foot on the ground in mock frustration.

'Why did he have to leave in such a hurry?'

'Urgent news from Taiwan,' replied Gao. 'He was obliged to return there at once. He said that you were to be very cautious. It might be necessary for you to leave the Palace and lie low for a while.'

Trinket was touched by this concern on the part of the Helmsman.

'What's happened in Taiwan?'

There seems to be some friction within the Marshal's family. The Helmsman is needed there to restore the peace. Some of the Brothers have gone with him—Big Beaver, Brother Li, Father Obscurus. Brother Xu and I and some of the others have stayed behind here to wait for your orders.'

Trinket nodded his head.

'Ask Brother Xu to come in.'

The Eight-Armed Ape might be just the person to escort the

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two girls to Shijiazhuang, thought Trinket: he was an excellent fighter, and old enough to be their father.

Meanwhile he and the girls had a light meal of noodles. The Little Countess picked at her food.

'Are you sure you can't come with us to Shijiazhuang?' she asked.

Trinket looked at Fang Yi, who had put down her chopsticks and was staring at him with a beseeching expression. He was very tempted. He even thought of suggesting that the two of them went with him to the Wutai Mountains. But a moment's reflection sufficed to tell him that would be a crazy idea. They were both wounded, and their presence would be bound to attract attention. He sighed.

'I must finish my errand first, and then I'll come and find you. Where does your friend live in Shijiazhuang? What's his name?'

Fang Yi picked up her chopsticks and toyed with her noodles.

'He runs a donkey stable/ she said softly. 'His name is Song San, people call him Mr Gallop.'

Trinket gave a mischievous little smile.

Til be there, never fear. I'm always game for a gallop, or a canter, or even a trot, so long as I've got one of my women up in the saddle with me . . .'

He received an immediate scolding from the Little Countess for being so flippant at a time like this.

'If you're our friend,' said Fang Yi in an earnest tone of voice, 'you'll always be welcome to come and see us wherever we are. But if all you want to do is make silly remarks like that, then you might as well stay away.'

Trinket was beginning to find their constant priggishness depressing.

'If that's how you feel,' he said somewhat petulantly, 'I might as well keep my mouth shut and say nothing at all.'

Fang Yi insisted that there was nothing wrong with occasionally joking and having a little fun. But one should know where to draw the line.

'So please don't be cross with us!' The way she said this was so endearing, Trinket's spirits immediately soared again.

'How could I be cross with you?' protested Trinket. 'But what about you? Are you cross with me?'

'No one could ever really be cross with you!'

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Fang Yi's face was still smudged with dirt, but to Trinket she seemed as lovely as ever, and the sight of her gave him a warm, tingling sensation. He sat there, gazing at her, and silently drinking his noodle broth.

Presently Xu Tianchuan came in, and Trinket introduced him to the two girls. It was only now (on observing Xu's attitude of reverence, and on hearing him address Trinket as Lodge Master Wei) that they became aware of Trinket's Triad identity. Xu informed Trinket that he had escorted the Mu Family out of the city, and that they had headed south. When Fang Yi heard that the group included her beloved Liu Yizhou, her face flushed and she hung her head bashfully.

'Look how happy she is, the minute she hears that her lover is alive and well!' thought Trinket moodily.

But the thoughts running through Fang Yi's mind were somewhat different.

'If Liu is saved, then I've given my word, and I'm married to a eunuch! What kind of marriage can that ever be?'

Xu Tianchuan agreed to escort the girls to Shijiazhuang. He was delighted to have this opportunity to show his goodwill towards the Mu Family, and vowed that he would gladly

go with them all the way to Yunnan Province if need be, to show his gratitude to Lodge Master Wei.

The Little Countess at first turned her nose up at the idea of being escorted by this old man, but he was so insistent that in the end she consented. He pointed out that while they had little need of protection (given their undoubted kungfu prowess), he could still make himself useful by performing all sorts of necessary services for them, such as hiring carts, booking rooms at inns, procuring refreshments, dealing with grooms, and so on. And it would be such a pleasure, he repeated, to be able to repay Lodge Master Wei for what he'd done for him.

Xu explained to the girls how he had been savagely beaten up by the Satrap's official Lu Yifeng, and how Trinket had had a word with the Satrap's son, as a result of which Lu had had both his legs broken personally by Wu Yingxiong.

Meanwhile Brother Gao had ordered three large carts, and was waiting outside. Trinket had been wondering what to do with the five copies of the Sutra that were now in his possession: the three he had taken from the secret compartment in the Empress Dowager's bed, and the two he had previously acquired. He took Gao aside.

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'Brother Gao, a friend of mine in the Palace has been killed by the guards, and I want to bury his ashes. I'd be grateful if you could purchase a coffin for me.'

Gao assumed that the Lodge Master's friend must be a hero who had died in the cause of the Resistance, and he went out and bought the very best coffin available, made of wood from Liuzhou in the deep South. By the time he had also bought the urn, paper money, spirit tablet, spirit banner and other funeral paraphernalia, ordinary men's attire for the ladies to change into, and an assortment of snacks for them to take with them on their journey, he had spent almost all of the three hundred taels given him by Trinket. The few remaining taels went towards hiring the services of a coroner to officiate at the funeral ceremony, and a carpenter. He returned a few hours later, to find Trinket and the girls still taking a nap.

When Trinket awoke, he took the five copies of the Sutra, and the little kungfu manual given him by the Helmsman (when was he going to have time to practise, after all, on this new mission?), and wrapped them carefully in several layers of oil-cloth. Then he took a handful of ash from under the kitchen stove, and put it inside a burial urn. He rubbed some water in his eyes, and, sobbing most convincingly, made his way to the outhouse where the coffin had been placed. There, he knelt solemnly and placed the package and the urn in the coffin. Brothers Xu and Gao, and the two girls, also fell to their knees and bowed their heads, not for a moment questioning the sincerity of Trinket's grief for this departed friend of his. Finally, when the coroner had placed a layer of soft paper and lime on the contents of the coffin, and the carpenter had nailed it up and added a coat of varnish, the 'mourners' departed and the coffin was left standing on its own in the outhouse.

Departure from Peking

After another short rest, Trinket said he would accompany them some of the way, an offer gladly accepted by the two girls. They climbed into one cart, while Trinket and Xu each boarded one of the others. They left Peking by one of the eastern gates, and after travelling in an easterly direction for a while, turned south and travelled another two or three miles, when they came to a small country town. Here Brother Xu ordered the drivers to stop, and suggested that they should drink some tea in a small tea-house, and that the Lodge Master

might wish to take his leave. The waiter poured tea,

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while the drivers sat at a separate table. Xu himself wandered out to admire the view, thinking that the Lodge Master might wish to make his farewell undisturbed.

The Litde Countess spoke first.

'Brother Laurel,' she began. 'Now we know that your real name is Wei. Lodge Master Wei—what does that mean?'

The time has come to tell you the truth,' announced Trinket with a smile. 'Yes, my real name is Trinket Wei, and I am Lodge Master of the Green Wood Triad Lodge.'

The Litde Countess let out a soft sigh.

Then how did you let yourself become ... a ... Palace Eunuch? It seems such a terrible . . .'

Fang Yi knew what she meant: such a terrible shame, such a waste, to be castrated.

'It was worth it!' she put in fiercely. 'He let himself be mutilated for the Great Cause! He's a brave boy!'

If it had been as she imagined—if Trinket really had allowed himself to be castrated in order to work as a Triad spy—he would have been brave indeed!

Trinket gave a wry smile.

'Shall I tell them, or not?' he was wondering.

Even as this thought was passing through his mind, he heard a cry from the next table. Xu Tianchuan had hurled himself at one of the drivers, and brought the edge of his right palm down sharply on the man's shoulder. The driver darted to one side. As Xu's right cut through thin air, he drove his left fist into the driver's side. But the man caught the incoming fist and turned it back on itself. Xu now brought his right elbow down on the back of the man's neck, whereupon the man swept his right hand through the air and fainted at the crown of Xu's head. Xu saw the danger he was in, and leapt backwards. Each one of his moves had met with a smart riposte.

By now Xu was both angry and alarmed. This driver had clearly been planted to do some mischief. Xu gestured to Trinket, indicating that the three of them should escape while they still could. But escape was not at all what they had in mind. Fang Yi was still too weak to fight, but the Litde Countess and Trinket immediately drew their swords and joined the fray.

The driver turned around.

'Allow me to congratulate the Eight-Armed Ape on having such keen eyesight!'

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It was a high-pitched voice. The driver had a sallow, puffy face, and was dressed in dirty rags. It was hard to tell what age he was. Xu was greatly taken aback to hear himself being called by his nom de guerre.

'May I know your name?' he asked, cupping his hands in a polite gesture. 'And why you choose to disguise yourself as a driver, and play tricks on me?'

The driver laughed.

'I can assure you, it is no trick. I am a good friend of Lodge Master Wei's, and thought I should accompany him out of Peking.'

Trinket scratched his head.

'But... I don't even know who you are!' he exclaimed.

'Only last night the two of us were fighting together! How could you have forgotten me so soon!'

The truth suddenly dawned on Trinket.

'You must be Tao!'

He slipped his dagger back in his boot, and hurried over to grasp the 'driver' by the hand. It was the maid Tao Hongying, dressed as a man. She had smeared so much grease and powder on her face, that it was hard to tell what expression she wore. But there was a glint of pleasure in her eyes.

'I was concerned that the Tartars might try to intercept you. I never expected anyone to see through my disguise! Tell me, Brother Xu, what was it that gave me away?'

'It was something about the way you handled the whip,' said Xu. 'You managed to control it without ever moving your wrist or your elbow. I knew you were no ordinary driver the minute we left Peking.'

Trinket introduced Tao as a close friend of his, and Xu begged Tao's forgiveness.

'I must be leaving you all/ said Tao. She bowed, and jumped up onto the driver's seat of one of the three carts.

'Where are you going?' asked Trinket.

'Back to where I came from/ she replied enigmatically.

Trinket nodded.

'Until we meet again!'

Tao drove the cart off into the distance.

The Little Countess turned to Xu.

'Was that man's kungfu really so extraordinary?'

'I should say so/ replied Xu. 'Especially for a woman!'

'A woman? Why do you say that?'

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'Didn't you see the way she jumped up onto the cart? Did you ever see a man with a wiggle like that?'

Trinket meanwhile had fallen silent. He knew the time had come for him to leave, and he was beginning to mink with some trepidation of the dangers that lay ahead of him on the road to the Wutai Mountains. On his original journey to Peking from Yangzhou he had been accompanied by the seasoned River and Lake veteran Whiskers Mao. Since then, in the Palace, whenever danger threatened, which was often, somehow he had always managed to pull something out of the bag. This time he would be travelling alone and across unfamiliar terrain. Suddenly he felt like a scared little boy. For a moment he contemplated going back to Peking and asking Brother Gao to accompany him. But that would entail betraying the Emperor's confidence. No, mere was nothing for it; he had to do it alone.

'It's getting late, Master/ said old Xu, who still supposed that Trinket would be returning to the Capital. 'You'd best be heading back, or you'll find the city gates closed.'

'Come and visit us in Shijiazhuang when your mission is accomplished/ said the girls.

Trinket nodded. He could not bring himself to say anything, torn between the sweetness of being with them, and the bitterness of having to say goodbye.

Xu bade the girls climb into their cart, and himself sat down beside the driver. Trinket watched them as they set off towards the south. They leaned out and waved goodbye, then their cart made a turn, was obscured by a row of willow trees, and they disappeared from view.

Trinket acquires an Aunt

Trinket mounted the last cart. He instructed the driver not to return to Peking, but to head

directly west. The driver's reluctance soon evaporated at the sight of the twelve taels in Trinket's hand.

'Will this be enough for three days?'

'Yes, sir! At your service, sir!'

That night they stopped in a little market town some seven or eight miles south-west of Peking, and found lodgings at an inn. Trinket had a quick wash, and fell asleep on the heated brick bed without even bothering to eat.

He awoke early the next morning with a splitting headache.

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His eyes were so heavy that he could barely open them. His entire body was in great pain, and he could scarcely move. It was like waking into a nightmare. He tried to open his mouth and speak, but could not utter a single sound. Finally, when he was able to see, he made out the bodies of three men lying on the ground by the bed. He stared at this sight in horror, then succeeded in composing himself and struggled into a sitting position, only to become aware of another figure standing before him, looking at him and chuckling quietly. Trinket let out a little cry.

'Awake at last!' said the figure, which Trinket was enormously relieved to recognize as Tao Hongying.

'Sister . . . er, Miss Tao, what's going on?'

'Who are those three?' she asked him, by way of reply.

Trinket tried to climb down onto the floor, but promptly collapsed and had to prop himself up against the side of the bed. He could see that the three bodies were dead, but failed to recognize a single one of them.

'I don't know. Auntie Tao, it looks as if you've saved my life!'

She laughed.

'Well make up your mind! Am I to be Sister, Miss, or Auntie?'

'Auntie/ decided Trinket.

Auntie Tao proceeded to tell him what had happened. She had returned to the Palace from their last encounter at the teahouse, only to find that the Empress Dowager was still alive. (Trinket pretended to be surprised by this piece of information. Secretly he regretted not having told her the previous evening.) The Palace, she had concluded, was now altogether too dangerous a place for her. She had decided to leave immediately, disguising herself as one of the menials working in the Imperial Kitchens. It was then that she had spotted three suspicious-looking guards setting off on a mission from the Empress Dowager's apartment. She had ended up following them, and they had led her straight to this inn and to Trinket. The guards had first overpowered the innkeeper, his wife, and the tea-boy, and had then put a sleeping potion in Trinket's tea. She would have intervened, but could see that Trinket was washing and didn't want to disturb him. (Trinket recalled that the previous evening, while he was washing, he had been idly dreaming of how nice it would be if Fang Yi were his wife and had her arms around him. He vaguely remembered being aroused, and blushed to think what Auntie Tao must have seen.)

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'So, what did you do then?' asked Trinket.

'I heard them whispering in the kitchen. Their orders were to bring you back alive if possible. But come what may, they were to get hold of something you had on you. One of them said what a cocky little fellow you must be to have stolen Her Majesty's Sutra, the one

she uses every day to pray from . . . Tell me, my young friend, is it true that you took her Sutra? Your Helmsman told you to, didn't he?'

Tao was gazing deep into Trinket's eyes.

It suddenly dawned on Trinket that what Auntie Tao must have been searching for in the Dowager Empress's bedroom was a Sutra, or several copies of the Sutra. He feigned an expression of innocent incomprehension.

'What Sutra? The Helmsman isn't even a Buddhist. I've never seen him read a single Buddhist Sutra in his life.'

Auntie Tao was taken in. She was a fine fighter, but in terms of worldly guile, Trinket was far and away her superior. He had grown accustomed to dealing with treacherous Palace intrigue, while she had spent her life in the inner apartments secluded with other maids-in-waiting, and would often speak no more than a couple of sentences in the course of a whole day.

'I saw the three of them searching your belongings,' she said. They found a lot of valuables and a large sum of money. They were talking about stealing it. That put me in a rage, and I went straight in and dealt with them.'

'Damn that Old Whore!' cursed Trinket. 'She was after my money! That's why they laid a trap for me here. They would have killed me for it!'

'I don't think so,' said Tao. The Empress Dowager wanted the Sutras, not the valuables. Those Sutras are very important. My next thought was that maybe you'd given them to Xu Tianchuan for safe keeping, and that he and those two young ladies had taken them to Shijiazhuang. So I followed them south and tried to search their cart outside the inn where they were staying. But that Eight-Armed Ape spotted me before I'd even started. I had to fight with him again, and close their Vital Points, I'm afraid. I went through all their things, I even broke into the cart, but I couldn't find anything. So I came hurrying back here. Tell me, did the Emperor ever talk to you about the Sutras?'

'He did mention them,' replied Trinket. To be honest, I can't see what all the fuss is about. Even if the Old Whore spends the

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rest of her life chanting Sutras, it still won't save her from all the wicked things she's done

'What exactly did the Emperor say?'

Auntie Tao pressed Trinket for an answer.

The first time was when I went with Songgotu to look through Oboi's things. He wanted me to keep an eye open for two copies of a Sutra. Something with a Four and a Two in it..."

'Yes! That's it! The Sutra in Forty-Two Sections*. Did you find them?'

'No, / didn't. I can't even read. It was Songgotu who found them. Afterwards I handed them over to the Empress Dowager. She gave me some stupid cakes as a reward! If I'd known what a disgusting Old Whore she was, I'd have chucked the Sutras in the kitchen stove and burned them . . .'

'That would have been a tragedy!' cried Auntie Tao.

'I suppose so,' replied Trinket. 'Anyway, now the Old Whore has got four copies of the thing.'

'Four? How do you know?'

'I heard her talking about it with that man-maid of hers the other evening. There's the one she had in the first place; the two I gave her; and a fourth one which Colonel Rui stole for her from some Bannerman or other.'

'Who knows,' muttered Tao, 'she may even have others.'

She paced up and down the room.

Those Sutras are of the greatest importance. I am counting on you, my young friend, to help me steal them from her.'

'But she may die/ said Trinket in a low voice, 'and then she'll take them with her to her grave.'

That's very unlikely,' said Tao. 'What I fear is that the Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect will move first. If he should lay his hands on them, that would be a disaster of the greatest magnitude!'

This was the first time Trinket had heard tell of this leader or his sect.

'Who's he?' he asked.

Tao made no reply, but continued pacing round the room. First light was beginning to glimmer through the window.

'We had better not talk any more here. These walls have ears!'

They dragged the corpses out and lifted them onto the cart. Tao had killed them with her naked hands, and there was no trace of blood on the bodies.

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They tied up the innkeeper and your driver. We had best leave them to sort themselves out.' So saying she leapt onto the driver's seat, and the two of them drove the cart off in a westerly direction.

Two or three miles further on, Tao dumped the corpses in an abandoned grave by the roadside, and weighed them down with a few heavy rocks.

'We can carry on talking as we travel,' she said to Trinket, as they continued on their way. The road broadened into a highway, on both sides of which stretched a wide expanse of uncultivated countryside.

'You have saved my life, and I have saved yours/ said Tao. 'We are bound by a strong tie. What do you say to the idea of calling me your real Aunt? Will you let me adopt you as my nephew?'

Trinket pondered this briefly. He could not see how he could lose from the deal.

That's a wonderful idea!' he cried. 'But Auntie, before we go any further, there's one confession I have to make.'

'What's that?'

'If you're going to be my Aunt, there are things I think you ought to know about me. I don't have a real father. And my mother was a whore . . .'

Tao was momentarily taken aback by this, but then a smile of pleasure stole across her face. 'My dear boy, that needn't be an obstacle. Why, the greatest heroes have had the humblest origins: take our Founding Emperor—he was once a monk and a beggar, and that never stood in his way. I'm glad that you have been so honest with me. It shows that you really do think of me as your Aunt!'

Trinket jumped down from the cart and knocked his head on the ground.

'Nephew Trinket Wei does homage to his very own Aunt!'

Tao had been shut up all these years in the Palace, and these were the first words of affection she had heard in a very long time. She was strangely moved. She too clambered down from the cart.

'Dear nephew/ she said, a happy smile on her face, 'from this day, I have family in the world . . .'

Tears sprang to her eyes.

'See what a happy occasion this is? Look at me! I'm crying!'

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The Eight Sutras, the Dragon Line, and the Mystic Dragons

They continued slowly on their way in the cart, Auntie Tao holding the reins in her right hand, and Trinket's hand in her left.

'Dear boy/ she began, 'let me tell you something of my story. I entered Palace service when I was twelve years old. The very next year I began working for Her Highness the Princess—' 'Princess?'

'Yes. Princess Chang. The daughter of the Emperor Chong Zhen of the Ming/

'So you served in the Palace under the Ming dynasty!'

That's right. When the Emperor Chong Zhen had to leave the Palace, he cut off the Princess's arm with his sword. When I heard what was going on, I ran to save her, but I tripped and hit my head on the steps and fainted. When I came to, His Majesty and the Princess were nowhere to be seen. The Palace was all topsy-turvy. No one bothered with me. Not long after that General Bash-em and his troops broke into the Palace. Then the Tartars chased them out and took it over themselves. But that was years ago . . /

'But why did the Emperor want to cut off his own daughter's arm?'

Auntie Tao heaved a deep sigh.

'She was his favourite child, and he loved her dearly. He knew that the rebels were in Peking, and had already decided to take his own life. He was afraid for what they might do to her, so he thought to kill her.'

That must have been a pretty difficult thing to do. And then later he hung himself on Coal Hill, right?'

That's what I heard from others. The Tartars were led into Peking by Wu Sangui. Most of the Palace eunuchs and maids were dismissed as untrustworthy. I was so young, and I'd been tucked up in bed ever since my fall, so no one noticed my existence. It was only three years later that I met my Shifu.'

'Your Shifu must really be someone, to have a disciple that can fight like you!' said Trinket.

'My Shifu was also a Palace maid/ replied Auntie Tao. 'She entered the Palace on the instructions of my Grand-Shifu.'

As she said this, Auntie Tao cracked the whip loudly in the air.

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'And the reason my Shifu entered the Palace was to lay hands on the Eight Sutras.'

'Eight?'

That's right. One for each of the Banners. The Chief of each Banner—Plain White, Yellow, Red, and Blue; Bordered White, Yellow, Red, and Blue—has his own copy'

That makes sense/ said Trinket. The two I saw at Oboi's were different colours. One was yellow with a red border, one was plain white.'

'Yes. The Sutras match the colours of the Banners.'

Trinket was thinking to himself:

'I've got five of them. That means there are still three more knocking around somewhere. But I still don't know what's so special about these Sutras. I'm sure Auntie Tao knows. I must try and get it out of her somehow.'

He acted stupid again.

'So I suppose your Shifu's Shifu—your Grand-Shifu—must have been a very devout Buddhist. These Sutras must be very valuable. The writing's probably done in gold or something.'

'No, that's not it/ said Auntie Tao. 'Dear boy, what I'm going to tell you today must never go

any further than you. I want you to swear.'

Swearing was something that came easily to Trinket. He could swear his head off about something in the morning, and have forgotten all about it by afternoon. And besides, why should he want to go telling anyone else about the Sutras, when his aim was to collect the remaining three for himself?

'If I, Trinket Wei/ he began, 'should ever betray the secret of the Eight Sutras to another living soul, may I be struck dead, and die a horrible death, just like that foul turtle the Old Whore kept in her bedroom dressed up as a maid . . .'

'Come what may, one thing's for sure/ he thought to himself. 'I'll never be like that creature! No one'll catch me dressing up as a woman and getting into bed with the Old Whore!' Somehow, to Trinket's way of thinking, that thought let him off the hook....

That's a strange kind of oath to swear/ said Auntie Tao with an amused smile. Well, listen while I explain this thing to you. When the Manchus came in through the Great Pass, they never thought they would end up ruling China. There were so few of

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them. They thought they would do a bit of marauding and then head back to the North-East. So they just grabbed whatever treasure they could lay their hands on. There was a huge amount of it. The person in command of all the Manchu forces at that time was die Regent Dorgon, uncle of me Emperor Shun Zhi. But the Banners were powerful, and each Manchu Banner had its own Head. The Banners held a Council, and at the Council they drew a map of the place where they would bury their Manchu treasure. Each of die Eight Banner Heads was to keep a map—'

Trinket leapt to his feet excitedly and cried out:

'I've got it!'

The cart wobbled and he sat down again promptly.

'Each of the Eight Sutras has a map hidden in it!'

'Almost, but not quite. Who knows?' said Auntie Tao. 'Only the Eight Banner Heads who were present at the Council meeting know the exact secret. Even Princes and Great Ministers don't know. My Shifu told me that die hill where die treasure is buried lies on one of die Dragon Lines that controls die destiny of die Manchu people. This Dragon Line has enabled diem to set one of their own kind on die throne and rule China.'

'What's a Dragon Line?' asked Trinket.

'It's a line of power in die earth,' replied Tao. The Manchu ancestors were buried in this hill. Their sons and grandsons have prospered, and have conquered China. My Shifu told me, if only we can find that hill, and break the Dragon Line, not only can we throw die Tartars off the throne of China, but we can send diem back for ever to dieir homeland, to die diere. My Shifu, and my Grand-Shifu before her, gave their lives in the quest for this knowledge. That's how important it is. And somehow or other die secret lies hidden in those Eight Sutras.'

'How did your Grand-Shifu come to know all this about the Manchus?' asked Trinket.

'It's a long story. She was the daughter of a Chinese father living in the North-East. She was taken into captivity by the Head of die Bordered Blue Manchu Banner. She said that when the Manchus took Peking, there was a lot of argument among the Banner Heads. Some of them wanted to conquer the whole of China. Others thought that such a conquest would be too great an undertaking, and that it would be safer to take whatever diem could carry and go back to die North-East. In die end it was Prince Dorgon who decided: diem would stay and establish dieir dynasty,

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but at the same time they would carry off a huge treasure and bury it somewhere beyond the Pass. Then if the day ever came when they were forced to retreat, they would have something to fall back on.'

'So you mean they were afraid of us Chinese?'

'Of course they were! They still are. It's just that we won't stand up against them together.

Dear boy, you are the Emperor's favourite. If with your help we can find out where the Sutras are hidden, and get our hands on that treasure, we will be able to strike a double blow! We will have broken the Manchu Dragon Line, and with the treasure we will be able to pay for the soldiers and the weapons we need. Then we'll soon have them on the run!'

None of this patriotic fervour found much of an echo in Trinket's opportunist heart. But the thought of all that treasure lying somewhere ready for the taking . . . That was a different matter.

'Auntie,' he asked breathlessly, 'are you saying that the Sutras tell where the treasure is hidden?'

'My Shifu heard it from her Shifu,' replied Tao. 'She heard the Head of the Bordered Blue Banner one day, in a fit of drunkenness, tell his junior Princess that he would leave her something special after his death, a copy of a Sutra. He called it the very Life Blood of the Eight Banners. That was why both my Shifu and my Grand-Shifu spent their lives in search of it. My Grand-Shifu tried in vain to steal it, but there was a highly skilled fighter in the service of the Bordered Blue Banner who prevented her. When she was dying she told my Shifu to get into service in the Palace and find a way to get hold of another copy. But my Shifu discovered how difficult it was to accomplish her mission in the Palace. Then she met me, and since I had been a servant of Princess Chang, she took me as a disciple.'

'No wonder the Old Whore was so desperate to get her hands on the Sutras!' said Trinket.

'She must have been after the treasure! You'd think she had enough money of her own!'

His thoughts ran on silently:

'What about Old Hai? Why was he always asking me to get the Sutras from the Upper Library for him? Perhaps he was just using it as a way of finding out who I was working for? Or finding out who killed Princess Donggo? He probably thought they were one and the same person. I'll never know now, anyway

There may be something else in the hill,' continued Tao, 'something my Grand-Shifu didn't know about. My own Shifu felt

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ill and died in the Palace. Her parting words to me were to find the Sutras. She knew it would be too hard for me to achieve this single-handed, so I had to find a reliable disciple in the Palace, someone I could trust with the secret. It mustn't die with me.'

'Absolutely,' thought Trinket. 'We certainly wouldn't want all that treasure to fall into the wrong hands . . .'

Trinket was not much of a patriot, and he was too young to have any feelings about the terrible excesses committed by the Manchus during their conquest: the rape and pillage, and the massacres of innocent women and children. These were things he had heard of from his elders, but never witnessed for himself. In fact, in all his time as a Palace Eunuch, he had received little but kindness from the Manchus—with the exception of Old Hai (though, when all was said and done, Trinket had probably done more harm to the old eunuch than Hai had succeeded in doing to him).

'None of the Palace maids were possible disciples,' continued Auntie Tao. They all seemed either stupid, or flirtatious. How could I trust one of them with my secret? But now I have

been lucky enough to meet you. I feel so much easier in my mind, so much happier, now that I've shared the secret with you.'

'I feel so much happier too/ said Trinket. 'But not because of all that stuff about the Sutras 'Then why?'

'Because now I've got a real Auntie! We're family!'

He had a way of saying this that brought a flush of pleasure to Tao's cheeks.

'Yes, and I've got a nephew! So I'm happy too!'

But then, quite suddenly, her expression changed. Her face began to twitch, and a look of terror came into her eyes. She gazed into empty space, and when Trinket asked her what the matter was, it was as if she had heard nothing. He asked again, and she seemed to shudder.

'It's . . . nothing . . . '

Suddenly the whip fell from her hand and landed with a thud on the ground. Trinket jumped down from the cart, picked it up, and leapt back up again. Tao seemed very ill at ease. She pointed to a large tree by the roadside.

'Let's go and rest there for a while, and let the donkey eat some grass.'

The two of them descended from the cart and sat side by side in the shade of the tree.

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Tao stared abstractedly in front of her.

'Did he say anything?' she said all of a sudden. Trinket looked at her, at a loss as to what she meant.

After a long silence, she asked again: : 'Did you hear him say anything? Did his lips move?'

••• -: Trinket was beginning to find her a bit scary. He wondered if she might be possessed.

'Who, Auntie?' he asked, in a trembling voice. 'Where? When?'

Auntie Tao seemed to wake from a dream.

The man we killed, the man dressed as a woman. That evening in the Palace. Did you hear him say anything?'

Trinket heaved a sigh of relief. At least she wasn't seeing ghosts.

'You mean him! No, I didn't hear him say anything.'

Tao fell silent again. She shook her head.

'I was too weak for him, that's why. He didn't need to use anyiof their spells.'

Trinket had no idea what she was talking about. 'Forget about him, Auntie. He's dead and gone.'

'Yes,' she repeated, 'dead and gone.' • . Somehow this seemed to make her all the more frightened.

'Even his ghost is nothing to be frightened of,' said Trinket.

'It's not that. What worries me is that he may have been a disciple of the Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect. But the Dowager Empress kept calling him her brother-in-arms ... So he can't have been. Surely . . . '

She was partly talking to herself, partly calling upon Trinket to reassure her, and her voice was still trembling.

'Don't you worry, Auntie, he never said a word. Who is this Mystic Dragon Leader character anyway?'

'Leader Hong is a man of extraordinary power. You must never speak of him with disrespect. He gets to hear things. He has followers everywhere. Say a single disrespectful thing about him and . . . you're done for!'

Even as she said this she was looking furtively in every direction, as if she feared the presence of some Mystic Dragon informer.

'How can these Mystic Dragons be so powerful? Are they more powerful than the Emperor?'

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'No, they are not. But you can hide from the Emperor. You can't hide from the Dragons. They will find you wherever you go.'

'Then they must be a bit like the Triads?'

Tao shook her head.

They're not the same. The Triads are fighting for a cause. They can hold their heads up high, and everyone on River and Lake respects them. The Dragons are different.'

'You mean everyone on River and Lake is afraid of the Dragons?'

Tao pondered this briefly.

'I don't know much about River and Lake. Only what my Shifu told me. She was an outstanding fighter, and she died at the hands of one of the Dragon Sect.'

Tamardy!' burst out Trinket. Then they are our sworn enemies! We must fight them, not fear them!'

Tao shook her head again, and said slowly:

'If only it were as easy as that! My Shifu told me that their kungfu is like a chameleon, constantly changing, full of surprises. That's part of its strength. And they chant spells which boost their own courage and strike fear into the hearts of their opponents. My Grand-Shifu was up against them when she tried to get hold of the Sutra belonging to the Bordered Blue Banner. She had the upper hand, and then one of them started chanting and all her strength and courage just drained away. My Shifu was there. She saw it happen. She ran to her Shifu's aid, but no sooner did she hear the chanting than her own resolve faltered, she fell to her knees and surrendered. That is the kind of power they have!'

Trinket was privately thinking to himself:

That's because your Shifu was a woman.'

'What was it they chanted?' he asked. 'Have you ever heard one of their spells yourself?'

'No, I never have. I suspected that man-maid of being one of them, that's why I asked you if you'd heard him say anything.'

'I didn't hear anything like that,' said Trinket.

The strange thing,' said Tao, 'is that when I fought against him, I felt all my courage and strength draining away too . . .'

'How many people have you fought, Auntie?' asked Trinket. 'How many people have you killed in your life?'

Tao shook her head.

'I've never fought before.'

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'There you are. That's why. You must fight more, kill more people. Then you won't be scared.'

'You may be right. But I don't want to fight, I don't want to kill. I just want to get hold of those Sutras, as peacefully as I possibly can. Then we'll be able to break the Manchu Dragon Line. Then I'll be happy. But that Sutra from the Bordered Blue Banner is almost certainly in the hands of the Mystic Dragons, and how will we ever get it back from them?'

Her face was heavily made up, and it was hard to read her expression. But fear was visible in her eyes.

'Auntie, why don't you join the Triads?' said Trinket.

He was thinking that while she might be easily scared, the Triads would surely be more than a match for the Mystic Dragons.

Auntie Tao seemed a little taken aback by this.

Why should I?

'Because the Triad cause is the same cause as your Shifu's— to bring down the Manchus and restore the Ming!'

There may be something in that. Let's talk about it some other time. I must hurry back to the Palace. Which direction are you going in?

'Aren't you afraid of what the Old Whore might do to you?' asked Trinket in some surprise. Tao sighed.

'I've been in the Palace since I was a girl. It may not be very safe, but it's probably the only place where I can survive. I don't know my way around out here, in the outside world. I was afraid of my secret dying with me, but now I've found you and passed it on, so even if the Empress Dowager kills me, there is nothing left to fear! The Palace is big enough. I'll find somewhere to hide.'

Til come looking for you one of these days,' said Trinket. 'But first I have to complete my mission, the one given me by my Shifu.'

Auntie Tao assumed this to be Triad business, and was too discreet to enquire further.

'Where shall we meet?'

'When I come back,' said Trinket, 'I'll go to the burning-ground and make a heap of stones. In the middle of the heap of stones I'll stick a piece of wood, and on the wood I'll draw a sparrow. That will mean that I'm back, and we'll meet there that very evening.'

Auntie Tao nodded.

'Good. Be careful, my boy. River and Lake is full of danger.'

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Trinket nodded.

'And you be careful too, Auntie. That Old Whore is a vicious monster. Don't fall into any of her traps.'

They drove their cart on to the next country town, and there they parted ways, Tao turning back east towards the Capital, Trinket hiring another cart and continuing on his way westward in the direction of the Wutai Mountains. He could see her looking back after him as her cart disappeared into the distance.

'She may not be my real Auntie,' he thought to himself, 'but she certainly seems to be fond of me!'

Close Blade

Trinket dozed off as the cart rumbled along. Evening was drawing on, when he heard the sound of galloping hooves, and a horse pulled up alongside him. He heard a voice hailing the driver:

'Hey, you there! Have you got a boy in your cart?'

Trinket recognized the voice as Liu Yizhou's. He poked his head out of the cart.

'Brother Liu!' he cried amiably. 'Are you looking for me?'

He could see that Liu's face was streaked with sweat and dirt.

'I've found you at last!' cried Liu, and wheeled his horse round in front of the cart. 'Get down here at once!' he shouted, in a tone that was far from friendly.

'Brother Liu,' returned Trinket, greatly taken aback, 'what have I done wrong? Why are you angry with me?'

Liu cracked his whip violently across the head of the mule pulling Trinket's cart. The creature let out a cry of pain, and reared on its hind legs. The cart tipped backwards and the driver, who was almost thrown to the ground, cried irately:

'What are you doing that for?'

'Because I want to!' cried Liu hysterically.

He cracked his whip again, and this time coiled it around the driver's whip and hauled him onto the ground.

'Because I feel like it!'

The driver scrambled to his feet, screaming and yelping. Liu's whip had drawn blood.

Trinket reacted quickly to the danger presented by this maniac, who had no quarrel with the driver and would doubtless turn on him in a moment or two—even more viciously. He pulled his dagger from his boot and gave the mule a quick stab in the

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rump. The animal responded by bolting down the road, dragging the cart along with it. Liu abandoned the driver and galloped after the cart.

'Stay and fight, you little brat—if you've got the guts!'

Trinket poked his head out of the cart: : 'Stop chasing me, you little brat—if you've got the guts!'

Liu whipped his horse on, and was soon close behind the mule and cart. Trinket thought of hurling his dagger at Liu, but was afraid of missing and of losing his precious weapon. He urged the mule on for all he was worth. The next moment, he felt a sudden sting on his cheek. It was Liu's whip. He ducked back inside the cart. From between the curtains he could see Liu's horse pulling closer and closer. Another moment and Liu would be able to jump onto the cart. In the heat of the moment Trinket reached inside his gown and took out a lump of silver, which he hurled at Liu's horse, catching it on the left eye.

The beast was blinded instantly, and went careering off down the slope at the side, blood pouring from its wounded eye. Liu pulled hard on the reins, but his horse responded by bucking savagely and throwing him to the ground. Liu scrambled to his feet. By the time he started whistling and calling, the horse had vanished into the trees. Trinket burst out laughing.

'Brother Liu, not much of a rider, are you! Try riding a turtle instead!'

Liu ran huffing and puffing after the cart.

Trinket urged his mule on. Looking back, he saw that although Liu was now on foot, he was still drawing closer. It would be hard to throw him off. He prodded the mule again with his dagger, but this time it failed to have the desired effect. Instead the beast stamped its hooves once or twice, turned about, and began heading straight for Liu.

'No! No!' yelled Trinket. 'Wrong way!'

But the more he pulled on the reins, the more the mule hurtled towards Liu. Finally, in despair, Trinket bailed out, and ran for cover in the trees. In a matter of seconds Liu was after him, and had him pinned to the ground. Trinket had his dagger in his right hand, and Liu lost no time in seizing him by the wrist and twisting his arm round (Wandering Clouds and Flowing Water) so that the edge of Trinket's dagger was pressed against his throat. Trinket knew how sharp the dagger was. It would slice through his neck as if it were the softest bean curd.

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'Dear friend/ he pleaded, with his most fetching smile, 'please tell me what all this is about! Surely there's no need to be so rough! After all, we're almost brothers!'

Liu spat in his face.

'You, my brother? You . . . you sordid little brat! All that sweet-talking you did in the Palace, with my girl! And then you got into bed with her. . . I'll kill you!'

His brow was working with rage, his eyes were blazing, his left fist was clenched and aimed at Trinket's forehead.

So he'd found out all about Fang Yi, Trinket thought to himself. But how? However it had happened, Liu was in an extremely dangerous mood, and he was holding that dagger far too close for comfort. The slightest pressure and there would be a nasty hole in Trinket's throat.

'Can't you see that you're the one Miss Fang loves,' he said, trying to smile without moving his face any more than was absolutely necessary. 'I wouldn't have dreamed of doing anything like that to her. She wouldn't stop talking about you day and night!'

At these words Liu's rage visibly abated.

'How do you know?'

Trinket felt the knife-edge move an inch or so away from his throat.

'She begged me to rescue you, and when I managed to get you out, she was overjoyed. You should have seen her!'

Suddenly Liu flared up again.

'I don't owe you anything, you little runt! Why did you cheat my sister-in-arms into . . . agreeing to marry you?'

'I don't know what you're talking about! Who told you that? A beautiful babe like her could only marry someone handsome and brave like you . . .'

Again Liu's rage abated, again the blade moved an inch or two away.

'But do you deny it? Did she agree to marry you or didn't she?'

Trinket gave a little laugh.

'What's so funny?'

'Brother Liu,' said Trinket, 'just think for a moment: a eunuch, with a wife?'

Liu had come chasing after Trinket in a mad fit of rage. He

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had not even stopped to consider the matter calmly. Trinket's logic seemed to brighten him up no end. He laughed, but still held tightly onto Trinket's wrist.

'So why did you make her agree to it then?' he asked.

'Who told you I did?'

'I heard them talking about it together, her and the Little Countess.'

Something Wrong with the Biscuits

It transpired that on their way south to Shijiazhuang, old Xu and the two girls had run into Shaker Wu, his disciple Ao Biao (the Blue Tiger), and (Pale-Face) Liu. The three men were planning to rest awhile and recover from the beatings and torture they had suffered during their detention in the Palace. They were delighted to see the Little Countess and Fang Yi.

But Liu soon noticed a change in the way Fang behaved towards him. She hardly even looked at him, and seemed strangely cold. Whenever he tried to draw her aside, so that they could have a moment together, she seemed to cling to the Little Countess. Liu was greatly put out by this. He questioned her about it, and finally she said:

'From this day forth, we are obliged to treat each other as brother- and sister-in-arms. It must go no further than that.'

Her words had a devastating effect on Liu.

'What do you mean? Why?'

There isn't a reason,' she said coldly.

Liu took hold of her hand and pleaded with her:

'Sister-in-arms, you . . .'

She pushed him away and cried:

'Show me a little respect, please!'

Poor Liu retired to his room in the inn that night in a state of utter desolation. He tossed and turned, but he was much too distraught to sleep. Finally he got up and went outside. He happened to find himself outside the window of the room where Fang Yi and the Little Countess were staying. They were talking. This was what he heard:

'Why are you doing this to your brother-in-arms? You'll break his heart!'

The sooner it breaks, the sooner he'll get over me and feel no pain.'

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'You're not really thinking of marrying that. . . young Trinket, are you?'

'Why, do you fancy him for yourself?'

'Of course not!'

Fang Yi sighed.

'I swore an oath, by Heaven and Earth, and you were my witness.'

'I know, but I never thought he was being serious!'

'Whether he was serious or not, when a girl promises herself to a man . . . And besides . . .'

'Besides what?'

'Well, both of us have slept with him in the same bed, under the same covers . . .'

The Little Countess stifled a laugh.

'He certainly is a mischievous little imp, isn't he! He put his arms round you, and even kissed you . . .'

Fang Yi said nothing, and only sighed. Outside the window, Liu Yizhou was fit to burst. It was all he could do to remain standing upright.

'He may be young,' Fang Yi went on, 'but he has such a funny way with him! And he was good to us!'

The Little Countess laughed.

'Why, I do believe you miss him!'

'So, what if I do!'

At this point Liu keeled over and came crashing down on the window-frame.

'What was that?' cried the two girls.

Liu now had one thought only, to catch up with Trinket on his journey west and kill him! He found a horse outside the inn and galloped off, asking every cart-driver he passed if he had seen a boy on the road.

Trinket heard all this from Liu's own lips. He succeeded, by dint of various references to how much Fang Yi adored Liu, and by fabricating an account of the untold dangers she had encountered to retrieve the hairpin given her by her beloved, in inducing the gullible Liu to loosen his grip; and what with one thing and another, a few minutes later the two of them were sitting down side by side beneath a large tree by the roadside, Trinket's wrists very blue and swollen.

'You Mu folk certainly know how to squeeze!' commented Trinket wryly. That younger Bo brother, Maple, did exactly the

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same thing to me once. So, how come you were outside their window last night and heard

what they were saying? What were you doing?'

'Actually, I just went outside to have a pee,' confessed Liu.

That's a bit low, isn't it? Stinking out the fair maids' dwelling like that, when you had the whole world to choose from!'

Tell me some more about Miss Fang,' begged Liu.

Tm starving,' protested Trinket. 'Go and get me something to eat, something nice, then I might have the strength to tell you some more of Sister Fang's soppy, sickening, sweet-nothings kind of talk . . .'

Trinket was, needless to say, plotting his getaway.

'What do you mean, soppy and sickening? She never talks like that.'

'Oh really? What about stuff like this then: "My darling brother-in-arms Liu, my sweetest, dearest, most adorable, most handsome brother-in-arms . . ." Maybe you don't find that kind of thing sickening, but it makes me want to puke! Tamardy! I'd be dead embarrassed if I ever caught myself talking like that!'

Liu was, of course, ecstatic. Trinket repeated his demands for food.

'If you won't go and get some, I will!' he announced.

'No/' cried Liu, anxious to hear more recitals of Fang Yi's adoration. 'I've got some biscuits with me. Have some of these for now, and later when we get to town I'll treat you to a proper meal.'

He handed Trinket a biscuit. Trinket complained that it tasted peculiar, and rummaged around in Liu's bag for another one. He broke off a piece.

Tamardy, I'm dying for a piss!'

Trinket went behind a tree, opened his trousers, and began peeing on the ground.

When he came back, he rummaged around again among the biscuits. By now Liu was feeling hungry himself, and started munching biscuits too.

'You know/' Trinket said to Liu, 'that Fang girl is a real good-looker. If I wasn't a eunuch, I wouldn't mind marrying her myself. Anyway, I'm afraid you never will.'

'What do you mean?' cried Liu.

'Calm down. Have another biscuit.'

Tamardy! You're

As he spoke, Liu suddenly began to feel faint.

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'What's the matter?' asked Trinket. 'Aren't you feeling well? Something wrong with the biscuits?'

Liu rose to his feet, wobbled, and came crashing to the ground.

Trinket burst out laughing, and gave him a good kick on the buttocks.

'Seems your biscuits had a little something in them, my friend!'

Liu gasped, and then lost consciousness.

Trinket gave him a couple more l<icks, but Liu just lay there motionless. Trinket undid his own belt and used it to tie up Liu's legs and hands. There was a large boulder by the tree.

Trinket managed to heave this away, and excavated a hollow underneath it, until he had a hole about four feet deep. Into this he dragged Liu's body.

'Buried alive by old Trink!'

He propped him upright in the hole, and filled it with earth and rubble, so that only Liu's shoulders and head were showing.

Feeling very pleased with himself, Trinket went to a nearby stream, took off his gown and dipped it in the water. He returned, and squeezed the cold water over Liu's face.

Liu came round slowly. He saw Trinket sitting in front of him, hugging his knees and

staring at him and chuckling mischievously. He struggled to move, but to no avail.

'Don't play games with me!' he pleaded.

'Games!' cried Trinket. 'Arse-hole! Think I've got time to play games with a shit like you!'

He gave Liu a hefty kick in the face. Blood came pouring from his right cheek.

'Miss Fang's minel She's my wife, do you hear me? You shit, twisting my arm, boxing me on the ears, whipping me. Well, now it's Trink's turn! First I'm going to slice off your ears, then your nose, then cook you up in little bits . . .'

He pulled out his dagger, stooped over Liu, and ran the edge of the blade twice across his face.

Liu was terrified out of his wits.

'Dear. . . friend . . . Lodge Master . . . For the Mu Family's sake, put away your knife . . .'

'I rescued you from the Palace, but what did you do? You turned on me and wanted to kill me! It's a bit late to start talking about the Mu Family now!'

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'I did wrong!' gasped Liu. 'Forgive me!'

'Not till I've had three hundred and sixty slices at your tamardy rat-face!'

He took hold of Liu's pigtail and sliced it clean off. Then he used the blade as a razor, and shaved Liu's scalp clean.

'Filthy bald arse-hole of a monk! Just the sight of a monk like you makes me want to kill!'

Liu sniggered nervously.

'But Lodge Master, I'm not a monk . . .'

Then why shave your tamardy head, arse-hole!'

Liu was in no position to argue.

'I did wrong! Forgive me, Lodge Master, forgive me . . .'

'Then answer this question,' said Trinket. 'Whose wife is Miss Fang?'

'I... I...'

'Speak up!' shouted Trinket. He waved the dagger in front of Liu's face. Liu decided that in the circumstances prudence was definitely the best course of action. This was not the moment for heroics. The boy was only a eunuch after all. He might as well give him the semblance of a victory. He wanted to come out of this with his ears and nose intact.

'Of course she is your wife, Lodge Master Wei.'

Trinket laughed.

'She? Come on, I want a name. I can't hear your monkish mumblings.'

'Miss Fang Yi, Miss Fang, my sister-in-arms, is Lodge Master Wei's Lady Wife...'

'Let's get things straight,' Trinket continued. 'Are you my friend?'

Liu thought he saw light at the end of the tunnel.

'Why, yes!' he declared joyfully. 'I mean, I would never have dared to suggest such a thing, but if you are willing to call me your friend, Lodge Master, I consider it a great honour!'

'I am calling you my friend,' said Trinket. 'Now: on River and Lake, friends are bound by honour—am I right?'

'Oh yes, absolutely,' agreed Liu eagerly. 'Why, friendship means honour!'

'And honour means a man never meddles with his friend's wife, right? So in future, you're to stop messing around with mine. There's to be no more nonsense. I want you to swear it'

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Liu had walked straight into it. He inwardly cursed himself for being such a fool. He hesitated a moment. But then he saw Trinket's dagger glinting in front of his eyes.

'I swear! I will never harbour intentions towards Lodge Master Wei's wife!'

'If you should so much as look at her or speak to her in an improper way, what will become of you?'

'May Heaven and Earth punish me!'

'And turn you into a turtle!'

'Yes! Yes!'

'Yes what? Turn you into a what?'

'Into a turtle!'

Trinket gave a big laugh.

That's better. Maybe I'll let you off. But I think I'd better piss on your head first ..."

He slipped the dagger back down the side of his boot, and undid his trousers.

Suddenly a girl's voice was heard crying from the nearby trees:

'No! That's going too far!'

The Storm

To Trinket's surprise and delight, it was Fang Yi. A moment later, she, the Little Countess, and Xu Tianchuan came out of the trees, followed by Shaker Wu and Ao Biao.

The five of them had heard Liu Yizhou's sudden departure during the night, and had followed him. They had been hiding in the trees nearby for quite some time and had heard the entire conversation.

Trinket smiled.

'Out of respect for Mr Wu, I will spare you the humiliation of being pissed on!'

Old Xu hurried over and excavated Liu from his hole. He hauled him out, and untied the belt which bound him. Liu was overcome with shame and remorse, and hung his head, unable to look any of them in the face.

Shaker Wu gave Liu an angry dressing-down, in the course of which he disclosed to all present Liu's cowardly behaviour in the Palace, when he had been frightened by the threat of death into betraying his own name. Shaker declared that he was only refraining from punishing Liu out of respect for their mutual Shifu, Iron

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Dragon. This made Liu all the more ashamed and crestfallen, and he stood there ashen-faced and silent.

Trinket stepped in and pleaded with Shaker to let bygones be bygones.

'You see!' said Shaker Wu. 'See what a magnanimous person Lodge Master Wei is!'

'Come over here,' said Fang Yi. It was Trinket she was speaking to. There's something I want to say to you.'

Liu observed this public display of intimacy with uncontrollable jealousy. His hand went to his sword.

The next thing he heard was a resounding slap. Trinket jumped back and held his hand to his face.

What did you do that for?'

'I heard the things you said! How could you!'

Tears of anger and distress were rolling down her cheeks.

Xu Tianchuan tried to steer them away from this personal tiff, his main concern being to preserve the harmony between the Triads and the Mu Family.

'Look,' he said, 'I think we can consider Lodge Master Wei and Brother Liu's matter settled. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm hungry! Let's find somewhere we can have a good meal.'

A wind had blown up from the north-east, and big drops of rain began falling from the sky. Xu looked up into the heavens. He could see great thunder clouds rolling in. 'Looks like a storm brewing. Come, we'd better find shelter.'

Shelter

The seven of them set off on foot down the highway, in a westerly direction. The two girls had still not fully recovered their strength, and made slow progress. The rain fell ever more heavily, and there was not a dwelling in sight — not a farm, nor even so much as a simple roadside shelter. They were soon soaked to the skin.

Presently they heard the sound of rushing water, and came to a river. A few hundred yards upstream stood a small building. They hurried thankfully towards it. As they drew near, they saw that it was a small, and utterly dilapidated, temple. But it was better than nothing. At least it would afford them shelter from the rain. The door had long ago rotted away, and as they entered, a pervading smell of mould and decay assailed their nostrils.

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The walk had exhausted Fang Yi, and she was gritting her teeth to endure the pain from her wound. Old Xu smashed up a few broken pieces of furniture and lit a fire, bidding them all to dry their clothes. It was growing darker and darker, and the rain was now a deluge. Xu produced some dry wheat-cakes from his bag and handed them round.

Liu Yizhou stuffed the remains of his pigtail into his hat, and Trinket gave him a scornful look.

Night was falling. The seven of them sat on the ground around the fire. The roof of the ruined temple let in the rain and there were few patches of dry ground left. Trinket felt water dripping on him, and shifted to the left. It was just as wet there. Fang Yi told him to come over and sit next to her.

'Don't worry/ she said, 'I won't hit you!'

Trinket gave a little laugh, and sat down beside her.

Fang Yi leant and whispered something to the Little Countess, who gave a splutter of laughter, nodded, and in turn whispered to Trinket:

'Sister Fang says that now she is yours, you mustn't take it amiss if she hits you or tries to tell you what to do, like asking you to be nice to Brother Liu. Do you understand?'

'No!' whispered Trinket back. 'What does she mean by being "mine", for a start?'

The Little Countess transmitted this to Fang Yi, who gave Trinket a supercilious look and whispered to the Little Countess:

'I swore an oath. Nothing can change that. Tell him to set his mind at ease.'

Once again, the message was transmitted.

'If she's mine,' whispered Trinket to the Little Countess, 'what about you?'

She blushed, gave a disapproving little click of her tongue, and reached out to slap him.

Trinket laughed and dodged the blow, all the while nodding meaningfully towards Fang Yi, who was looking at him with a mixture of laughter and anger, her eyes flashing. She looked quite bewitching, and absolutely adorable. Trinket caught a whiff of the two girls' scent, and breathed it in with ecstasy.

Liu Yizhou had been watching all this from a distance with mounting jealousy and rage.

Unable to contain himself, he rose to his feet. He leant against one of the pillars of the temple, and there was a sudden series of crashes as several tiles fell from the roof.

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The rain and wind seemed to have dealt a final blow to the already precarious temple. Old Xu cried out:

The whole temple is going to collapse! We must get out of here!

The seven of them hurried out. They had no sooner gained open ground than they heard a great rumbling, and the entire roof of the temple caved in, together with half of the main wall.

A Haunted House

In the same instant, through the torrential rain, they heard the clattering of horses' hooves. A dozen or so horses were galloping towards them from the south-east. It was too dark to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of them.

'Aiyo!' cried one of the riders, by the sound of it an elderly man. This temple could have given us shelter, if it were still standing!

'Hey, Old Zhang,' asked one of the other riders, addressing an old peasant who had accompanied them, 'isn't there anywhere else to shelter round these parts? A cave or something?'

Old Zhang replied: . . . 'Well, in a manner of speaking there is . . .'

'Cut the crap, will you!' swore yet another of the company. 'Is there or isn't there?'

'A little way to the north-west,' replied Old Zhang, 'right on the col, there's a house. It's haunted though. No one dares go inside it . . .'

The men laughed.

'We're not afraid of ghosts! Let's go!'

'I strongly advise you gentlemen not to,' said Old Zhang. 'If we continue another ten miles or so north, we'll come to a small town.'

Ten more miles in this rain? You must be joking! Come on, there are plenty of us. We don't have to be afraid of ghosts!'

'Very well. You must go on towards the north-west, then turn, and follow the road up to the col. You can't miss it. . .'

They did not even wait for him to finish his sentence, but spurred their horses on. Old Zhang hesitated for a moment, then turned his own horse around and headed back towards the south-east.

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'Brother Wu,' said Old Xu, 'Lodge Master, what should we do?'

'As I see it. . . ' began Shaker Wu, then paused. 'I think Lodge Master Wei should be the one to decide.'

The trouble is,' replied Trinket, 'there are some ghosts you can't see. And by the time you can, it's too late!'

This was the nearest he could get to saying 'I'm scared of ghosts!'

'Ghosts don't frighten me!' cried the valiant Liu Yizhou. 'If we stay in this pouring rain much longer we'll all catch our death of cold anyway!'

Trinket could see that the Little Countess was shivering, and he certainly didn't want to be upstaged by Liu.

'All right, let's go then.'

So off they went in the direction indicated by Old Zhang, up towards the col. But soon they had lost the road, and all they could see was a great torrent of water pouring down the mountainside, through a rain-shrouded expanse of trees.

That's must be a ghost wall!' said Trinket nervously.

That/ said Old Xu, 'is simply the water rushing down the road.'

'Yes!' cried Shaker Wu, and began clambering up the course of the torrent. The others followed him.

They could hear horses neighing, and knew that the riders must be in the trees off to the side.

'I wonder what those men are up to?' brooded Xu silently to himself. But between them he thought he and Shaker Wu should be a match for any opposition, and put his best foot firmly forward, up the course of the stream and into the trees.

Presently they heard the sound of a loud knocking on a door close by. That must be the haunted house ahead of them, in among the trees. Trinket was both relieved and frightened. Suddenly he felt a soft hand reach out and take hold of his. Then a gentle voice spoke in his ear.

'Don't be afraid!'

It was Fang Yi.

The knocking continued, but there seemed to be no answer. The seven of them moved forward, until finally the outline of a large mansion loomed out of the mist. They could hear the riders crying:

'Open up! Open up! We're in need of shelter!'

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Their cries went unanswered.

There's no one here,' said one of them.

'Of course not! Old Zhang said it was haunted. No one would be foolish enough to come and live here. Let's climb in!'

There was a flash as two of them drew their swords and leapt in through a hole in the outer wall. They opened up the main door of the house from the inside, and the rest of their party surged in.

These men look like common outlaws,' thought Xu Tianchuan to himself. They certainly don't give the impression of being very good fighters.'

The seven of them followed the others into the house. Inside the main door lay a sizeable courtyard, and beyond that a large hall.

One of the riders had kindled a flame, and seeing candles on a table, proceeded to light them. As the hall lit up, they could all see that it was furnished with quality rosewood furniture. It seemed to be the home of a family of some style.

There's not a speck of dust on the furniture,' muttered old Xu quietly to himself. 'And the floor has been swept. And yet there's nobody here!'

One of the riders exclaimed:

This place is so neat and tidy. There must be someone living here.'

'Is there anyone there? Is there anyone at home?' cried another.

His voice echoed in the great hall.

When the echo died away, there was no sound apart from that of the pelting rain. They all looked at one another apprehensively.

One of the riders, a white-haired old man, had noticed Xu Tianchuan:

'Would you all be friends of River and Lake?'

'My name is Xu,' he replied. These are relatives of mine. We were travelling to Shanxi to visit cousins of ours, when we ran into this storm. May I ask your name?'

The old man merely nodded. The party of seven seemed to match Xu's description (old men and young men, women, a child). But he did not reply to Xu's question and give his name.

Instead he muttered:

This place seems a bit weird.

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'Is there anyone there?' called out another of the riders. 'Is everyone dead?'

Still no sound.

The old man sat down in one of the chairs and gestured to six of his men.

'You lot go into the back and have a look around!'

The six drew their swords and went to do his bidding, making their way cautiously into the depths of the house, stooping and walking slowly. From the hall the rest of them could hear the sound of doors being kicked open, and questions being shouted out. Nothing untoward seemed to happen, and gradually the sounds became fainter as the men penetrated deeper and deeper into the mansion.

The old man now gave orders to four others to find some wood, make torches, and follow the first six inside. They too obeyed his commands.

Trinket and his six companions sat down on the ledge of a long window, none of them daring to say a word. Altogether ten of the riding party had now departed into the inner recesses of the house, leaving eight in the hall. They wore plain cloth gowns, and to Old Xu's experienced eyes seemed like members of some underground fraternity or other. They could have been members of a security escort, if it were not for the fact that they did not seem to have anything to escort. He could not quite make them out.

At that moment, the advance party of six riders returned, looking extremely spooked. There's no one there. But the place is all neat and tidy. There's bedding on the beds, and shoes on the floor—women's shoes. And the wardrobes are full of women's clothes. Not a single thing for men!'

'Female ghosts!' cried Liu loudly. The house is haunted by the ghosts of dead women!'

They all turned simultaneously and looked at him. No one breathed a word.

Suddenly they heard cries coming from the second search party. The old man leapt to his feet, and the four came running back into the hall. Their torches were all extinguished.

'Spooks! Dead men everywhere!' they cried.

There was terror written on their faces.

The old man scowled.

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'Stop panicking! I thought for a moment you had run into a real enemy! There's nothing to fear from a dead man!'

'But they're . . . spooky!'

'What do you mean, spooky?'

'One of the rooms on the right is full of... hundreds of shrines to the dead!'

'Are there any bodies or coffins?' asked the old man.

Two of the men exchanged glances.

'We couldn't see too clearly,' they both replied at the same time. 'We don't think so.'

'Light some more torches, and we will all go in together. It's probably just something perfectly ordinary, like an ancestral shrine.'

The old man tried to sound casual, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice.

His men set about breaking up chairs and tables, and soon they had all set off into the back of the house with blazing torches.

Til go with them and have a look,' said Xu Tianchuan. 'You stay here and wait for me.'

He followed after the men.

Ao Biao turned to Shaker Wu.

'Shifu, what kind of men do you think these riders are?'

Shaker Wu shook his head.

'From their accents, I'd say they were from Shandong or from just north of the Pass.

Probably smugglers, though I can't see what they're smuggling.'

'They're nothing to be afraid of. It's the women ghosts you should be worried about

Liu Yizhou stuck his tongue out at Trinket as he said this. Trinket shuddered, and held Fang Yi's hand tightly. His own palms were clammy with fear.

'Brother Liu,' said the Little Countess, in a shaky voice, 'will you please stop trying to scare us!'

'You've got nothing to be scared of, Countess/ replied Liu. Those nasty ghosts wouldn't come anywhere near a young lady of noble blood like yourself. No, the people they hate the most are the ones who are neither fish nor fowl, neither man nor woman— eunuchs, for instance . . .'

Fang Yi frowned angrily and wanted to say something, but restrained herself.

After a while they heard footsteps again and the search party

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returned. Trinket breathed a sigh of relief. Xu reported back to his friends in hushed tones. There are seven or eight rooms, and each one is filled with shrines to the departed. Each shrine contains the spirit tablets of between five and eight people. They would seem to be family shrines.'

'Ha ha!' chuckled Liu Yizhou. 'So we're talking about a couple of hundred nasty ghosts haunting the place!'

Xu shook his head gravely.

'I don't know. The strangest thing of all,' he continued, 'is that in front of each shrine there are candles burning.'

Trinket and the two girls simultaneously let out a cry of terror.

'When we went in just now,' put in one of the original advance party, 'there weren't any candles lit.'

'Are you sure you are remembering correctly?' asked the old man.

Four of the men exchanged doubtful glances, and shook their heads.

These aren't ghosts/ said the old man. This is some sort of wizard! To light more than thirty candles in a matter of seconds! What do you make of this, Mr Xu?'

Xu adopted an expression of utter bewilderment.

'Perhaps we have disturbed the master of the house in some way . . . Maybe we should kowtow at the shrines!'

Just then, clearly audible above the driving rain, they heard a sound coming from the eastern wing of the house. It was the sound of women's voices wailing. It was a desolate, piercing sound.

Trinket stood there with his mouth gaping, his face paralysed with fear.

They all looked at one another in terror. Seconds later another sound reached them, this time from the western wing. It was the sound of another group of women weeping and sobbing. Liu Yizhou, Ao Biao, and two of the riders cried with one voice:

'Ghosts!'

The old man said something to try and calm them down. Then he turned to Xu Tianchuan.

Tell me,' he said, 'if you are all from one family, how is it that some of you speak with a Peking accent, some with a Yunnan accent?'

Xu concocted a plausible enough story about the family's

origins and how they were on their way to Shanxi to seek out his younger sister-in-law's family.

Tell me,' continued the old man, 'on your way here, did you come across a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old eunuch?'

Xu's face betrayed nothing. His companions, when they heard this, registered visible shock, but luckily no one was looking at them.

There are so many eunuchs in Peking,' replied Xu. We must have encountered quite a few of them on our way out of the city.'

'I said on your way here,' insisted the old man, 'not in Peking.'

'My dear sir,' said Xu, 'you must surely know that eunuchs are not allowed out of the Capital, on pain of death.'

'Perhaps this one was in disguise,' said the old man, with a humph.

Xu shook his head. He was thinking to himself that these people were most probably after Lodge Master Wei, and that it was his duty to ferret out of them who exactly they were.

There is one Palace Eunuch who has become very famous,' he ventured. The one who succeeded in killing that monster Oboi.'

The old man stared at Xu wide-eyed.

'You mean Laurel Goong-goong?'

'Of course!' replied Xu. 'What courage! What kungfu!'

'What does he look like? Have you ever seen him?'

'He's always gadding about the Capital. Just about everyone in Peking has seen him. Fat, swarthy little fellow. Looks almost twenty. You'd never take him for a fifteen-year-old.'

Fang Yi gripped Trinket's hand tightly. The Little Countess nudged him in the small of the back with her elbow. They were both silently chuckling to themselves. Trinket was so frightened to hear himself talked about like this, he had almost forgotten to be afraid of ghosts.

'Really?' returned the old man. 'I'd heard quite differently. I'd heard he looked about thirteen or fourteen. A shifty little brat—a bit like this nephew of yours, in fact!'

He was alluding to (and looking at) Trinket.

'I've heard that Laurel Goong-goong is a low-down little brat too,' piped up Liu Yizhou, 'forever putting drugs in people's drinks. In fact, that's how he managed to kill Oboi. He'd never have done it otherwise—he's such a pathetic little coward!'

Liu turned to Trinket with a giggle.

'Don't you agree, cousin?'

Shaker Wu flew into a rage at Liu's continued provocation of Trinket, and he lashed out at him, using a move known in the Mu Family as Emerald Cockerel Spreads Feathers. Liu darted out of the way, responding with another classic Mu Family move, Gold Horse Neighs in the Wind. Between them, the two men were blatantly betraying their Mu Family origins. The old man leapt to his feet. His followers followed his example.

'Not a single one of them is to escape!' cried the old man.

Shaker Wu drew a short-sword from inside his jacket, and with a shake of the head to the left, had soon hacked down one of the riders. Then as he shook to the right, another rider received Wu's sword in the throat and crashed to the ground.

The old man now produced a pair of fighting-clubs, and clanged them together menacingly.

He swung them through the air, narrowly missing Shaker's throat with the left, and grazing Xu Tianchuan's chest with the right. Xu darted to one side, and as he did so poked at one of the men's eyes with his left hand. The man ducked. Xu seized hold of the man's short-sword and turned it back on him. The man lurched forwards with the blade in his belly. Ao Biao was also engaged in close combat, while Liu Yizhou was busy cracking his whip.

A moment later, the old man leapt back with a crash of his clubs, and all of his men instantly fell into formation behind him. The speed and discipline with which they did this showed it to be a well-drilled manoeuvre. Xu Tianchuan and Shaker Wu gave a start and withdrew a few paces, but Ao Biao rushed impetuously forward. Four blades protruded from the phalanx, while longer pikes protected their flanks. Ao Biao went down with wounds to both of his shoulders, shouting with pain.

'Retreat!' cried Shaker Wu, and Ao Biao scrambled out of danger.

Xu Tianchuan was standing protectively in front of Trinket and the girls, watching how the enemy formation would deploy itself next. Things seemed to be taking a nasty turn. At this point the old man brandished his clubs in the air and gave a mighty cry:

'Long Life to Our Great Leader Hong! Blessings be on Him!'

'Long Life to Our Great Leader Hong! Blessings be on Him!' came back the thundering chorus from his men.

Xu stared at them aghast. But at the words 'the Leader',

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Trinket suddenly remembered his conversation with Auntie Tao, and her terror-stricken face.

'They're from the Sect of the Mystic Dragon!' he cried. 'They're Dragons!'

The old rider with the clubs paled.

'How do you know that name?'

He raised his right hand and chanted:

'All Hail to Our Supreme and All-Powerful Leader Hong! Victory is Ours!'

The chanting was succeeding in unnerving his opponents.

'That's part of their technique!' cried Trinket. 'That's what they do! They chant spells! Don't fall for it! Don't give up! Fight back!'

But now it was the entire phalanx chanting with one voice in one great crescendo, louder and louder, faster and faster.

'Our Great Leader Hong will protect us! Our Courage will Multiply! We know no fear! One of us will defeat a hundred of the enemy, a hundred of us will defeat ten thousand! Our Leader Hong's eyes are as the Lightning in the Heavens! They shine upon the Four Corners of the Earth! Willingly we die for Our Leader! He will take us all to Heaven!'

And then in one climactic burst of sound they surged forward.

Shaker Wu, Xu Tianchuan, and the others stood their ground courageously. But the chanting had given the Dragons an added ferocity and power. In a matter of minutes Ao Biao and Liu Yizhou had been hacked down, and Trinket and the two girls were also knocked to the ground. Fang Yi received a wound in the leg, the Little Countess in the arm, and Trinket a pike in the back. The blow was strong enough to send him toppling, though he was protected from serious injury by his trusty magic waistcoat. Next Xu and Shaker were wounded, and the old man leading the Mystic Dragons closed their points and immobilized them.

'Our Great Leader Hong is All-Powerful! Long Life to Our Great Leader Hong!'

The chant rang out once more. Then, in another perfectly coordinated movement, the men all sat down. Sweat was pouring from their brows, and they were panting fiercely. They had

obviously drained themselves in the intensity of the onslaught. The whole battle had been decided in no more than the length of time it would take a man to drink a cup of tea. But they looked like warriors who had been fighting for several hours.

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'No wonder Auntie Tao was so scared of them!' thought Trinket to himself. They're using black magic! They really are All-Powerful!

The old man sat down on a chair and composed himself. After a while he stood up again, wiped the sweat from his brow, and began pacing up and down the hall. Gradually his men also rose to their feet.

The old man addressed Xu Tianchuan:

'Repeat after me: Our Great Leader Hong is All-Powerful! Long Life to our Leader!'

'Me, chant that mumbo-jumbo of yours!' cried Xu. 'You must be dreaming!'

The old man swung one of his clubs and struck Xu full on the forehead. Blood gushed down his face.

'Bastard!' yelled Xu. 'Sorcerer!'

The old man turned next to Shaker Wu.

'Repeat after me . . .'

Shaker was already wagging his head in defiance. The old man swung his club again, and left Shaker's forehead a bloody mess. He turned next to Ao Biao.

'Fuck your mother!' cried the ever impetuous Ao Biao. 'And a dog's life to your prick of a leader!'

This sent the old man into a rage. He brought his club down with a mighty crash, and Ao Biao fell unconscious to the ground.

'Bravely done, Biao!' yelled Shaker. 'As for you, you pack of arse-lickers, if you've any real courage, why not kill the lot of us!'

The old man raised his club again and turned to Liu Yizhou.

'Repeat after me: Long Life to Our Leader Hong!'

'Long . . . Long . . .'

The old man brought his club up to Liu's forehead and gave him a little thump.

'Come on!' he yelled.

'I am! Long . . . Long Life to Our Leader Hong!'

The old man laughed.

'I'm glad to see that at least one of you has some sense! No need to brain this one!'

He advanced on Trinket.

'Say after me . . .'

There's no need for you to say it,' replied Trinket.

'Heh? Being cheeky?'

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The old man raised his club.

'Long Life to Our Great Leader Wei!' Trinket shouted, and promptly rattled off a whole lot more. 'Our Great Leader will protect us! Our Leader Wei's eyes are as the Lightning in the Heavens! They shine upon the Four Corners of the Earth! Willingly we die for Our Leader! He will take us all to Heaven!'

Each time he somehow managed to mumble the 'Wei' part so that it came out as a sort of nasal grunt that was indistinguishable from 'Hong'. The old man looked pleased.

'Good boy!'

He walked up to Fang Yi and put his hand to her chin.
'Not a bad looker! Say it for us, there's a good girl!'
She twisted her face away and cried:
'I won't!'
'Let me do it for her!' cried Trinket.
'Who asked you to say anything?'
The old man threatened to smash Fang Yi in the face, but in the end contented himself with hitting her on the shoulder. She gave a cry of pain.
One of the men called out:
'If she won't say it, let's strip her clothes off!'
'Yes!' bawled the others. 'Strip her!'
'Leave the girl alone!' cried Liu. 'It's the eunuch you really want. I'll tell you where he is!'
'So you know, do you?' snapped the old man. 'Hurry up then, tell us!'
'Only if you promise to leave the girl alone,' said Liu.
'Brother Liu/ said Fang Yi sharply, 'I don't need your help!'
The old man laughed.
'Very well then, I give you my word. We won't touch the girl.'
'Can I trust you?' asked Liu.
'Can you trust me!' growled the old man. 'Come on now. We're after the eunuch who killed Oboi. The Emperor's favourite. His name is Laurel Goong-goong. Where is he?'
'He's here ..." said Liu, 'and then again he's not
The old man jumped up. He pointed at Trinket.
'It's him, isn't it!'
He was beginning to be quite overwrought.
'How could someone like him have killed Oboi?' said Fang Yi. 'Don't take any notice of that man—he's just talking nonsense!'

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'You're right,' said Liu. 'I am. He could never have done it— without using drugs!'
'Did you kill Oboi?' the old man asked Trinket, torn between doubt and belief.
'So what if I did?' replied Trinket. 'And so what if I didn't?'
'Damn you!' cried the old man. 'I thought from the start there was something queer about you. Search him!'
Two of his men came up and untied Trinket's bag, spreading the contents out on the table. The bag disgorged a quantity of precious stones and other valuable items, and then bundles of notes, big denominations, hundreds of thousands of taels' worth. The old man stared at them in amazement.
'Just the sort of thing I'd expect to find on a Palace Eunuch! So you're young Laurel Goong-goong men! Take him next door for questioning!'
'Don't...'
It was Fang Yi who spoke.
'Don't be hard on him!'
The Little Countess also let out a pained cry, and started sobbing.
One of the men now seized Trinket by the scruff of the neck, two others gathered up his belongings, and another carried a candle. They hauled him off through the back courtyard, and into a side-room. The old man followed them into the room, and then dismissed everyone except Trinket.

The Inquisition

When they were alone, the old man began walking up and down the room, rubbing his hands together in gleeful anticipation.

'So, we meet at last!'

'Yes, we do! At long, long last!' returned Trinket.

'Eh?'

The old man could not understand what was behind this puzzling retort of Trinket's. Little did he know that Trinket was (as usual in such a crisis) doing no more than playing for time.

Tell me,' the old man continued, 'would you happen to be on your way to the Wutai Mountains?'

'Damn it!' thought Trinket. 'He seems to know everything! This is going to be harder than I thought.'

'I was most impressed,' said Trinket out loud, 'by that display

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of Mystic Dragon chanting just now! Most impressed! I'd heard of it, of course, but this is the first time I've actually heard it with my own ears! Most impressive!'

'Where had you heard of the Mystic Dragon Sect, if I may ask?'" countered the old man.

Trinket improvised without a moment's hesitation: 'It was the Satrap's son, Wu Yingxiong, who told me about it. His father sent him to Peking with several top fighters trained in the Golden Gate School from Liaodong. Their mission was to exterminate the Mystic Dragons. I remember them talking about the Great Leader Hong, the Ail-Powerful, and all the Sect members under his command. One of the Sect worked for the Head of the Bordered Blue Banner, and managed to get hold of a copy of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. Excellent kungfu!'

Trinket was a veteran Grand Master of the Liars' Lodge. In order to deceive effectively, he knew that it was necessary to season every spoonful of falsehood with the odd grain of carefully selected truth.

The old man was thinking to himself:

'How can he know so much! Why, even I only got wind of the Bordered Blue Banner job a month ago. And that was by accident! It was supposed to be a top secret operation!'

'But the Satrap has no cause to exterminate the Mystic Dragons,' he said to Trinket. 'Why should he attempt anything so foolish?'

'Of course he has nothing against the Mystic Dragons themselves,' Trinket hastened to explain. 'In fact, Wu's men said all sorts of very complimentary things about the Great Leader. No, it's the Sutra they're after. That's the great prize. By the way, I also seem to remember you have a woman member working in the Palace? A fat woman by the name of Swallow Liu?'

The old man seemed genuinely taken aback by this. 'How could you possibly know that?'

Trinket was merely snatching at even the smallest detail in order to construct some credentials, some sort of connection, however tenuous, between himself and the Sect. He swiftly pursued this promising tack.

'Oh, Sister Swallow and I were especially close. Once, when she'd offended the Empress Dowager, I even saved her life. I hid her under a bed. The Empress Dowager searched everywhere but couldn't find her. Sister Swallow was so grateful. In fact, she

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wanted me to join the Mystic Dragons myself. She said the Great Leader could do with a young person like me. He'd be sure to reward me.'

The old man humphed. He was almost beginning to find the boy plausible.

'But why would Her Majesty want to kill Sister Swallow? Weren't they . . . partners, in a sense?'

'Why yes,' said Trinket, 'in a sense they were. At the beginning anyhow. So why did Her Majesty want to kill her? You may well ask. Trouble is, that's absolutely top secret. She made me promise not to tell another living soul. So I really can't tell you. I'm awfully sorry. Then there's that other person who popped up in Maternal Tranquillity recently: a man dressed up as a woman, a bald man ..."

'Are you talking about Deng Bingchun?' gasped the old man. 'Do you mean to say you know about Comrade Deng's secret mission too!'

Trinket had no idea what the cross-dressing maid's name was, but nothing ruffled his all-knowing expression. He smiled.

'Top secret! Not a word of it to anyone. Otherwise, you might be in grave trouble with the Great Leader yourself . . .'

Trinket had worked in the Forbidden City long enough to know that betraying a secret was a misdemeanour punishable at the worst with death, at the least with dishonour. That was why everyone carried on so sneakily in the Palace. No one wanted to run the risk of betraying anyone else. People acted as if they knew everything, while at the same time divulging nothing. This was the basic ploy he was now trying on the old man, and it seemed to be working a treat. When it came down to it, most of the same techniques worked in the Palace as on River and Lake. It was just that in the Palace people were a bit more refined about being underhand.

The old man had been quite thrown by Trinket's display of inside Mystic Dragon knowledge. He was not sure how to proceed. He laughed nervously.

'And what did you say to Comrade Deng?'

'I'm not allowed to tell anyone,' replied Trinket. 'Of course, I'll be making a full report of what I said to him, and of the message he gave me, when I see the Great Leader in person . . .'

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'Of course!' the old man hastily replied. He could not make out who on earth this boy really was. He tried a placatory smile, before venturing:

'I suppose you're on your way to the Wutai Mountains to see Colonel Rui. . .'

'Hm,' thought Trinket. 'So he knows about Wutai and Colonel Rui. The Old Whore must have told him. She and that bald-headed Deng character are obviously mixed up with the Mystic Dragons. Watch it, old Trink! Let that lot get their hands on you, and you're history!' He feigned surprise.

'My goodness, you are well informed! You even know about Colonel Rui!'

The old man smiled.

'And I know about someone else,' he said. 'Someone much, much more important than Colonel Rui. . .'

'Drat!' Trinket cursed silently. The Old Whore has told him everything. He obviously means the Old Emperor!'

Tell me,' said the old man, beginning to sound positively ingratiating, 'were you ordered to go to Wutai, or are you going on your own accord?'

'What do you take me for?' exclaimed Trinket. 'Since when have Palace Eunuchs gone cruising off on out-of-town jaunts? Since when have they done anything but take orders?'

'So it was His Majesty who sent you?'

Trinket looked his most perplexed.

'His Majesty? Ha ha! I'm afraid this time your information leaves a lot to be desired. How would he know about Wutai?'

Then who was it?'

'Guess.'

'You don't mean ... It can't be ... Her Majesty?'

Trinket laughed.

'You are a clever chap! Right first time! Only two living souls know about Wutai—and one ghost.'

'And who are they?'

'In the world of the living, Her Majesty and yours truly,' replied Trinket. 'In the world of the dead, a certain Hai Goong-goong. He's the ghost. Her Majesty used Soft Crush karate to bump him off.'

The old man's fleshy jowls twitched.

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'Soft Crush, Soft Crush/ he murmured to himself, almost mesmerized by the words. 'So it was Her Majesty that sent you. But why?'

Trinket gave a canny smile.

'Seeing you and Her Majesty are so close, why not go and ask her yourself?'

If Trinket had said that to him when they had first entered the room, the old man would most probably have given him a good box on the ears. But by now he was too confused to know what to do or say.

'Sent by Her Majesty ..." he muttered to himself.

'She told me that she's already sent word to the Great Leader,' Trinket went on, 'and that he is extremely pleased with the way things are going. Once the mission is successfully accomplished, the Great Leader is sure to reward me highly!'

He could tell that the old man was absolutely petrified by the slightest mention of the Great Leader, and was exploiting this to its fullest.

'And those six people outside are under your command?' asked the old man.

'They're all from the Palace,' replied Trinket. 'The two girls work for Her Majesty, the four men are all guards. Her Majesty sent them with me. But they don't know anything about the Mystic Dragons. Her Majesty has never mentioned it to them . . .'

Trinket saw a sly smile creep across the old man's face.

'What's the matter? Don't you believe me?' He had clearly put his foot in it.

The Mu Family fight for the Ming cause/ sneered the old man. 'They would never work as guards for the Emperor! You're lying!'

Trinket gave a loud laugh.

'What's so funny?'

The old man did not know that this was another of Trinket's standard ploys. When caught out with a monster fib, he laughed, thereby buying precious time. He laughed again.

'What you obviously don't know is that the Mu Family's real enemy, the person they really hate, is not the Empress Dowager at all—'

'Of course I know that!' snapped the old man. 'The person they hate the most is Satrap Wu.'

'Well done!' cried Trinket, feigning the utmost surprise. 'I am

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impressed! You see, the Mu Family don't mind working for Her Majesty if it means they can wipe out the Satrap and his entire camp, down to the last chicken and the last dog! Why, they even have their men planted in the Satrap's headquarters! But you must promise me not to tell a soul!

The old man nodded. But his confidence in Trinket's story had been seriously dented. He decided to go out and cross-question the others.

'Wait a minute!' cried Trinket, as the old man turned to go. 'Where are you off to? This house is haunted . . . You're not going to leave me here all on my own, are you? I can't even move/

'I'll be back in a minute/

The old man barred the door after him, and hurried to the front hall.

Trinket's hands were clammy with terror. The wavering light of the candles threw dancing shadows on the walls. Each shadow seemed to be a ghost. There was a deathly hush in the room. Then all of a sudden the silence was broken by a great cry from outside.

'Where are you all?'

It was the old man's voice. It was shaking with fear, and Trinket nearly fainted.

'Have . . . have . . . they disappeared?' he asked. 'Where are you?' the old man repeated.

'Where have you gone?'

Silence. Followed by the sound of running, and door after door being kicked closed, then more running, a hurried fumbling with the door-bar, and someone burst into the room. Trinket let out a shriek. It was the old man, terrified out of his wits, his face drained of colour, his eyes bulging out of their sockets.

'They've . . . they've all vanished! Every one of them!' Then they've been carried away by ... ghosts!' cried Trinket. 'Quick, help me, let's run for it!'

The old man slumped across the table, and the table started shaking. Then he rose and made for the doorway again, still crying: 'Where are you? Where have you gone!' He stood still and listened. A faint sound of sobbing could be heard, carried on the night air. Women sobbing. The old man hesitated a moment, then retreated back into the room, barring the door again, from the inside. He looked at Trinket. The boy's eyes were popping out of his head with sheer terror. Trinket stared back at the old man, who was grinding his teeth, his face whiter than ever.

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The rain, which had let up for a while, now began falling heavily on the roof again.

Suddenly, through the rain, they heard a woman's voice from the outer hall—quiet, but distinct: 'Come out here, old man!'

It was not the voice of an old crone; but it wasn't a girlish voice either. It was definitely neither Fang Yi nor the Little Countess. There was something horribly chilling about the sound. 'A woman ghost!' whispered Trinket hoarsely. 'Who is calling for me?' stammered the old man. There was no reply. The only sound was the rain drumming on the roof. Trinket and the old man stared at one another, both shivering with terror.

A few minutes passed. Then they heard the same voice again. 'Come out here, old man!'

The old man finally plucked up his courage and kicked at the door. It was still held fast by the bar. He brought down his right palm with a chopping motion, and split the bar in two. Then he shot out through the doorway.

'Don't go!' Trinket cried after him.

But the old man was already running full pelt out towards the hall.

A Ghost?

There was no sound of fighting. Trinket could hear no footsteps. A cold wind came curling in from the courtyard, blowing the rain in with it. Trinket shivered, and was about to cry out, but thought better of it. The wind blew the door shut, then blew it open again. So there he was, still incapable of movement, and all alone in a haunted room—alone, that is, apart from the multitude of horrors lurking outside, the horde of vicious ghosts waiting to burst in on him and take his life. But minutes went by, and still there was no onslaught. Trinket comforted himself with the thought that they probably only ate grown-ups, and must have eaten their fill already by now. If only the dawn would come! Suddenly a gust of wind blew out the last remaining candles and Trinket was plunged in total darkness. He let out a great cry. Now he could feel it, without any doubt. There was a ghost in the room. It was standing there right in front of him. He couldn't actually see anything. But he was positive it was there.

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'Don't hurt me!' he babbled. 'I'm a ghost too! We're two of a kind! We're all ghosts! Why would you want to harm me!'

The ghost spoke, calmly, with a woman's voice.

There's no need to be afraid,' it said. 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

Her words put fresh spirit into Trinket.

'Don't worry,' the voice went on. 'I'm not a ghost. Tell me, are you truly the one who killed Oboi, the great Manchu minister?'

'Are you sure you're not a ghost?' stammered Trinket. 'Are you Oboi's friend, or his enemy?' His question received no reply. Trinket could not make up his mind whether it would be safer to admit to killing Oboi, or to deny all responsibility for it. It depended. In the end, his gambler's instinct took over.

Tamardy!' he cried. 'Yes, / did it! / killed Oboi! I stuck my knife in his back! Well? What are you going to do to me now?'

'Why did you do it?'

The same quiet woman's voice.

Once again, Trinket decided to venture all. If this was Oboi's friend, even if Trinket laid the ultimate responsibility for Oboi's death at the Emperor's door (which was the truth), it would not save him.

'Oboi did terrible things to the common people, he treated them cruelly, he took their lives. When he offended the Emperor, I saw my chance and killed him. I wanted to avenge all the innocent people he had wronged!'

He vaguely remembered what the Triads had said about Oboi. In actual fact, it had been entirely the Emperor's idea to kill Oboi. But so what!

The woman before him stood there in silence. Trinket's heart was thumping. He had no idea if his gamble was going to pay off.

He felt a faint breeze, and the woman—or was she really a ghost after all?—flitted out of the room, leaving Trinket standing there, rooted to the spot, his clammy shirt sticking to his body. His points were still closed. He was incapable of movement. The door blew open and flapped noisily. Trinket shivered in the cold gusts of wind.

CHAPTER 13

In which Trinket acquires a Devoted Companion; deals with a Succession of Lamas and Bonzes; and makes his Way, with Several Adventures, to the Wutai Mountains Back



Doublet

Suddenly a glow of light appeared some way off across the room. It seemed to be coming slowly closer.

'Ghost fire!' thought the panic-stricken Trinket. 'Spooks!'

But as the light came closer still, he was able to distinguish it more clearly as a lantern. And carrying the lantern was a woman— another ghost, no doubt—dressed in white from head to foot. Trinket instantly closed his eyes. Light footsteps pattered towards him, and came to a halt right in front of him.

He was trembling with fear. Any moment he would choke.

'Why are you closing your eyes?'

It was a girl's voice. The sound was gentle, almost touching.

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'Don't try scaring me!' gasped Trinket. 'I don't dare look at you'

The ghost gave a little laugh.

'I suppose you think I've got blood oozing out of my eyes and ears, and my tongue is sticking out of my head. Go on, why not take one little look at me?'

'I'm not falling for that,' stammered Trinket. 'You're just a horrible spook with tangled hair and blood all over your face, I know you are!'

The ghost laughed again, louder this time, and blew gently on Trinket's face.

Her breath was gentle and warm, and carried with it a delicate fragrance. Trinket opened

his left eye a crack. He thought he could make out a pale face, curving eyebrows, a small delicate mouth, dimpled cheeks. Then he opened both eyes properly. He found himself looking into the face of a remarkably pretty girl, fourteen or fifteen years old, her tresses neatly plaited at both temples. She was gazing at him with a beaming smile. Greatly reassured by what he saw, Trinket asked her:

'Are you sure you're not a ghost?'

The girl smiled.

'I am a ghost. The ghost of someone who died by hanging.'

Trinket started. She laughed.

'You were brave enough when it came to killing that great big brute Oboi. How come you're so scared of a hanged ghost?'

Trinket drew in a sharp breath.

'Living people don't scare me. Only ghosts.'

The girl gave another little laugh.

'Which of your Vital Points have been closed?'

'How should I know?'

She put the lantern down on the table and started rubbing his shoulders, and pummelling his back. Gradually the movement returned to his hands and he waved his arms a couple of times above his head. 'Brilliant!' 'I've only just learned how to do it,' she said. That was my first try.'

More rubbing and pummelling under his armpits and round his waist, and Trinket was soon wanting to walk.

'Stop!' he cried. That's enough! I'm very ticklish!'

No sooner was he mobile again than he was on the offensive.

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'Now I'll give you some of your own medicine!'

He took a step towards her, reaching out his hands to tickle her.

She instantly stuck out her tongue and pulled a ghoulish face. But try as she might to scare him, there was still something very endearing about her. It was not in the least frightening. Trinket tried to pinch her tongue, but she ducked out of the way, with a peal of laughter.

'Aren't you afraid of hanged ghosts any more?'

'I can see your shadow,' replied Trinket. 'And you're warm. You're alive! You're not a ghost at all!'

She fixed him with both eyes.

'You're quite right/ she declared solemnly. 'I'm not a ghost. I'm a corpse.!''

Trinket started for a second. But by the light of the lantern he could see the colour in her face.

'No you're not! Corpses are stiff, and they don't talk!'

'Then I'm a fox-spirit!'

'I'm not scared of them]' returned Trinket, secretly wondering if she really could be one. If so, perhaps she would seduce him and suck the life out of him. He walked round behind her and looked her up and down.

'I'm a thousand-year-old fox!' she said. 'My magical powers are highly advanced. That's why I no longer have a tail.'

'I wouldn't mind being bewitched by a pretty little fox like you!'

The girl blushed. She stretched out a hand and scratched him playfully on the face.

'You should be ashamed of yourself! Just now you were scared to death, and now here you are taking advantage of a poor defenceless girl.'

The fact of the matter was, on Trinket's list of things to be feared, corpses came first, ghosts

second, and fox-spirits didn't feature at all. Besides, this girl seemed such a darling! She was even more adorable than Fang Yi and the Little Countess. And she had one very important thing in her favour: she spoke with a decidedly southern accent. It was so much softer on the ear than the outlandish Yunnanese spoken by the other two girls.

Tell me, miss, what's your name?'

He was starting to sound almost polite.

'My name's Doublet,' was her reply. She went on:

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'Laurel Goong-goong, you're soaked to the skin! Why don't you go next door and change into something dry? But I'm afraid you'll find that all the clothes here are women's.'

Trinket's heart missed a beat.

'Yes,' he thought to himself, 'I know. That's because all the ghosts here are women!'

'Follow me,' said the girl called Doublet, picking up her lantern from the table. Trinket hesitated. She walked to the doorway, and turned back expectantly.

'I know,' she said with a smile. 'You're probably afraid that wearing women's clothes will bring you bad luck. Why not get straight into bed and give me your wet things? I'll iron them dry for you.'

It was impossible to say no to this girl. She was so sweet, so kind and thoughtful. Trinket followed her meekly out of the room.

'Where have all my companions gone?' he asked.

'My Lady says I'm not to say anything about that.'

Doublet had fallen in by his side.

'You're to eat something first, and then My Lady will come and explain things to you herself.'

Trinket was extremely hungry, and the mere mention of food cheered him up no end.

Doublet led the way down a pitch-black corridor, until they came to a room, where a candle burned on a table. The only other piece of furniture was a bed, simply made up with a padded quilt. Doublet drew back the quilt and let down the bed-curtains.

'Laurel Goong-goong,' she said, 'why don't you get into bed now, and pass out your wet things to me?'

Trinket climbed obediently into bed, stripped himself naked behind the curtains, and burrowed under the quilt, throwing the clothes out to Doublet.

'I'll fetch you some nice hot dumplings,' she called from the doorway. 'Do you fancy something sweet or savoury?'

'I'm so hungry I'd eat a dumpling stuffed with sand!' was Trinket's muffled reply from beneath the bedclothes.

Doublet laughed and went on her way. When she returned a few minutes later, Trinket caught a whiff of something delicious! She parted the bed-curtains and Trinket saw that she was carrying a tray. And on the tray were four large steamed dumplings of the sort called zongzi, made with sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves. She had already unwrapped them. Trinket was famished. He would

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have devoured whatever had been put in front of him, even dumplings stuffed with slugs and snails and caterpillars. ... He picked up the chopsticks and tucked in. The first dumpling he attacked tasted indescribably delicious.

'Doublet,' he managed to say between mouthfuls, 'this tastes wonderful! Just like a real

Huzhou zongzil'

Huzhou, in the southern province of Zhejiang, in addition to the silk and writing-brushes for which it was justly renowned, was famous for its sticky rice dumplings, spiced with all sorts of delicious flavours. There was even a Huzhou dumpling shop in Yangzhou, and the customers at Vernal Delights had been in the habit of constantly sending little Trinket off to fetch some. Then, the bamboo-leaf wrappers had made it hard for him to nibble any of the actual filling, but he'd always managed to squeeze a little bit out through one of the corners. This was the first time he had tasted one since journeying north.

'How clever of you to know what they are!' exclaimed Doublet, with a smile of admiration. Trinket smacked his lips.

'Yum!' he purred. 'How on earth did you get hold of real Huzhou zongzi in a godforsaken place like this?'

'We didn't get hold of them. We . . . conjured them up by fox magic!'

She giggled.

'Excellent magic! Excellent kungfu!' exclaimed Trinket.

Suddenly remembering his recent brush with the old man and the Mystic Dragons, he added for good measure:

'Long Life and Great Blessings to the Fox Leader!'

Doublet laughed.

'You eat up! I'm going to iron your clothes now.'

She began to walk to the door, then halted:

'Are you still afraid?'

Trinket's fears had mostly evaporated by now, but none the less he begged her to return as quickly as possible.

A few minutes later she was back with an iron filled with glowing embers. She proceeded to spread Trinket's wet things on the table and iron them, thereby keeping him company at the same time.

Trinket finished three of the four dumplings.

They really are delicious. Did you make them yourself?'

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'My Lady mixed the ingredients together. I helped her to wrap them.'

That lilting southern accent was music to Trinket's ears. 'Are you all from Huzhou, then?' he asked.

Doublet did not reply.

'Your clothes will soon be dry. When you see My Lady, she'll answer your questions for you.' She chose her words carefully. She seemed such a gentle, thoughtful girl. Trinket wrapped himself in the quilt and sat up, lifting the bed-curtain, and peeping mischievously out at her as she finished the ironing. She looked up at him and smiled.

'Careful you don't catch cold. You've got nothing on.'

Trinket bared his chest.

'I think I'll get out and jump around a bit. That'll keep me warm . . .'

Doublet gave a start. But instead of jumping out of bed, Trinket burrowed back under the covers until not even his head was visible. A muffled chuckling could be heard from the depths of the bed.

A quarter of an hour or so later, Doublet passed the now neatly ironed and dry clothes through the bed-curtains. When Trinket had dressed himself, he climbed down from the bed. Doublet helped him do up his buttons, and, producing a little wooden comb, tidied his hair for him and plaited his pigtail. Trinket breathed in the subtle scent that emanated from

her young body. He was in ecstasy.

'I never knew fox-spirits were such nice people!'

Doublet pulled a face.

'Stop all that horrid nonsense! Of course I'm not a fox-Spirit!' ,•; 'Oh, I know,' quipped Trinket, 'you're a fairy!'

Doublet laughed. c 'No I'm not! I'm just an ordinary maidservant.'

'Well, I'm just an ordinary eunuch, so that makes two of us. We both wait on other people, so we are two of a kind!'

'But you wait on the Emperor,' said Doublet. That makes you as far above me as the sky is above the ground!'

She finished plaiting his pigtail. He tossed it over his shoulder and admired her handiwork.

'My Lady says that if you like, you can go and see her now.'

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'And where's your master?' inquired Trinket. 'Isn't he at home?'

'He's dead!' whispered Doublet.

Trinket shuddered as he remembered that he was in a haunted house, full of strange shrines to the dead. He followed Doublet through the back quarters of the house until they came to a little reception room. There he sat down, and she fetched him a cup of hot tea. He was feeling very nervous, and had lost his appetite for chattering and joking.

Widow Zhuang

Several minutes later he heard the sound of light footsteps, and from behind a wooden partition wall there emerged a young lady dressed in the plain white of mourning.

'You must have had an exhausting journey, Laurel Goong-goong.'

She spoke very politely. Trinket hastened to rise to his feet and return her courtesies.

He judged her to be a woman in her late twenties. Her pale face bore no trace of make-up or rouge, and her eyes were red, evidently from recent weeping. The lantern cast its light on her, and he could see that she had an unmistakable shadow. There was certainly something eerie about her appearance, but she was no more of a ghost than Doublet had been—much to Trinket's relief.

She told him to be seated and he perched on the edge of his chair.

Thank you very much, ma'am, for the delicious Huzhou zongzi\'

'My late husband's name was Zhuang,' replied the woman. 'You can just call me Widow Zhuang. Tell me, Laurel Goong-goong, how many years have you been in service in the Palace?'

She went on to ask Trinket for an account of how the 'villain' Oboi had met with his death. Realizing to his enormous relief that his luck was in and that he was in the hands of Oboi's enemies (which accounted no doubt for the delicious dumplings), Trinket proceeded to give her a blow-by-blow account of the death of Oboi, from the very beginning to the very end, including how he had used the ashes to blind him, then smashed him on the head with the brazier, and trussed him up. He did not give Kang Xi any credit for the stabbing.

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The Widow Zhuang listened to all of this recital in complete silence. At the climax (ashes and brazier) she heaved a deep sigh. Trinket was a seasoned storyteller. He knew exactly when to pause for effect, and when to let himself get carried away. And in this case, it was

something he had lived through himself, so it was easy to make his story even more dramatic than the real thing.

'So that's how it happened!' exclaimed Widow Zhuang. 'It's quite different from what I thought. The way people always tell it, they make you out to be a great kungfu master!' 'I'm afraid not. In a straight fight, one of him would have beaten a hundred of me\'' said Trinket, with unusual honesty.

He decided to go on and tell her the rest of the story as truthfully as possible, including the final killing of Oboi in his cell, and his own subsequent encounter with the Triads.

'The Triads were Oboi's deadly enemies. So of course they hailed me like a hero. They said I'd avenged them.'

The lady nodded.

'And that is how you came to be the Helmsman's disciple, and Master of the Green Wood Lodge.'

Wow!' Trinket muttered silently to himself. 'She knows the whole lot! I wonder why she even bothers asking questions!'

'I'm not a real Lodge Master,' he protested, deciding to hedge his bets. He had no way of knowing if this lady was for or against the Triads. 'I'm afraid I'm just a fake.'

She pondered this for a moment.

'Can you show me how you finally killed Oboi in his cell? What kungfu moves did you use?' There was a strange gleam in her eye as she said this. Trinket decided it might be dangerous to fool around with her. Best stick to the truth. He stood up.

'Kungfu moves, my arse!'

He waved his hands around in the air.

'I was scared shitless! I just thrashed around like this, and—'

Widow Zhuang nodded.

'Please be seated, Laurel Goong-goong.'

She now rose to her feet.

'Doublet, bring some of our laurel-flavoured candy for Laurel Goong-goong.'

She bowed deeply to Trinket, and retired to one of the inner apartments.

Trinket was a little uneasy. What was going on? This lady

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might not be quite what she seemed. Or perhaps his bad language had offended her?

Doublet came in with a blue-and-white plate piled high with candy of various kinds.

'Help yourself, Laurel Goong-goong,' she said, depositing the plate on the table and then taking her leave.

Trinket sat there, crunching candy and waiting for the dawn.

After what seemed like an age, he heard the rustling of silk, and became aware of many pairs of eyes peeping at him from all sides. He had the feeling they were women's eyes, but whether they were the eyes of living beings or of ghosts, he could not tell. His heart trembled.

An elderly woman's voice finally spoke through the window.

'Laurel Goong-goong, by killing that wicked villain Oboi, you have avenged a great wrong for us! How can we ever repay the great debt of gratitude that we owe you!'

Through the longest of the windows in the reception room, Trinket could now make out the figures of some twenty or thirty women, all dressed in white, and all bowing deeply towards him. Taken aback, he bowed to them in response. Then all of a sudden the window closed, and a sound of loud ululation began.

The wailing sent a shiver down Trinket's spine. Gradually the sound died away, and he

could hear the throng of women dispersing. He wondered if he had been dreaming, or seeing things. Were these women alive, or were they ghosts?

After another pause, Widow Zhuang emerged again from an inner room.

'Laurel Goong-goong, please set your mind at ease. These are all of them women whose menfolk, husbands or fathers, died at the hands of Oboi. They all feel a deep gratitude to you for having taken vengeance for them.'

'Was your husband one of the men killed by Oboi?' asked Trinket.

She lowered her head.

'He was. I too am deeply in your debt'

'Please,' insisted Trinket, with uncharacteristic modesty. 'It was nothing. I just got lucky. But I would like to know one thing. Where have all my companions gone?'

Widow Zhuang pondered this question for a moment.

'Since they were your friends, we have done our utmost to protect them from harm. You will see them again soon.'

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Trinket could tell there was nothing to be gained by pressing her any further. He glanced out of the window.

'Why is it still so dark?' he wondered to himself. Widow Zhuang seemed to read his thoughts.

'Where are you planning to set off to when it's light?' she asked.

Trinket could see it was futile to try hoodwinking this all-knowing lady. She had probably overheard everything anyway.

'I'm travelling to the Wutai Mountains.'

'That's a long way from here,' replied Widow Zhuang. 'The journey could be a hard one. We should like to give you something to take with you. I hope you will accept it.'

'I never refuse presents,' quipped Trinket.

The present we have in mind is my maidservant Doublet,' continued Widow Zhuang. 'She has served me for several years, and is a thoroughly trustworthy girl. We would like her to wait on you.'

Trinket was both surprised and delighted by this generous offer. Doublet certainly seemed a helpful and resourceful girl, and she was extraordinarily pretty into the bargain. It would be fun having her by his side. But then again, the journey might prove dangerous, and require some speedy responses. She might cramp his style.

'It's very kind of you, Widow Zhuang,' he began, 'but I wonder if. . .'

Then he had second thoughts. It seemed churlish to refuse such a gift. And Doublet was so sweet. . . . There she was, her head lowered, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. When his glance met hers, she turned coyly away, and a flush stole across her face.

'I'm just afraid that this trip of mine to Wutai may be a bit dangerous for a girl.'

'You needn't worry on her behalf. She is a very capable girl. I don't think she will be a burden on you.'

Trinket glanced again at Doublet. There was such entreaty written on her face, such a pleading look darting from her jet-black eyes.

Well Doublet,' he said, 'what about you? Do you want to go with me?'

She bowed her head.

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'If My Lady says so,' she replied. 'I'll do whatever My Lady says.'

'That's not what I asked,' said Trinket. 'What about you? Do you want to go? It may be dangerous.'

'I'm not afraid.'

'You still haven't answered my first question. Do you want to go?'

'My Lady has always been good to me. You are My Lady's benefactor. If My Lady wants to give me to you, that is my fate! For better or for worse!'

Trinket gave a little laugh.

'I promise it'll be for better!'

The faintest shadow of a smile crossed Doublet's face.

There, that's settled then!' said Widow Zhuang. 'You're Laurel Goong-goong's now!'

Doublet's eyes reddened and she fell sobbing to the ground and knelt before Widow Zhuang, who stroked her head.

'Laurel Goong-goong is a brave young hero,' she said gently. 'Serve him well, and he will be sure to treat you kindly.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Doublet turned and bowed to her new master. Trinket rummaged in his bag and brought out a string of pearls.

Take these,' he said. They're yours. Our First Meeting present.'

These pearls cost me three or four thousand taels of silver!' he mused to himself. 'Enough to buy twenty or thirty maids! But none as sweet as you!'

Thank you very much,' said Doublet, taking the necklace and putting it round her neck. The pearls added a charming touch to her pretty face.

Widow Zhuang warned Trinket of the dangers that might lie ahead on the Wutai Mountains, and of the strange characters he might encounter lurking in some of the temples dotted around on the various slopes. She strictly enjoined Doublet to serve her new master well, and then took her leave.

At last the dawn came, and light glimmered through the window. Doublet went in to fetch her own bag, and threw it together with Trinket's over her shoulder.

'Let's go then!' said Trinket.

'Yes, let's go!'

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Doublet took one last lingering look behind her. Her eyes were red. She had been crying again.

Secrets Exchanged

When Trinket and Doublet stepped out of the house, the torrential rain had stopped, but the hillside was still awash with water. They walked twenty or thirty yards, and Trinket turned and looked back. The haunted house was already swathed in mist. Another thirty yards and there was nothing to be seen but a white expanse.

'Last night all seems like a dream,' said Trinket with a sigh. He turned to Doublet.

'Can you tell me what happened to my friends?'

Doublet began:

'We saved them, and we captured the others. But then some more fierce Mystic Dragon people arrived, and made off with them all. My Lady said we were not to put up a fight, so we let them go.'

Trinket nodded. He was most concerned, needless to say, about Fang Yi and the Little Countess.

'My Lady made the leader of the Mystic Dragons promise not to harm your friends.'

'Not that their promise is worth a donkey's fart,' commented Trinket with a sigh. Tell me, is your mistress a good fighter?'

The best!' replied Doublet proudly.

Trinket shook his head in disbelief.

'Such a delicate looking lady? If she's so good at kungfu, how come she wasn't able to save her own husband from death?'

'At that time, none of the Zhuang womenfolk knew anything about the Martial Arts,' replied Doublet. That came later. The men were arrested on Oboi's orders and taken to Peking to be executed, and the women were all exiled to the far north, to Ninguta. They would have ended up as slaves working for the soldiers on the frontier—but they were rescued on the way, and settled down here. The person who saved them also taught them Martial Arts.'

By now the sun had risen in a clear blue sky, and was shining down on a verdant landscape, fresh and brilliant after the previous night's heavy rain. The bright weather helped to disperse Trinket's

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doubts and fears, and he felt confident now that the house had indeed been inhabited by widows and bereaved mothers, not haunted by ghosts.

'So all those shrines were in memory of their dead husbands and sons, killed by Oboi?'

'Yes. We lived apart from the world. If people ever became curious and poked their noses into our affairs, we would pretend to be ghosts and frighten them away. That's why everyone thinks the house is haunted. For a year now no one has come near the place. Not till you came along. And since you turned out to be the one who avenged their deaths, we felt bound to tell you the truth.'

'And I must do likewise,' declared Trinket, feeling a fit of honesty coming on. 'My real name isn't Laurel Goong-goong at all. It's Trinket. Trinket Wei.'

'You can trust me,' replied Doublet. 'I won't tell a soul.' She seemed thrilled to have had such an important secret confided in her.

She told Trinket that Widow Zhuang had been watching and listening during the fight with the Mystic Dragons. It was Widow Zhuang's women who had put out the candles, and caught the Dragons in a fishing-net.

'Clever move!' cried Trinket.

'You see, the Zhuang family used to live near Lake Tai Hu in the old days. They rented out their boats to the local fishermen, and often watched them at work with their nets.'

'Oh well, if you're all from Huzhou, no wonder the zongzi were so delicious! But tell me, why did your master get into such trouble with Oboi in the first place?'

Doublet explained to Trinket how young Master Zhuang had gone blind, and then told him the whole story of the Ming History and the terrible punishment inflicted on the entire Zhuang family. In the ensuing purge, many renowned scholars connected with the Zhuang family (and even innocent booksellers and book-buyers) had lost their lives as well. And it had all been because of a number of disrespectful references in the text to the Manchu rulers.*

* Note to Reader:

For details of the Ming History Inquisition, the reader is directed to the Prologue of the First Book.

Lamas

After a few miles they came to a small country town and went into an inn for a meal. Trinket sat down at the table, and Doublet stood attentively at his side. 'Come on!' he said. 'Don't be so formal! Sit down and let's have a bite to eat!' 'I couldn't possibly eat with you. That would never do.' Tamardy!' cried an exasperated Trinket. 'If I say it'll do, then hot-poppin' momma it'll do! Think of the amount of time we'll waste if you have to stand around waiting till I've finished every time, before tucking in yourself!' 'You just eat, and then we'll leave,' insisted Doublet. 'Til buy some steamed bread and eat it on the way.' 'You don't seem to realize. I'm funny that way. If I eat on my own, I get a bellyache.' Doublet let out a little peal of laughter and pulled a bench up to the table. Trinket had hardly eaten more than two or three mouthfuls of noodles, when he saw three Tibetan lamas walk into the inn. They sat down at a table near the door and began yelling, in broken Chinese, for noodles. One of them looked suspiciously at Doublet's necklace, and nudged his companions. Soon they were all ogling the pearls. Trinket took them for common thieves. He quickly finished his noodles, hired a cart, and set off again at once, ordering the driver to head west and make good speed. They had only progressed a mile or so when they heard the sound of galloping horses behind them. It was the three lamas from the inn. 'They're after your pearls!' Trinket cried to Doublet. 'Why don't we just hand them over? I can easily get you some more.' 'Of course!' agreed Doublet. 'But there's no need to get me any more.' 'Stop cart!' yelled one of the lamas. The driver reined in his mule. The lamas urged their horses forward, and barred the way in front of the cart. 'Out of cart, baby!' cried another lama. Doublet untied her string of pearls and made to throw it down on the ground, crying: 'My master says you can have the pearls!'

One of the lamas, a big fat fellow, reached out—but it was not the pearls he was reaching for, it was Doublet's wrist. He yanked her down from the cart. 'Don't be rough with her!' cried Trinket. 'I've got plenty more money if that's what you want.' Even as he was saying this, he saw a flash of yellow go whizzing past him. It was the fat lama hurtling through the air. 'Excellent kungfu!' Trinket muttered to himself. The lama landed with a sickening thump, his feet pointing upwards, his big head in the soft mud. He sank in right up to his chest, and began thrashing his legs wildly in the air. Trinket found all this most bewildering, and not a little exciting. What weird style of kungfu was this lama into? The other two lamas were now shouting and tugging noisily at their companion's legs, in an effort to extract him from the ground. When he finally emerged, his face was entirely covered in mud. He looked a dreadful sight. Luckily for him the ground had been greatly softened by the previous night's rain, and he had not been unduly hurt by the fall. Trinket laughed aloud and ordered the driver to drive on without any further delay. Doublet

still had the pearls in her hand.

'Master, should I give them my necklace or not?'

Before Trinket could reply, the lamas charged towards them with daggers drawn, but quick as a flash Doublet seized the driver's whip and flicked it at one of them, coiling the tip around his dagger and bringing it spinning back into her left hand. She then repeated the process on a second lama. The third stopped dead in his tracks, muttering to himself in amazement.

Doublet flicked the whip again. This time she coiled it round the third man's neck and hauled him up close to the cart, where she relieved him of his dagger. The whip was still wound tightly around his neck. The whites of his eyes were showing and his tongue had shot out. Every drop of blood seemed to drain from his face. The two other lamas closed in on Doublet from both sides, with a view to rescuing their companion; but Doublet then leapt down and, placing her left foot on the cartwheel, lashed out with her right, kicking the two advancing lamas deftly on the head and closing their Vital Points. They fell to the ground in an instant swoon. She loosened the whip and the third lama collapsed unconscious before her.

Trinket was ecstatic.

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'Doublet!' he cried. 'I never dreamt your kungfu was so brilliant! Excellent!'

Doublet smiled.

That was nothing. These stupid creatures were useless.'

Trinket gave one of the lamas a good kick and asked him:

'What were you playing at?'

The lama said nothing. He was still unconscious.

Doublet kicked him once in the small of the back, and he came to with a groan.

'My master asked you a question!'

'You . . . fairy?' groaned the man. 'Or me ... dream?'

'Answer my master's question! Hurry up!'

'Lamas . . . Wutai Mountains . . .' he finally succeeded in saying. 'Manjush Monastery, Bodhisattva Peak.'

Doublet frowned.

'Stop talking jibberish!'

These monks are lamas from Tibet,' explained Trinket. They don't speak very good Chinese.'

'So you're a bonze are you!' This was the common term for a Buddhist monk of any denomination.)

Doublet gave him another kick.

'Why haven't you shaved your head then?'

'Me lama, not shave head

'Rubbish!'

She kicked him again in the small of the back, this time on the Vital Point known as the Celestial Gully, causing him the most excruciating pain. He let out a piercing scream. The worse the pain grew, the louder he screamed.

The other lamas had by now regained consciousness. They were greatly alarmed to hear their companion squealing like a pig in the slaughterhouse, and exchanged a few quick words in their own language.

'Yes miss!' cried the lama. 'Me bonze, yes miss, please to stop pain!'

'It all depends on my master. What do you say, master? What is he?'

Trinket laughed.

'A nun!'

The poor lama was truly in agony.

Trinket and Doublet both burst out laughing. Finally Doublet took pity on him. She tapped her foot lightly on the point known

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as the Gate of Corporeal Energy, situated just below his neck, and his pain ceased. But he kept on jabbering. 'Me nun! Nun! Me! Nun! Me!'

Trinket could not stop himself from laughing. 'If you really are monks,' he asked, 'why did you try to rob us?'

'Never do again!'

'What are you doing down here in the Erst place? Why aren't you up in your temple chanting your Sutras and saying your prayers?'

'Guru . . . send us/ was their somewhat gloomy response.

To steal pearls?'

'No ... go to Peking.'

At this point one of the lamas (the fattest one) coughed loudly. Trinket saw him give his companion a meaningful look. He had assumed the three to be typical miscreant lamas on the rampage. Lamaist Buddhism enjoyed the patronage of the Manchu Court, and in Peking lamas seemed to think they possessed some kind of diplomatic immunity, and could get away with all manner of misbehaviour as a result. Trinket had intended to enjoy himself a little giving these three a hard time, and then let them go. But there was something in that fat lama's look that alerted him to some deeper plot afoot.

These three are up to no good/ he muttered to Doublet. 'Give them each a good kick, and let's get out of here as quickly as possible.'

Doublet duly landed a foot on the fat one's Celestial Gully and he too started screaming his head off. Then she went up to her previous victim.

'Please no kick!' he begged her pitifully. 'Me tell. Guru send us Peking, carry letter.'

'A letter?' echoed Trinket.

'No can see. You see letter. . . Guru . . . kill us!'

'You give me the letter/ said Trinket, 'or I'll kick you!'

The lama assumed that whatever the maid could do, the master was bound to do better. He was taking no chances.

'Me . . . not have . . . letter . . . '

'Give it to me!'

The lama stumbled over to his fat companion and the two of them started jibbering in Tibetan. The fat one had some difficulty

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talking, because he was still squealing with pain like a stuck pig. The resultant combination of noises was especially hideous.

Something about the fat lama's body language made Trinket feel sure that he was trying to prevent his companion from handing over the letter. Trinket walked up to him and booted him savagely in the head. He went out like a light. The other one now promptly extracted a little oilskin package from within his gown, and handed it over with trembling hands.

Doublet produced a little knife and cut open the package. Sure enough, it contained a letter.

On the envelope were two columns of Tibetan writing. 'Who is this letter for?' asked Trinket.

He ripped it open with a finger. The two lamas howled in protest. Inside was a sheet of yellow paper, covered in squiggly Tibetan writing. The bottom of the page was stamped with a talismanic charm in red ink—most peculiar and utterly indecipherable.

'What does it say?' asked Trinket.

'Come on/ added Doublet. 'You heard him. My master wants to know what it says. You'd better tell him, or I'll kick you and close your points and never open them again. Well, not for three days anyway.'

The lama took hold of the letter. > 'Says . . . man . . . cannot. . . be . . .'

;- • The other of the two conscious lamas suddenly started squawking loudly in Tibetan. Doublet landed him a quick kick to the Celestial Gully and his squawks were instantly transformed into pathetic moans.

The original lama (the one still holding the letter) paled. He began shaking uncontrollably.

'Says . . . man . . . cannot be found. Search everywhere. No find. Not on Wutai/

Trinket studied the man. His eyes were glinting, his face was twitching, he was stammering so badly he could hardly get out two syllables in succession.

'I may not have been able to understand all that cock-a-doodle-doo jibberish of yours/

Trinket thought to himself, 'but I can tell that you're making it all up. And you're lousy at it too!'

'He's lying!' he said out loud to Doublet.

Then we'll have to give him the works!'

She raised her foot in the general direction of the lama's Gully.

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'Please not!' he yelped. 'Please to kill. . . not to kick! Guru say . . . we tell letter . . . we dead\ So ... please to kill!'

'Forget him.' said Trinket. 'Let's just go.'

He and Doublet climbed back onto the cart. The driver had watched in silent admiration as the two youngsters put paid to the three fully grown, and extremely aggressive, lamas.

'When we get to the next town,' Trinket whispered to Doublet, 'you'd better change into something different. And put the pearls away somewhere safe.'

'Yes, master. How would you like me to dress?'

Trinket smiled.

'Like a boy.'

Trinket the Benefactor

Ten miles further down the road, they came to a large town. There, Trinket dismissed the driver and took lodgings at an inn. He gave Doublet some money to go and spend on clothes. Presently she returned, looking for all the world like a handsome young page-boy. They now made a much less conspicuous duo. Mr Trinket Wei and his page. They continued on their way, and in a day or two had arrived at the mountainous border between Hebei and Shanxi provinces. Travelling due west from the town of Fuping in Hebei, across the range of hills known as the Long Wall (because it follows an old southern spur of the Great Wall), they came to Dragon Pass, which forms the easternmost approach to the Wutai Mountains. Here they had to negotiate steep mountain paths, winding their way between precipitous peaks, until finally they reached the very first temple on the eastern slopes of Wutai, the Bubbling Spring Temple.

That evening Trinket and Doublet put up at a little village inn near the temple. They had a good meal of lamb stew with dumplings, followed by some preserved fruits. Trinket reflected ruefully on the unhelpful, almost disrespectful, attitude of the monks when the two of them had looked in briefly at the temple. They reminded him strongly of the snobbish bonzes he had encountered in his boyhood in the temples of Yangzhou. One had to be a very important person indeed to get their attention at all. It was going to be tough for a young nobody like himself to find the Old Emperor at the Pure Coolness Monastery. He was going to need all

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the help he could get. Perhaps it might improve his chances if he flashed his money around a bit.

With this in mind, he decided to go back to Fuping and break down one or two of his five-hundred tael notes. While they were there he and Doublet bought themselves some smarter clothes. But then Trinket reflected that if he was to pose as a wealthy Buddhist benefactor he would need some practice. A quick trip to the local Fuping temple, the Temple of the Goodly Auspices, and a bit of a dress rehearsal, would be just the ticket. In he went and kowtowed before the holy image of Buddha. As the Camerarius was producing the register of would-be benefactors, Trinket handed him a fifty-tael lump of silver. The monk was hugely impressed by this initial act of largesse, and promptly led Trinket off to sample the establishment's vegetarian fare.

At his meal Trinket was joined by the Abbot, who preached him a little sermon on the untold joys that devotion and generosity would bring him in later life, or indeed in later lives.

'Holy Father,' said Trinket (as ever a quick learner when it came to picking up the relevant lingo), 'I am on my way to Wutai, on a sort of pilgrimage. I wish to pay for a Mass to be said for certain departed souls. I would greatly appreciate your guidance in this matter.'

Predictably the Abbot's first instinct was to detain this well-heeled pilgrim on his own premises.

'My son, why travel the mountain trails to Wutai, when you can just as easily show your devotion here? The Lord Buddha is present here too, you know.'

Trinket shook his head vigorously, insisting that he absolutely must proceed to Wutai. Then, producing another fifty taels of silver, he enquired of the Abbot if he could possibly hire the services of a companion.

'Of course! The easiest thing in the world!' exclaimed the Abbot. He already had someone in mind, needless to say—his own cousin, who though not in holy orders, had been put in charge of the temple estates and produce. The cousin's nickname was Wurtle (on account of his similarity to a Turtle, so it was said). He was a plausible if somewhat scabrous sort of fellow, a bit of a scamp, and Trinket recognized him instantly as a kindred spirit of sorts. He sent him off to purchase whatever paraphernalia he considered necessary for the 'offering', and to buy himself some decent clothes. The three of them then set off back south on the main track across the

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hills towards Wutai, followed by eight bearers, each laden with gifts for the Lord Buddha. They crossed Dragon Pass once more, and entered the Wutai Mountains proper for the second time.

They passed by Bubbling Spring Temple again, then walked on past one monastic

establishment after another, until finally they arrived at the Monastery of the Holy Precinct. Here they lodged for one night, and set off again the next morning in a northerly direction, reaching the Monastery of the Golden Pavilion, then veering off towards the west. A mile or two further on they came to their destination, Pure Coolness Monastery, which stood on the crest of a mountain of the same name. Despite its reputation, it was no more impressive than the other monasteries; in fact if anything it seemed more dilapidated. Trinket was rather disappointed.

'Surely the Old Emperor could've chosen something a bit grander than this? Perhaps that stupid old Hai Dafu got his facts muddled up and he's not here at all?'

Wurtle went ahead and spoke with the Camerarius, who, impressed by the evident wealth of the party and their obviously generous intentions, went in at once to report their arrival to the Abbot, Father Aureole. The Abbot came out immediately to welcome the guests.

Trinket was even more disappointed by the Abbot's appearance than he had been by the monastery's. Father Aureole was a thin, scrawny monk, and had a generally down-at-heel and unprepossessing look about him.

'Holy Father,' Trinket began, 'I have come here to request a seven-day Mass for the salvation of my deceased father's soul, and for the souls of several of my deceased friends.'

The Abbot politely inquired why his guest had chosen his own humble establishment in preference to the many temples in Peking, or indeed on other parts of Wutai.

Trinket had rehearsed his answer to this question on the way there.

'My mother had a vision in a dream. My late father came to her and requested her to hold the Mass in this very place. No other place would do to save him from the endless torment of Hell!'

In actual fact, Trinket did not have the slightest idea who his own father was, or whether the individual responsible for conceiving him was living or dead. He found the whole idea highly entertaining.

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'Why, dad, you old bugger,' he was silently joking to himself, 'whoever you are—you never cared two hoots for old Trink! You never came anywhere near him! You deserve to rot in Hell anyway! You don't know how lucky you are to have me, old Trink, paying for a Mass for your soul!'

'My son,' came the Abbot's somewhat fatuous response to Trinket's brief tale, 'dreams can be mere illusion!'

'But Father,' insisted Trinket, 'even so, even if it is an illusion, my heart will never find peace until I pay for this Mass. It was my mother's own wish. She said there was a karmic bond between herself and Your Reverence

'Nice one!' he chuckled silently to himself. 'Sort of implies that this bald-pated turtle-head of a bonze once sneaked off to Yangzhou and jumped on my mum!'

'But my son,' continued Father Aureole, 'what you may not have realized is that this monastery of ours is a Zen establishment. We devote ourselves mainly to silent meditation and the quest for wordless enlightenment. Of course, we can and do say Masses. But that is not really our main line. You'd be much better served if you went to one of the Pure Land temples on Wutai, like the Golden Pavilion.'

Trinket was perplexed to get such an unenthusiastic reception from Father Aureole, when the old Abbot at Goodly Auspices had been falling over himself to hang onto him and his money. He repeated his request once more, but the Abbot was adamant and finally rose to his feet, instructing his Camerarius to see them out and show them the way to the Monastery of the Golden Pavilion. Trinket insisted on leaving large quantities of gifts

behind, and the Abbot expressed his thanks—rather perfunctorily, given the scale of the donation. There were over three hundred items, Trinket explained, something for everyone, even the lowliest kitchen-boy or garden-hand.

That is excessive,' insisted the Abbot. There are only fifty of us here. I must ask you to take the greater part of your presents with you.'

'May I in turn ask a final favour of you, Father?' said Trinket. 'My mother most particularly asked me to hand over the gifts in person. Would it be possible to assemble all of your monks together? It was my mother's wish.'

When he heard this a strange look came into the Abbot's eyes.

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'Buddha is compassionate!' he intoned. 'Let it be according to your mother's wish, my son.' With these words he walked back into the inner precinct of the monastery.

Trinket watched uneasily as the Abbot's spare frame disappeared. He picked up his teacup and awkwardly drank a sip. Wurtle, who was standing behind him, muttered a few uncomplimentary remarks, to the effect that 'with an old fogey like that in charge, it was no wonder the place was falling apart', and more along the same lines.

A bell rang from within, and the Camerarius asked them to proceed to the western hall. There Trinket found all the monks assembled. He gave each of them a present, and as he did so studied their faces one by one.

'I've never set eyes on the Old Emperor,' he thought to himself, 'but he's the Emperor's father, and there must be some kind of family resemblance. What I'm looking for is an older, bigger version of Misty.'

But not one of the monks answered this description.

Then Trinket reflected that if the Old Emperor were living in this monastery, he would hardly be subject to the same regulations as the other monks. He had doubtless been excluded from the summons. But however hard he pestered the Camerarius with questions (and terrifying threats of having his tongue cut out in Hell if he lied), he was unable to extract any information from him.

Lamas on the Hill

Just as Trinket was feeling most despondent, a monk came tearing into the room, crying to the Camerarius:

'Brother, there are a dozen lamas outside wanting to see the Abbot!'

He added, sotto voce:

They're armed! And looking very unfriendly!'

The Camerarius frowned.

We should always welcome fellow believers in the Dharma,' he said, 'even if they are followers of a different school. But what do these men want? You go in, and report to the Abbot. I'll go out and take a closer look.'

He turned to Trinket.

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'Excuse me for a moment.'

They're probably after us,' mused Trinket, reflecting that with a fighter like Doublet by his side, he would be more than a match for a dozen lamas.

The next instant he heard a great tumult outside and the sound of a large crowd of people

bursting noisily into the Great
Buddha Hall,

'Let's go and see what's happening!' he cried, and dragged Doublet and Wurtle off with him in the direction of the noise. They arrived to find the unfortunate Camerarius surrounded by a dozen lamas in saffron robes, jabbering wildly at him:

'Must search! Man . . . here ... in Pure Coolness!'

'You . . . wicked! Why hide man?'

'Give man ... or else ...'

Trinket stood to one side, arms akimbo, thinking to himself:

'Here's your man! Here I am! Come and get me!'

But the lamas, although by now they could see Trinket quite plainly, were paying him no attention whatsoever.

The Abbot now made a dignified entry.

'What is all the excitement about?' he asked.

'Your Reverence,' gasped the Camerarius, 'these men—'

The moment they heard the word Reverence the lamas crowded round Father Aureole.

'You . . . Abbot? Give man, or ... burn monastery!'

'Brothers,' replied the Abbot, 'would you be so good as to tell me where you have come from? And what brings you here?'

Tibet!'

The lama who answered wore a red cassock over his saffron robe.

'Dalai Lama send us to China,' he continued. 'Our lama . . . young one . . . kidnapped . . . hiding here. Abbot give man ... or burn monastery!'

This is all very strange,' replied Father Aureole, 'and most irregular. This is a Zen cloister. We normally have very little to do with our Lamaist brethren. Should you not be looking instead in the other Lamaist monasteries on Wutai, of which there are quite a number?'

'Our man . . . here\ You give . . . we go!'

The Abbot shook his head.

'I'm afraid we have no such person as you describe here.'

Then please to look!'

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This is holy ground!'

The Abbot shook his head again. :

Two lamas seized hold of him by the collar of his gown.

'Give ... no give? Look ... no look?'

'Monks . . . hide women! Sex! Bad secrets! Afraid of look-see!' One of the other lamas was beginning to get carried away.

By now a dozen Pure Coolness monks had come into the hall, but were prevented by die lamas from approaching their Abbot.

'Master/ whispered Doublet, 'shall I deal with them?'

'Hold on,' Trinket whispered back.

It had finally begun to dawn on him what the lamas were up to. Like himself, they were searching for die Old Emperor.

There was flash of steel, and two lamas drew their swords. One held the tip of his weapon against the Abbot's chest, the other held his to the small of the Abbot's back.

'We kill!'

Father Aureole did not so much as twitch a muscle of his face.

'Amida Buddha!' he replied. 'We are all believers in the same faith. There is surely no need

for any of this!'

The two lamas pressed their swords closer towards Father Aureole, but he stepped nimbly to one side and they all but collided with one another. A cry went up, and a motley assortment of thirty or forty more men came bursting in through the main door of the hall, some of them dressed in ordinary Buddhist monks' habits, some in lama garb. There were even one or two laymen in long gowns. Among them was one elderly, white-haired lama in saffron, who cried indignantly:

'Abbot killing lamas!'

Fadier Aureole protested and addressed himself to another monk in his fifties, also one of the newly arrived:

'Father Crystal, I am indeed honoured that you should have come all this way!'

The man he was addressing, Fadier Crystal, was the Abbot of Buddha Light Monastery, the oldest foundation on Wutai, dating back to the days of the Northern Wei dynasty in the fifth century. It antedated the very name Wutai Mountains. In fact, the mountains had at first been called the Mountains of Pure Coolness (it was beautifully cool up there during the summer months) and had only subsequently (during the Sui dynasty, or sixth century) been called the Wutai Mountains, from the five (wu) terraces (tai), or terrace-shaped peaks, that formed the range. The Buddha Light

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foundation was ecclesiastically speaking far senior to the Pure Coolness Monastery, and its Abbot, Fadier Crystal, was tacitly acknowledged as the highest ranking cleric in the whole of Wutai. He was, in actual fact, a fat, swartiiy individual, with a twittering way of speaking.

With the arrival of all these newcomers, the atmosphere had calmed down sufficiently for conversation to take place.

'Allow me to introduce two friends/ began Fadier Crystal. He pointed to the elderly lama as he went on: This is Brodier Bayen, from the great lamasery of Lhasa. He is a Great Lama and one of the Dalai Lama's most trusted and influential advisers.'

'It is my most excellent karma to meet you, Brother Bayen/ said Fadier Aureole.

Brodier Bayen nodded. He definitely looked the proud sort.

'And this gentleman/ continued the Abbot of Buddha Light, indicating one of the laymen in long gowns, 'is His Excellency Mr Huangfu, a civil official from the Western Marches of Sichuan Province.'

Huangfu made some reference to Fadier Aureole's great Martial Arts fame, and Father Aureole greeted the layman courteously. Trinket was almost disappointed to see things calming down like this. He had been secretly hoping to watch the encounter escalate into a free-for-all fight, one which might even have offered him a chance of determining the Old Emperor's whereabouts.

Brother Bayen, the elderly Tibetan lama, now demanded that Father Aureole hand over their 'little disciple'. When the Abbot politely but firmly insisted that he could not, since he did not have him there in the first place, Bayen rolled his eyes and burst into a torrent of barely intelligible broken Chinese, the general drift of which seemed to be: 'Hand him over, or you'll regret it!'

Father Crystal now offered to mediate. He proposed that the only foolproof way to establish the truth of the matter was for himself and Mr Huangfu to conduct a 'guided tour' (in other words, a search) of the monastery. Father Aureole did not look pleased.

To hear such an outrageous suggestion from our Tibetan friends did not come as a surprise!' he protested. 'But from a distinguished fellow Chinese monk such as yourself?

Would we not be better advised to search your monastery first. . . ' Father Crystal gave one of his twittering laughs. 'Come, come! If we find no one here, I shall of course be more than happy to agree to such a request from our lama brothers . . . '

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'Man . . . here!' blurted out Bayen. 'Someone . . . see him! Or we not dare pesstrass on your troperty . . . '

He was trying hard.

'And who was it that saw him?' asked Father Aureole.

'Mr Huangfu see. Him very big famous person. Him not lie.'

'Of course not,' thought Trinket silently to himself. 'And him obviously happen to be part of your group . . . '

But what he said out loud was:

'Tell me, how old was this little lost lama of yours?'

Bayen, Father Crystal, and Mr Huangfu had until now paid no attention to the two well-dressed boys standing to one side. Their eyes now focused on Trinket in all his finery, and his smartly attired, and very handsome, page-boy.

'About the same age as yourself, as a matter of fact!' twittered Father Crystal.

'I thought so!' declared Trinket. That sounds like the one we saw just now—going into the Buddha Light Monastery . . . '

Brother Bayen and his friends pulled a face. Father Aureole secretly rejoiced.

'Stuffings and nonsense!' cried the irrepressible Brother Bayen, and made a lightning pass at Trinket. Father Aureole intercepted him with a flick of his right hand. Seeing that the two men were about to come to blows, Huangfu bellowed:

'We must talk this through! There's to be no rough play!'

His words were hardly out when they came echoing back in force from outside.

'No rough play!'

Judging from the strength of the chorus, there were several hundred men out there. The monastery was evidently surrounded. Father Aureole paused to reflect.

'Your Reverence . . . ' Huangfu continued, smiling diplomatically. But what he went on to say contained nothing new. 'If you have nothing to hide, what's to be lost by permitting a civilized tour of inspection?'

Father Aureole could see that his men were outnumbered. He had once been a Martial Arts Master himself, but of late he had devoted more and more of his energies to Zen meditation, and few of his fellow monks were fighters of any kind. His recent observations warned him that Brother Bayen was a fighter to be feared. His attempted left-handed Chicken Claw gouging attack on Trinket indicated mastery of an especially ferocious style of fighting.

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Huangfu was clearly not a man to be trifled with either, judging by the power of his voice! Not to mention the troops massed around the building.

'It really doesn't matter if we do find one or two nice-looking wenches on the premises,'

Huangfu put in, seeing Father Aureole pause. 'What's a bit of flesh between friends!'

This was definitely adding insult to injury.

Father Crystal twittered.

'Brother Abbot, why not let them in?'

But Bayen was not even waiting for the invitation. He was already leading the way. Father

Aureole was helpless to do anything but follow.

Bayen, Father Crystal, and Huangfu whispered among themselves, and dispatched their men to search every room of the monastery. The monks watched them with stony hostility. Trinket and Doublet walked immediately behind Father Aureole. They could tell how angry he was from the way the sleeves of his gown were trembling.

Suddenly they heard voices coming from the western row of cells.

'Is this him?'

Huangfu hurried over to see two men emerge from a cell, dragging with them an emaciated ascetic of middle years.

'What do you mean by laying hands on me?' he was protesting.

Huangfu shook his head and the two men apologized and let the man go.

Now Trinket knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had come to find the Old Emperor, and not some 'little lost lama'. Why else would they have seized such a man? The same thought had clearly occurred to Father Aureole.

'Does that brother look like a young lama?' he asked, with a quizzical smile.

Huangfu's men now produced another middle-aged monk. Their commander looked him up and down, and shook his head again.

'So he obviously knows what the Old Emperor looks like!' thought Trinket to himself.

'Sooner or later they're bound to find him. I must protect him! After all, he is the Emperor's father, and the Emperor is my friend!'

But he could think of no way of dealing with this enemy.

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The search-party of twenty or thirty, led by Bayen and friends, and followed by Father Aureole, had now reached a small compound independently situated in the north-east corner of the monastery grounds. It was firmly locked.

'Open up!' they shouted.

This is the personal retreat of a very distinguished monk/ said Father Aureole. 'He has been in seclusion in this hermitage for seven years. I must ask you not to intrude upon his meditations.'

'Come, come!' twittered Father Crystal. 'We will only interrupt his thoughts for a few minutes. It is not as if he himself were guilty of some lapse of concentration.'

'Break door!' shouted one of the taller lamas. 'Man here!'

He began kicking at the door.

In a flash Father Aureole was standing between him and the door, and the lama's foot made contact not with wood but with the Abbot's stomach, which was tense as steel. The lama gave a cry of pain as his leg shattered and he was thrown backwards through the air. At the same time, Bayen uttered a series of guttural croaking noises and leapt once more into his classic Chicken Claw position, threatening to pounce on Father Aureole. But the Abbot stood firm before the door, and dealt the elderly lama two hefty blows with left and right.

Trajna Hand! Excellent kungfu!' cried Huangfu, promptly extending the index finger of his left hand and aiming a pinpoint attack at the Abbot's forehead. Father Aureole darted to the side, and Huangfu's finger drove forcefully into the heavy wooden panel of the door. Once again Father Aureole had demonstrated his mastery in the art of Prajna Hand karate.

Bayen and Huangfu now closed in on their adversary from both sides. Again and again they attacked, cheered on by their men; but each time the Abbot turned them back, using his precise, unostentatious, but deadly karate skill.

Bayen was growing angry and desperate. He threw himself once more into the attack. With a sudden grunt he raised his left hand and leapt through the air, his white hair fluttering in

strands around him. All he succeeded in clutching hold of was the Abbot's moustaches, while he himself received a blow on his right shoulder. The pain seemed nothing at first, but gradually his right arm grew heavier and heavier until he could no longer even lift it up. He staggered off to one side, bellowing savagely. Four

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of his subordinate lamas drew their swords and rushed into the attack. Father Aureole now landed a couple of well-placed aerial kicks that put two of his new attackers out of action. A third he despatched with a blow to the chest, which sent the man reeling. The fourth and last was swinging his sword through the air when Aureole flicked his sleeve and caught him by the wrist. Even as he did this he saw Bayen move back into the fray, his hands weaving up and down through the air. Father Aureole ducked to the right, but not quickly enough to escape the massive force of the Tibetan's assault. He aimed a counter-blow, but felt a strange pain on his right cheek. It was Huangfu's finger. Things were taking a nasty turn. Doublet took one look at the blood pouring down the Abbot's cheek and whispered to Trinket:

'Shouldn't I help him now?'

Wait a little longer!

Trinket's prime concern was still to locate the Old Emperor. Supposing Doublet succeeded in routing the enemy (which was admittedly unlikely—one girl against a heavily armed army!), then they would have lost their chance of tracing Shun Zhi.

Meanwhile, somewhat late in the day, the monks of the monastery had come to their Abbot's aid, wielding as weapons whatever sticks or broken bits of furniture they could lay their hands on. From the start, they were outclassed, and as the blood began to pour from their wounds their Abbot cried out to them to desist.

'Kill all!' bellowed Bayen.

The lamas attacked more viciously than ever, and hacked the heads off four of the monks. The remaining monks had now lost their taste for the fight. Bayen and Huangfu closed in again on Father Aureole, and after a final struggle they had the Abbot lying powerless on the ground, his Vital Points closed, his left leg pinned in a ten-pronged Chicken Claw attack by the lama.

Bayen now gave a mighty laugh, and kicked at the door with his right foot. There was a great crash as it flew open.

'In ... go!' cried Bayen. 'See . . . inside!'

It was pitch-black inside the little hermitage, and silent as the grave.

Tie up ... and bring out!' shouted Bayen. 'Yes, master!' cried two of the lamas, and went charging in.

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The Hermitage

With a sudden flash of light, a golden cudgel-like object came swinging out through the hermitage doorway—bong-bong—and dealt each of the two lamas a devastating blow on the head. They fell silently to the ground, and the contents of their brains spilled out from their broken heads.

Stunned by this turn of events, Brother Bayen began cursing and swearing. Three more lamas went into the attack, this time drawing their swords to protect their heads. The one in front had no sooner reached the doorway than out came that golden cudgel again, smashing

past his sword and onto his head. The second lama went bravely on, sword raised, but he too had his brains spilled like soft noodles. The third dropped his sword to the ground in terror and fled. Bayen ranted and raved, but was certainly not planning to step into the breach himself.

'Onto the roof!' cried Huangfu. Take off the tiles and throw them inside!'

Four of his men obeyed these instructions, while others gathered stones and began hurling them through the open doorway.

Most of the stones were batted back out again by the wielder of the golden cudgel. But the tiles seemed to have more success, and several of them landed inside. Sooner or later the occupants of the hermitage would surely be forced out.

Suddenly, with a great bull-like bellowing, a massive monk came striding out of the doorway, his left arm clutching the form of another monk, while his right hand brandished the golden cudgel that had just wrought such havoc. This man must have been a good head taller than the average stature, and presented a terrifying spectacle. He was somewhat like a temple door-god come to life, with his great livid face, his bristling beard and moustaches, his huge hands and feet. Through his tattered monk's robe a glimpse could be caught of his muscular torso, his broad arms, and his knotted midriff.

Bayen and Huangfu found themselves instinctively retreating before this giant.

'He . . . only one man!' shrieked Bayen. 'He . . . only one big fat! Why frightened? Everyone ... go fight!'

'Take care!' cried Huangfu in some alarm. 'Don't harm the other one—the one he's carrying!'

Trinket studied this second monk more closely. He was a

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tallish, lightly-built man in his mid thirties, with fine features and a general air of distinction. Throughout the confrontation he held his eyes averted, cast firmly towards the ground. Trinket's heart missed a beat.

That's him!' he thought to himself. That's the Emperor's dad! He's even better looking than Misty! Funny, somehow I expected him to be a lot older.'

Meanwhile, a dozen lamas had launched a concerted attack on the giant. He swung his golden cudgel, and—bong-bong-bong— one by one the lamas bit the dust. Huangfu now extracted a whip from his sash, while Bayen seized a pair of short-handled metal fighting-mallets from one of his followers. The two of them closed in on the big monk.

Huangfu flicked his whip and watched its barbed tip curl around the monk's throat. The monk gave a great yell and aimed his cudgel squarely at the Tibetan. Bayen parried firmly with both mallets but, as he felt the cudgel's impact, both his arms went numb and the two mallets fell from his hands.

Meanwhile, another lama was launching an attack on the middle-aged monk.

'Quick!' whispered Trinket to Doublet. 'Now!'

Doublet darted into action, immobilizing the lama with one well-aimed finger. Then she turned to deal with Huangfu, who ducked to one side to avoid her. She homed in instead on Bayen, landing a neat finger dead in the centre of his chest. The Tibetan howled with pain and fell flat on his back. Doublet continued, striking out left and right, and in a matter of minutes she had a dozen or so of their men on the ground.

'Oh . . . please . . . dear son ...' twittered Father Crystal.

'Oh . . . please . . . dear father!' laughed Doublet, poking a quick finger in his ribs.

Huangfu now whirled his whip around him, and Doublet danced round the outside of the

circle it formed. Faster and faster moved the whip, faster and faster danced Doublet. Then Huangfu cried out 'Clever little fellow!', and in the same moment straightened the whip out and flicked it at Doublet. She shot forward under it and reached one deadly finger into Huangfu's midriff. He parried with his left palm, while his right hand gave the whip a little nudge that brought the tip curling round into the small of Doublet's back. Doublet scrambled away, but things were beginning to look dangerous.

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'No you don't!' yelled Trinket, searching the ground for particles of sand or grit or anything he could lay his hands on, to throw in Huangfu's eyes. Unfortunately the ground had been swept immaculately clean.

Meanwhile, the giant advanced on Huangfu. Trinket reached into his inside pocket, frantically grabbing the first thing he could find and throwing it in Huangfu's face. Pieces of paper went fluttering through the air. And in that one split second when Huangfu was brushing them away, the giant brought down his golden cudgel. Huangfu tumbled out of range, but as he did so Doublet kicked out with her left foot and connected with his Great Solar point. He gave a cry of pain and rolled helplessly backwards. There was a great crash and flying sparks as the giant's golden cudgel struck the ground inches from his head. 'Excellent kungfu!' cried Trinket. Drawing his dagger, he rushed up and held the point of it to Huangfu's left eye. 'Order all of your men out of here! Now!' Huangfu was incapable of moving and in no position to negotiate. He gave the order.

The big monk glared at him. Then he gazed at Doublet for a moment, before giving a grunt of approval. 'Hm, cute kid!'

Swinging his golden cudgel in his left hand, and still clutching the middle-aged monk under his right arm, he retreated back into the hermitage, and was gone before Trinket was able to speak with the monk he was carrying.

Doublet was meanwhile releasing Father Aureole's points. When she had finished, she gathered up the pieces of paper and handed them back to her master. Trinket laughed when he saw what they were: wads of banknotes!

Slice, No Slice

Huangfu was obliged to order his men (the several hundred of them still surrounding the monastery) to withdraw and wait for him at the foot of the hill. Father Aureole could finally breathe in peace. He made as if to release Father Crystal's points, but before he could do so, Trinket stopped him and led him away into one of the monastery's side chapels.

'Father,' he said, 'do you believe their story? Do you think

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those men really came here looking for one of their own lost disciples?'

Father Aureole did not reply. Trinket whispered in his ear:

'I know why they came. They were looking for His Majesty. His Majesty the Monk ...'

Father Aureole gave a start. Then he slowly nodded his head.

'So you know about that, my son.'

'That's why I came here,' said Trinket. 'To protect him. The rest was all pretence.'

'I myself wondered, I must confess.'

'I think it would be very dangerous to set those two free,' Trinket continued.

'There must be no thought of killing them,' replied the Abbot. 'Today has seen enough blood

spilled in this holy place! Amida Buddha!

'I agree. Simply tie them up, and question them. We must find out why they were looking for His Majesty.'

'But we are simple monks,' protested Father Aureole. 'Somehow it doesn't seem right to treat them in this way.'

'And is what they did right? If we don't do something about them, they'll come back and burn your monastery down.'

Father Aureole pondered for a while, then nodded his agreement. He clapped his hands, and a monk came in answer to his summons.

'Bring Mr Huangfu here. I wish to speak to him.'

'No!' objected Trinket. 'He's too crafty. Question the lama first.'

'Yes, of course.'

Two monks dragged Bayen in and threw him roughly on the ground.

'Show some respect to our distinguished guest!' protested Father Aureole.

'Yes, master!' chorused the two monks as they withdrew.

Trinket meanwhile had picked up a chair and with his dagger began sharpening the chair legs. He peeled off layer after layer, and the blade sliced through the wood as effortlessly as if he had been peeling the skin off a pear. Father Aureole watched him mystified. Then Trinket went up to Bayen, patted his head with his left hand, and with the dagger in his right hand began making a movement— just like the peeling he had just completed.

'No!' shouted Bayen.

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'On no account!' concurred Father Aureole.

'What do you mean?' protested Trinket angrily. 'I know these Tibetan lamas. They all practise Steel Head kungfu! Nothing can get into their brain-boxes! I tried it on one of them once in Peking. I peeled away for hours, and he never so much as budged an inch. Tell me, Brother Bayen, are you the real thing? Or are you a fake? There's only one way to be sure, and that's to test you out!'

'No slice!' stammered Bayen. 'No slice! Bayen . . . tell truth!'

Trinket fingered his scalp.

'But how will I know?'

'If Bayen lie, then slice!' suggested the lama hopefully.

Trinket pondered this option a moment.

'Very well. My first question is: who sent you here?'

'Great Lama Tsereng-bLo-do of Manjusri Monastery . . . sent here.'

'Holy name!' cried Father Aureole. That's right here on Wutai. Since when have the Lamaists of Wutai fought against us? Why did the Great Lama send you to make trouble here?'

'I no make trouble!' protested Bayen. 'Brother Tsereng . . . send me find monk. Monk . . . steal precious Sutra from Lhasa, belong Dalai Lama! He hide in Pure Coolness, so we come . . . take him away.'

'Holy name!' cried the Abbot again. 'I never heard of such carryings-on!'

'One lie, and I slice!' threatened Trinket, brushing Bayen's scalp with the blade of his dagger.

'No lie!' blurted out Bayen. 'No lie! Ask Brother Tsereng! We pretend look for young lama . . . really look for... older monk. Mr Huangfu, he know monk, he come with us. Brother Tsereng say . . . this monk steal precious Lama Sutra, Mahaparamarthasatya Sutra! I find monk . . . number one good thing . . . return Lhasa . . . Dalai Lama give big reward!'

From the look on Bayen's face during this lengthy recital, Trinket reckoned that this time he probably was telling the truth— the truth, that is, as far as Bayen himself was aware of it. The old lama had evidently been fed this story because the others did not want him to know about the Old Emperor. Trinket now produced the letter that they had taken from the three lamas on the road earlier, and thrust it in front of Bayen's eyes.
'Read this for me!'

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As he said this, he pressed the edge of the dagger-blade against the lama's scalp.
'Yes! Yes!'
Bayen began uttering a long string of outlandish Tibetan syllables. Trinket nodded.
That's right. Very good. Now do you mind saying all that in Chinese for the Father? He doesn't happen to understand Tibetan
'Letter say . . . ' began Bayen. 'Letter say ... great person . . . at Pure Coolness Monastery. Latest news . . . Mystic Dragons . . . come get him. . . . Must get there first
Trinket nodded.
'Anything else?'
'Letter say . . . Peking Great Lama Dahar ... he send more men in case Mystic Dragons arrive. ... If Great Lama Sangge already in Peking ... he top fighter in whole world, can help. . . . Others no hand stance in Hell!'
Trinket burst out laughing.
Tamardy! Hand what stance, you stupid lump of lama pudding!
It was not often that Trinket had a chance to correct other people's idioms.
'Yes ... no ... yes . . . ' jabbered Bayen. 'No ... no ... no ... no handstand in Hell. . . '
'You mean he wouldn't stand a chance in Hell, you big baboon! What else?'
'No else!'
'And Mr Huangfu? Who's he when he's at home?'
The lama looked puzzled at the question. 'Brother Tsereng ... He not at home . . . Send for him. He come yesterday.'
Trinket nodded. He turned to Father Aureole.
'I should like to question that Father Crystal, the fat monk from the Buddha Light Monastery. If you'd rather not be present, you can listen from outside.'
Father Aureole hastened to take his leave, and repaired to his cell.
Father Crystal was all smiles as he came in.
What superb kungfu, my young friend!' he twittered.
'Up your mother's!' snapped Trinket. 'Who asked you to lick my arse?'

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He gave him a boot up the pants. It hurt, but Father Crystal kept on smiling.
'Of course, no true hero likes to be praised! But I meant it, truly—'
'Shut up and answer this question. Who sent you here to put on this stupid little performance?'
'My son, I would never dream of lying to you. It was Brother Tsereng-bLo-do, the Great Lama of the Manjusri Monastery, who presented me with two hundred taels to accompany his fellow lama Bayen here. They were looking for someone, I believe. But I just did it to earn a little money
Trinket gave him another boot.

'Bullshit! Think you can pull that one on me? Now, give me the truth!'

'Yes, yes, my son. . . . Actually, it was three hundred taels.'

'You mean a thousand.'

'Five hundred, to tell the absolute truth.'

'And what about Huangfu?'

'A nasty piece of work. Brother Bayen brought him along. As soon as you let me go, I'll take him to Wutai County and have the magistrate there punish him properly. I think we can pin all the deaths on him—'

'Why not on you?'

Next it was Huangfu's turn. He was a tough customer and refused to say a word. Trinket tried the dagger trick, but it had no effect. He sent for Doublet and told her to close his Celestial Gully point. Huangfu groaned with pain. But still he refused to answer Trinket's questions.

'Go on, kill me! But stop the torturing! That's no way for a real man to behave!'

Trinket had a grudging respect for that kind of talk. He told Doublet to open the point.

Having dismissed Huangfu, he sent for Father Aureole again.

'We'll have to discuss all of this with a certain Very Important Person,' he declared. 'Then we'll know what to do.'

Father Aureole shook his head.

'He absolutely refuses to set eyes on any outsider.'

Trinket started getting angry.

'Don't give me that! He's just set eyes on a whole mob of people! And if we hadn't stepped in, he'd have been carried off altogether. Listen, a few days from now we'll have a whole new batch

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of lamas from Peking coming here, and this Great Fighting Lama whatever-his-name-is, and the Mystic Dragons, and the Spastic Turtles—and then our Very Important Person really will be up the creek!'

'I suppose you're right.'

'Of course I'm right. You go and have a word with him. Tell him it's a matter of life and death.'

Father Aureole shook his head.

'I have already given him my word that none of us—not even I myself—will speak to him.'

'All right then. I'll go. I'm not one of you.'

'No no! If you go in there, his friend, the big monk, Brother Headlong we call him—he'll kill you with one blow!'

'Not me he won't!'

Father Aureole glanced at Doublet.

'Even if your serving-boy manages to deal with Brother Headlong, Brother Wayward still won't speak to you.'

'Brother Wayward? Is that his new name? Is that what you monks call him?'

'Yes, it is. I thought you knew.'

Trinket sighed pointedly.

'I see. Very well then. There seems to be nothing I can do. Since you can't come up with anything either, not even a "handstand in hell"—we'll just have to stand back and watch your monastery being destroyed.'

Father Aureole frowned, and rubbed his hands together in great perplexity. An idea

suddenly occurred to him.

'I'll go and speak to Venerable Yulin. Perhaps he can think of something.'

'And who's he?'

'He is Brother Wayward's Shifu.'

'Excellent. Let's go and see him together.'

Beyond the Dusty World

And so Father Aureole led Trinket and Doublet out through the back entrance of the monastery and onto the hillside behind. About half a mile further up they came to a little tumbledown temple, without a name-board above its entrance. Father Aureole walked in and through to the meditation chamber at the rear, and there found an elderly, white-haired monk sitting on his prayer-mat, his

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eyes closed in deep meditation. He seemed totally unaware of the three of them as they came in.

Father Aureole sat down respectfully on a prayer-mat at the side, lowering his gaze and bringing his hands together in a gesture of prayer. Trinket did likewise (privately chuckling to himself at his newly acquired monkish ways). Doublet stood behind him. It was deathly silent in the little temple, which was apparently uninhabited except for this one old monk. An age seemed to go by, and still Venerable Yulin did not so much as move a muscle. Father Aureole sat motionless too. Trinket was beginning to get pins and needles, and kept restlessly jumping up and sitting down again, inwardly cursing the old bonze and his ancestors.

Another age went by, and the old man finally took a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes. He did not register any surprise at the fact that he was not alone, but merely nodded.

'My Revered Brother in the Dharma/ began Father Aureole, 'it seems that Brother Wayward's worldly karma is not yet extinguished. Trouble is at hand.'

He proceeded to tell the old bonze the whole story. Yulin listened in total silence, then closed his eyes, and seemed to drift back into a meditative trance.

Trinket's impatience finally got the better of him, and he jumped to his feet.

'Cut the karma!' he cried angrily. 'Time's running out!'

His imprecations were, however, cut short by Father Aureole, who gesticulated to him urgently, and indicated that he should be quiet and sit down.

Half an hour of further meditation passed (on the part of Yulin). With every minute Trinket's opinion of the bonze sank lower and lower.

Finally the old man opened his eyes again and spoke.

'Mr Wei, my son, have you come from Peking?'

'I have.'

'Have you been waiting upon His Majesty?'

Trinket started.

'How did you . . . know that?'

'I was just guessing.'

'What a weird old boy!' thought Trinket to himself, and silently resolved to show him a little more respect.

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'So what has His Majesty asked you to come and talk to Brother Wayward about?'

'He seems to know everything!' Trinket thought to himself. 'No use trying to pull the wool over his eyes!'

'When His Majesty learned that his father was still alive, he was both happy and sad. He sent me here to kowtow and to bring a devoted son's heartfelt greetings. His Majesty would be overjoyed if... if His Old Majesty were willing to return to the Palace.'

He made no mention of Kang Xi's intention to pay a visit to Wutai himself, if the news that his father was there proved to be true. He was keeping that back for the time being.

Yulin asked to see something in writing from the Emperor, and Trinket produced Kang Xi's handwritten letter and presented it to him respectfully with both hands.

Yulin read it and handed it back to Trinket.

'So you are Lieutenant-Colonel Wei of the Palace Guards? My humblest respects!'

Trinket's sense of satisfaction was somewhat marred by the expression on the old bonze's face as he said this, which mingled disdain with detachment, and seemed devoid of any actual respect, let alone humility.

'So tell me, my son, what do you plan to do now?'

'I should like to kneel before the Old Emperor, and hear his instructions.'

'He used once to be ruler of all that he surveyed,' commented Yulin. 'But since he entered the Gate of the Dharma, he has left the red dust of the world behind him. You must never utter the words "His Old Majesty" or "Old Emperor" again. Someone might hear, and his tranquillity would be for ever disrupted.'

Trinket fell silent.

'I must ask you,' Yulin continued, 'to report back to His Majesty, that Brother Wayward wishes to see no one, neither you nor any other intruder from the dusty world.'

'But my Master the Emperor is his son!' exclaimed Trinket. 'He's not an intruder!'

'For one who has entered within the portals of the Lord Buddha,' pronounced Yulin, 'family is no longer family. From that time forth, wife and children are all of them intruders.'

Trinket found this very hard to accept. He went on to offer his services as a simple guard in attendance on the Old Emperor,

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but Yulin politely brushed the idea aside, brought the palms of his hands together, closed his eyes, and drifted off again.

Father Aureole rose to his feet, retreated to the door, and bowed to Yulin. Trinket pulled a face, stuck his tongue out and, putting the thumb of his right hand to his nose, twiddled his four fingers at the old bonze as if to say, 'Here's to you, you old fart!'

Yulin's eyes were closed, and he saw none of this.

When the three of them were outside again, Father Aureole spoke to Trinket:

The Venerable Yulin is an extremely distinguished and enlightened member of our order. Now I must go and tell Father Crystal and the others they can leave. It has been a great privilege to meet you, my son. I must be on my way.'

He brought his palms together and bowed deeply. Clearly he had no intention of welcoming Trinket and his friends back to the monastery.

'Very well then,' replied Trinket, greatly mortified. 'Since you've obviously got a cunning plan up your sleeve, I'll just leave you to it!'

He sent Doublet to fetch Wurtle and their bearers, and they all set off back down the hill to the Holy Precinct Monastery.

A Strong Bond

Back in his room in the monastery, Trinket sat, chin on hand, lost in thought.

'So: I've seen His Old Majesty, and he's not a bit old—but he's in serious danger! What with the lamas and the Mystic Dragons all after him, and that old fart of a bald turtle Yulin, who's a pretentious idiot, and Father Aureole, who's no use to man or beast... I give the Old Emperor a few days at the most. What am I going to tell Misty? I mustn't let him down! What am I going to do?'

He looked up at Doublet, and saw that her face was locked in a frown.

'What's the trouble?' he asked her. 'Oh, nothing.'

'Come on, I can see there's something troubling you. Tell me what it is.'

'No, really, it's nothing.'

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'I know what it is: you're cross with me for not telling you that I actually worked for the Emperor in the Palace?'

'How could you?' burst out Doublet, her face flushing. 'How could you do such a thing? The Tartars are wicked, wicked people! And to think that you're one of them!'

Tears were running down both her cheeks. Trinket stared at her a moment.

'Silly girl! There's no need to cry!'

'My Lady gave me to you,' sobbed Doublet, 'to serve and obey. But how can I? My father and mother, my two brothers, were all of them killed by the very people you work for ...'

She started wailing out loud.

For an instant Trinket seemed at a loss what to say. Then suddenly he made up his mind.

'All right then. I'd better tell you the truth. All of that Palace stuff is just a front. Really I'm working for the Triads. I'm Lodge Master of the Green Wood Lodge, and I'm working on a top-secret mission in the Palace, collecting information ... If the Tartars ever get to know, my life will be in danger.'

Doublet held her hand to his lips and whispered:

'Shush! I'm sorry. I should never have made you tell me.'

A smile of joy lit up her tear-streaked face.

'So you are a good person after all! I knew you had to be! How stupid I've been . . .'

'No, on the contrary, you're very clever.'

He took her hand, and sat her down next to him on the kang. He told her all about the two Emperors, whispering into her ear, and painted the Old Emperor's present situation in a desperate light. Then he talked about the two of them.

'You and I will never part,' he said. 'We'll always be together.'

Doublet blushed.

'I'll never leave you,' she whispered. 'Unless, of course, you send me packing . . .'

Trinket raised his hand to his throat and made a sideways chopping motion.

'If I ever send you packing, may my head be chopped from my body!'

Doublet copied his gesture, and they both burst out laughing.

Doublet had always conformed to the role of servant, and hardly ever allowed herself to smile, let alone laugh, in her master's

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presence. The open way in which he had just spoken to her made her feel strangely happy. The bond between them grew stronger and more intimate as a result.

Dangerous Thoughts breed Danger

Trinket and Doublet sat there for a long while discussing the Old Emperor's predicament and the possible ways of saving him from the threat of capture. Finally Trinket hit upon the idea of pre-empting their rivals by kidnapping him first themselves. With this plan in mind, they set off back to the Pure Coolness Monastery.

'We'd better wait for dark,' said Trinket.

They hid among some trees and waited for night to fall.

'Luckily for us/ whispered Trinket, 'the Abbot's the only trained fighter in the monastery, and he's wounded and certain to be resting in bed. You had better immobilize that big fat monk, Brother Headlong, and I'll look after His Old Majesty. Just watch out for that golden cudgel of his!'

Doublet nodded.

Under cover of darkness they crept stealthily through the monastery grounds to the little hermitage where Shun Zhi was staying. The wooden double-door was closed, but the damage done to it earlier had still not been repaired and Doublet was easily able to pull open the left leaf. As she did so there was a golden flash and a great bellow, and the golden cudgel came shooting out of the doorway. In that instant, as the cudgel was raised to begin its devastating descent, Doublet dived in underneath it and shot out two fingers, aiming with deadly accuracy at two Vital Points on the giant's chest. Even as she did so she whispered:

'Very sorry!'

At the same time she caught hold of the great cudgel with both hands. Brother Headlong sank slowly to the ground. The cudgel must have weighed at least a hundred catties, and it was a good thing Doublet got hold of it, or it would have come falling down and crushed her feet.

Trinket meanwhile opened the other half of the door and darted in. In the dark interior he could just make out the figure of a man sitting on a prayer-mat. He fell to his knees and kowtowed.

'Your humble servant Trinket, Majesty. I'm the one who came to save you earlier today. Don't be scared.'

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Brother Wayward said not a word.

'Your Majesty,' continued Trinket, 'it is of course an excellent thing that you should spend your days in prayer and meditation. The trouble is, there are evil men outside who want to lay hands on you and take you away, so it would be much safer if we could move you somewhere a little more out of their reach.'

Still no response.

'So, if you don't mind, I'd like you to come along with me.'

Brother Wayward just sat there, cross-legged and silent. Trinket's eyes were used to the dark by now, and he could see that Brother Wayward was sitting in exactly the same position as his teacher, the Venerable Yulin, had been. He could not tell if he was in a deep meditative trance and therefore unaware of Trinket's presence, or just consciously trying to ignore him.

'Your presence here, Your Majesty, is no longer a secret. Those men have gone for the time

being, but others will be back. We must get you to a safe place.'

Silence.

Then suddenly Brother Headlong spoke.

'It was very kind of you young people to come to my Master's rescue earlier today. My Master is meditating, and when he is meditating, he never speaks to anyone. Where are you wanting to take him?'

His voice, usually a great bellowing roar, had been reduced to a hoarse croak.

Trinket rose to his feet.

'Anywhere away from here. Anywhere your Master would like to go. Anywhere those wicked people can't get hold of him. Then you can both carry on meditating to your hearts' content.' He told Doublet to release Brother Headlong's points, which she did by pressing him in the small of the back and below his ribs. Brother Headlong now addressed his Master, in a tone of great reverence:

'Sire, these children want us to take refuge from here.'

Finally Brother Wayward spoke. It was the first time Trinket had heard his voice. It was ringing and clear.

'My teacher said nothing about leaving this monastery.'

'But they are right,' insisted Brother Headlong. 'It is very dangerous here.'

'All things are born in the mind,' replied Brother Wayward. 'Dangerous thoughts breed danger. Peaceful thoughts breed peace.'

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All the killing earlier today has created a great deal of bad karma. We must have no more of such wild behaviour.'

Brother Headlong was silent for a moment, then replied:

'Your words are true, Master.'

He turned to Trinket.

'My Master refuses to leave. You have heard him.'

Trinket frowned.

Then they'll take him and slice him up into little pieces! Do you want him to die?'

'Death comes to us all sooner or later,' replied Brother Headlong. 'What difference does a few years more or less make?'

'What difference?' disagreed Trinket boldly. 'Are you telling me there's no difference between being alive and being dead? Or between being a man and being a woman? Or between being a monk and being a putrid turtle?'

'Indeed,' replied Brother Headlong. 'All living things are equal.'

'Stone the crows!' thought Trinket to himself. 'No wonder they're called Headlong and Wayward! At this rate I'll never get them out of here! I can hardly immobilize the Old Emperor and carry him out on a stretcher'

He ransacked his brains for a plan. Finally, in despair, he blurted out:

Well, if all living things are equal, I suppose that means that Lady Donggo and the other Empress were equal too? In which case, why all the fuss in the first place? Why go to all the trouble of leaving the dusty world behind and becoming a hermit?'

That did it. Brother Wayward leapt to his feet.

'What. . . what did you say?'

His voice was trembling. Almost before he had spoken, Trinket had regretted his words. He fell to his knees.

'Your Majesty, I beg you—don't be angry at my foolishness!'

The past is over and forgotten,' replied Brother Wayward. 'It is many a year since I was last

addressed as Majesty. Rise, there is something I wish to ask you.'

Trinket rose, thinking to himself, 'At least I've managed to get him talking.'

Tell me,' continued Brother Wayward, 'when did you learn about the two Empresses?'

'I heard the eunuch Hai Dafu talking to the Empress Dowager.'

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'You know about Hai Dafu? Tell me, how is he?'

The Empress Dowager killed him.'

Brother Wayward drew in a sharp breath.

'He's dead?'

'Yes. She used Soft Crush karate to kill him.'

'But. . . she never knew any Martial Arts.'

The Old Emperor's voice trembled.

'How do you know all this?'

They fought in the garden outside the Empress Dowager's palace. I saw it with my own eyes.'

'Who exactly are you?'

'My name is Trinket Wei. I'm Deputy Intendant of the Palace Guards.' He added: 'I'm here at His Majesty's express command. I have a letter in His Majesty's own hand.'

He held out the letter for Brother Wayward, who stared at it a moment before taking it. After a long silence he sighed.

'Is the Young Emperor well? Is he ... happy being Emperor?'

'As soon as the Young Emperor learned that Your Majesty was alive,' replied Trinket, 'he wanted to grow wings and fly here to be with you! But then . . . then he remembered his duties, and knew that he had to stay at Court. So he sent me instead. The moment I've reported back, he will come himself.'

There is no need for him to come.' The Old Emperor's voice was shaking. 'He is a good ruler. He puts affairs of state above his own feelings. Not like me . . .'

He sounded as if he might choke at any minute. Trinket could hear that he was weeping. He decided to make use of this opportunity to communicate what he knew.

'Old Hai Dafu worked the whole thing out. It was the Empress Dowager who killed them all. First she killed Prince Rong, then the Empress Donggo, then her sister, Lady Zhen. After that she killed the Young Emperor's own mother, the Empress Kang. As soon as the Empress Dowager realized that the cat was out of the bag (because Old Hai knew all about it), she killed him as well. Then she sent a gang of men here to try and kill Your Majesty! She'll stop at nothing!'

Shun Zhi had already learned from Old Hai that someone, a kungfu specialist of an especially sinister sort, had been responsible for the deaths of his baby son, his beloved consort, and her sister. After reporting this to his Lord and Master, Old Hai had returned to the Palace to continue his investigations into the iden-

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tity of the murderer. But the Old Emperor simply could not bring himself to believe that it was his wife, the present Empress Dowager, who had done it. He sighed.

'But she knows nothing of the Martial Arts. It can't have been her.'

'You wouldn't say that, Your Majesty, if you'd been there in the garden.'

Trinket then gave him a detailed, word-for-word account of what he had seen and heard

pass between the Empress Dowager and Old Hai that night.

Shun Zhi had always been a devoted son and an upright man. His passion for the Empress Donggo (she whom the Old Whore had called the Fox Lady) had quite swept him off his feet. It was after her death that he had totally lost interest in being the Lord-of-all-beneath-the-Heavens, and had instead taken refuge in this hermitage. All these years he had devoted himself to the practice of Zen meditation. But Empress Donggo was still deeply etched in his memory, and Trinket's words had awoken all his old passion. For the moment, the spirit of transcendent detachment was driven from his mind. As Trinket went over the details of the plot uncovered by Hai Dafu, the Old Emperor's heart filled with grief and rage.

'She'll stop at nothing,' Trinket repeated. 'First she'll kill you, then she'll kill the Young Emperor. Then she'll dig up the Empress Donggo's grave, and have all the copies of her Sayings destroyed. She says they're full of rubbish and any family found with a copy of it should be put to death!'

This last part was entirely his own fabrication. But it stirred Brother Wayward to even further indignation.

'Vile woman!' he cried, angrily slapping his thigh. 'I should have had her deposed! Look at the havoc she is wreaking!'

When he was Emperor, he had in fact wished to depose her and put his beloved Empress Donggo in her place. But his own mother had prevented him from doing so.

'So you see, Your Majesty, to save your own son's life, and to save the grave of the Empress Donggo from being defiled, we must stop her! Even if you think that death and life are one and the same, it's still important to stop that woman from killing other people.'

Shun Zhi had always been an impulsive sort of person. Having come to the throne at the age of seven, he had been no

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more than twenty-four years old when he sought refuge in the hermitage on Wutai. He was still now only a year or two over thirty. He believed Trinket implicitly.

Thank goodness you told me all of this! You are right! Brother Headlong, we must leave at once. Otherwise a disaster will occur.'

'Yes, Master!'

Brother Headlong grasped his golden cudgel in one hand, and with the other pushed open the door of the hermitage. There, standing in the doorway, he saw the figure of a man. In the darkness, he was unable to make out the man's face.

'Who are you?'

He raised his golden cudgel.

'Where are you going?' was the man's response.

Recognizing the voice, Brother Headlong gave a start, threw his cudgel to the ground, and brought his hands together in salutation.

'Shifu!' he cried.

Brother Wayward echoed his cry.

It was the Venerable Yulin.

'I heard everything that was said just now.'

He enunciated his words slowly.

'Oh dear!' thought Trinket silently to himself. This could mean trouble.'

Yulin continued, speaking in a sombre tone:

The karma of this world allows no such thing as escape. It must be fulfilled. Every action has its ineluctable and immutable consequence. Try to escape it, and it will follow you.'

Brother Wayward was already kneeling at his feet.

'Yes, Shifu! You speak the truth. Your disciple understands.'

'I fear that your understanding is still deficient. If your wife of former times is indeed seeking you out, if she bears an ill will towards you, if she feels hatred for you, if she wishes to take your life; then you must look deep within yourself, you must let her hate, you must let her kill, you must let this karma be fulfilled. Try to escape from her, and the karma will remain; send someone to kill her, and you will create yet more karma.'

'Yes, Shifu/ said Brother Wayward, his voice trembling.

'Up yours, you fat bald-pated turtle-bonze!' Trinket muttered quietly to himself. 'Damn you! Sod you! Blast you to smithereens! Slice your bald pate open and cram your fat smelly head full of your own stinking karma!'

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Yulin continued:

'The Tibetan Lama and his associates, however, are a different story. They and their plotting must be stopped. They want to lay hands on you and then, having done so, they will use you to control the Young Emperor. They will do wicked things and cruelly abuse the common people. They will create evil karma. We cannot simply stand by and let them wreak havoc. So, this place is no longer safe; for the present, you must come with me and move to the small temple up the hill.'

He turned and set off at once, and the two Brothers followed him, with Trinket and Doublet (whose presence the Venerable Shifu continued completely to ignore) trailing behind them. When they came to Yulin's little hillside retreat, the Shifu sat down again cross-legged on his prayer-mat and recommenced his meditations. Wayward sat on the mat next to his Shifu and followed his example. Headlong took a good look around first, and then did likewise. Yulin and Wayward brought their hands together immediately and closed their eyes, and sat there totally motionless. Headlong kept his eyes wide open at first, and sat staring into space, then finally he too closed his eyes, letting his hands rest in his lap. After a few minutes, one of his hands strayed towards his cudgel, just to make sure it was still there. Trinket pulled a face at Doublet, and then he too went through a whole performance of sitting on a mat. Doublet sat next to him. Trinket was Restless Monkey Incarnate, and he would rather have died than sit motionless on a prayer-mat for more than a minute or two. But there was no question of running off and abandoning the Old Emperor. He kept wriggling around, and taking hold of Doublet's hand and tickling her palm. She managed not to laugh, but pointed warningly in the direction of the meditating monks.

After an hour or so of this, Trinket suddenly had one of his brainwaves.

The Old Emperor may be a monk, but surely even monks occasionally have to relieve themselves. . . . I'll wait till he needs a piss, and then I'll try and trick him into escaping.'

This new plan set his mind considerably at ease.

After another period of meditative silence, they suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of tramping boots in the distance. It sounded as if a mighty horde of aggressors was on its way up towards the monastery. Headlong's face twitched. He instinctively

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reached for his cudgel, and opened his eyes wide. He saw that his Master and Shifu Yulin were still frozen, and after a moment's hesitation he let go of the cudgel and closed his eyes again.

Trinket could now quite clearly hear the sound of rampaging going on within the monastery.

'When they can't find him there,' he thought to himself, 'they're bound to come up here.

And what are you going to do about that, Bald Pate?'

Sure enough, less than an hour later, they heard the mob burst out onto the rear hill and begin making its way through the darkness towards the little temple. There were cries of 'Search!

Search!'

Headlong now leapt to his feet with his cudgel in one hand, and stood barring the doorway. Trinket stole across to the window and looked outside. By the light of the moon, all he could make out was a crowd of heads. Back inside, Wayward and his Shifu were still sitting motionless.

'What should we do?' whispered Doublet.

'In a minute/ Trinket whispered back, 'when they break in, we'll escape with the Old Emperor out the back!'

After a brief pause he continued:

'If we get separated, we'll meet up again at the Holy Precinct Monastery.'

Doublet nodded.

Brother Headlong guarded the doorway of the little temple single-handed against the yelling saffron-robed mob, his bulky frame all but blocking the entrance. In the ensuing confusion, by some miracle, nine pairs of grey-robed monks appeared as if from nowhere, succeeded in squeezing past him, and sat down cross-legged inside the temple. Trinket found all of this highly intriguing. Another monk in the place, and there wouldn't be room to move. If the eighteen new arrivals were fighters of the same calibre as Father Aureole, they would be able to hold the building against all comers.

Suddenly, above all the shouting, an old man's voice could be heard outside, crying:

'So the Shaolin monks want to take this on their heads, do they?'

Not a word came by way of reply from the eighteen monks within.

'Very well, then,' continued the old man's voice from outside.

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'If the Eighteen Lohans of Shaolin are determined to make a show of this, we'd best be off!' Just as he had advised, the crowd then disbanded. Trinket studied the new arrivals. Some of them were ancient, wizened bonzes well into their seventies and eighties, some of them were middle-aged monks. There were tall and short, good-looking and ugly; and judging from the protuberances sticking out through their gowns, they were all armed with weapons of some kind.

'So these are the Eighteen Fighting Lohans of Shaolin! No wonder that old Bald Pate Yulin wasn't scared! He'd got it fixed up all along! He knew he had this lot to back him up! This is too weird! I'm out of my depth! I'm wasting my time here!'

He went over to Wayward, and knelt on the ground before him.

'Your Holy Majesty, I don't think I'm needed any more. I'd best be on my way. Do you have any instructions for me to take back?'

Wayward opened his eyes and gave a little smile.

'I am obliged to you for your trouble. Please tell His Majesty not to bother coming to Wutai. He would only be disturbing my peace. Even if he were to come, I would not be able to see him. Tell him, if he wishes to keep the Empire at peace, he must remember one thing: never raise taxes. Tell him never to forget that. Then he will have done well by me, and I shall be happy.'

'Yes, Sire!'

Wayward reached into the bosom of his gown and produced a little package.

'I want you to give this little Sutra to your Master. Tell him, in all things, to follow the course of Nature. Never try to force the outcome of events. If we Manchus can bring blessings and prosperity to the Chinese people, well and good. If not, and they want us to leave, then we should go back to the place from which we came.'

He patted the Sutra.

'I know what this is,' thought Trinket to himself, remembering Auntie Tao's tale. 'It's another copy of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections!'

He held out his hands to receive it.

Wayward was silent a moment, then told Trinket to depart. Trinket made his way to the door, but just before leaving he turned to old Yulin and muttered:

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'Hey, old bonze, with all that sitting you have to do, don't you ever need to piss?'

When Trinket arrived back at the Holy Precinct Monastery, he opened the little package. Sure enough, it was another copy of the Sutra, this time bound in yellow silk.

'So should I give it to the Emperor or not?' wondered Trinket. 'I've got five copies already, and this one makes six. Two more, and I'll have the whole set. Such a shame to give it away. Luckily, old Wayward said that even if the Emperor docs go to Wutai, he definitely won't see him, so he'll never know even if I don't pass on the Sutra.'

But then he reflected that Kang Xi was his friend, and to pocket something belonging to a friend went against all the values of River and Lake. Perhaps he had better give it to him after all.

Fat Dhuta and the Eighteen Lohans of Shaolin

The next morning, Trinket led Doublet, Wurtle, and the rest of the party down the mountain, feeling extremely pleased at the way things had turned out. He had not only succeeded in completing his Wutai mission, by finding and speaking to the Old Emperor, as Kang Xi had wished; he had also acquired a delightful new companion. Doublet was at the same time beautiful, sweet-natured, and a brilliant kungfu fighter.

They had walked about three or four miles, when they came upon what looked like a pilgrim travelling in the opposite direction, going up the mountain. He was very tall, almost as tall as the crazy Brother Headlong. But Headlong was strongly built, whereas this man was quite extraordinarily skinny. His gruesomely cadaverous appearance made the scrawny old abbot, Father Aureole, seem positively fat by comparison. His head was an oblong box of bones, with a pair of cavernous eyes hollowed into it, and long hair dangling down to his shoulders, fastened around the forehead with a copper band. His loose cotton gown flapped around him as he walked, like a robe draped over a clothes-rack.

Somewhat daunted by this strange apparition, Trinket averted his gaze, and moved to the side of the road to let the ascetic pass. But the man stopped right in front of him, and asked: 'Are you on your way down from Pure Coolness Monastery?'

'No,' replied Trinket. 'As a matter of fact, we've come from the Monastery of the Holy Precinct.'

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The Dhuta (for so such ascetics were called) reached out his left hand, and placed it on

Trinket's shoulder. Then he twisted him forcibly around, and looked him in the face. 'Would you by any chance be Laurel Goong-goong from the Imperial Palace?' he asked. As he asked the question, he pressed his hand down on Trinket's shoulder, causing the boy's entire body to go limp and immobilizing him in an instant. 'What a ridiculous suggestion!' he cried. 'Do I look like a eunuch? I'm Mr Wei from Yangzhou.'

'Hands off my master!' shouted Doublet. 'How dare you treat him like that!' The Dhuta reached out his right hand, and grasped her by the shoulder too. 'You sound like a eunuch/ he said.

Doublet lowered her shoulder, and at the same time jabbed her index finger smartly at his Celestial Gully point, hitting the spot with her usual precision. But there was no give in the Dhuta's body. It felt as hard as an iron plate. Instead, Doublet herself felt an excruciating pain. The impact had all but shattered her finger. She gave a cry, and in that same instant a searing pain shot through her shoulder as the Dhuta's giant hand swooped down on it. He chuckled darkly.

'Not a bad fighter, for a little eunuch! Not at all bad!' Doublet now delivered a flying kick with her left foot, catching him squarely in the groin. It was like kicking a rock.

'Aiyo!' she cried, the tears running down her cheeks. 'Good move, little eunuch!' said the Dhuta. 'Excellent!' 'I'm not a eunuch!' she protested. 'You're the one who's a eunuch!' 'Do I look like a eunuch?' said the Dhuta with a nasty-looking leer. 'Get your hand off me!' screamed Doublet, 'If you don't let go, I'll cry rape!' 'Think I'm frightened of you?' cried the Dhuta, and with Trinket in his left hand and Doublet in his right, he hoisted them both up into the air and set off up the mountain, striding at a great pace.

Trinket and Doublet began screaming and shouting, but the Dhuta ignored them both, and began to run uphill at a phenomenal speed, carrying them with as much ease as if they

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were weightless. Wurtle and the bearers watched, transfixed with amazement. The Dhuta took a precipitous path up the mountainside, scrambling up it as if it was a flat surface. Trinket heard the wind whistling past his ears as they flew along. This Dhuta's like a cross between a troll and a mountain goat!' he muttered to himself. After a while, the Dhuta deposited them on the ground, and pointed to a towering mountain ahead of them, its peak lost in a vista of foggy cloud.

'If you don't tell me the truth, I'll take you up there and drop you from the very top.'

'All right, I'll tell you the truth,' replied Trinket promptly.

'Smart lad!' said the Dhuta. 'So, who are you actually? And who is this little boy?'

'Well... as a matter of fact, Your Reverence, she isn't a little boy . . . she's my . . . my Well?'

'My . . . my wife!'

Both the Dhuta and Doublet started when they heard the word 'wife'. Doublet flushed a rosy pink.

'Your wife?' asked the Dhuta suspiciously.

'Yes! And now I really am telling you the truth,' declared Trinket. 'You see, I'm not really from Yangzhou: I'm actually from a very rich family in Peking, and I went and fell madly in love with the girl next door. We got secretly engaged in my garden, but her father wouldn't let us get married, so we had to elope. How could a pretty girl like her be a eunuch? If you

don't believe me, take off her hat and see for yourself.'

This the Dhuta promptly did, uncovering a head of fine long hair. In those days, Chinese men had to shave the front half of their head and grow a pigtail, except for Buddhist monks and Dhutas (who shaved the whole head), and Taoist monks (who let their hair grow long). There was no doubt left in the Dhuta's mind. Doublet was a member of the female sex.

'Holy Father,' Trinket continued, 'please don't land us in trouble! We'll be put to death. I'll give you a thousand taels to let us go!'

'You're obviously not a eunuch,' mused the Dhuta out loud. 'No eunuch would have the guts to elope with a girl. Hm, you seem quite a brave little fellow . . .'

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He let go of him.

'So what are you doing here on the Wutai Mountains?'

'We came to pray to Lord Buddha, and to ask for his blessing: I want to do well in my exams/ said Trinket, 'and then she— my wife—can be a proper lady.'

Needless to say, all this stuff about a 'secret engagement' and 'doing well in the exams' was something Trinket had picked up from the Yangzhou storytellers.

The Dhuta pondered this for a moment. Finally he said:

'I seem to have mistaken you for somebody else. Off you go now, both of you!'

Trinket was delighted.

Thank you very much, Holy Father,' he said. 'We'll certainly remember you in our prayers.'

He took Doublet by the hand and they set off down the mountain again. They had only walked a few steps when the Dhuta cried out after them:

'Wait a minute! There's something not quite right here! Come back, both of you! You, little girl, you're not a bad fighter. You caught me with your finger right on the Celestial Gully, and landed me a very nasty kick in the groin. . . . Not bad.'

He was rubbing his Vital Point while he was saying this. He continued:

'Who taught you your kungfu? And which School is it?'

Doublet was not accustomed to lying. She flushed and shook her head.

'It's a family tradition. Her mother taught her,' Trinket told him.

'What's her mother's name?'

'Well. . . I'm afraid I really can't tell you that.'

'Why not? Go on, tell me her name!'

'My family name is Zhuang,' said Doublet.

'Zhuang?' repeated the Dhuta, shaking his head. That's not right, you're lying to me! I've never heard of a Shifu called Zhuang.'

There are so many Shifus in this world . . .' put in Trinket.

'Who asked you? Don't interrupt!' said the Dhuta angrily, tapping Trinket on the shoulder.

He had only tapped lightly, for fear of hurting the boy. But the moment his hand made contact with Trinket's shoulder, he sensed an immediate counter-motion, an almost impalpable shifting of Inner Force. Trinket had used the move known as Grass

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Bending in the Wind, twisting his shoulder, turning his body around, then raising his left hand to guard his face, while preparing his right for a sudden attack. The Dhuta was taken aback by this well-executed move. He snatched at Trinket's chest, and Trinket instantly jabbed with his right hand, a move known as Mystic Snake Quits Its Lair. He struck with

precision at the Dhuta's neck, but it was like driving his hand into an unyielding piece of iron. He screamed with the pain.

Doublet now flew into the attack with both hands. The Dhuta succeeded in closing the Vital Points on Trinket's chest, then turned around to face his new opponent. Doublet crouched low and leapt high into the air, moving and striking with extraordinary speed and dexterity, but the Dhuta was more than a match for her. He ended up seizing hold of both her hands, and closed her points with a corkscrew motion of his left elbow.

He turned to Trinket.

'So—you said you were a rich young man from Peking. How come you know the Catch-Can of the Mystic Dragon School of Liaodong?'

'Is there a law against it? Are only poor people allowed to practise it?' answered Trinket, playing for time.

But he was thinking to himself: 'What does he mean by the Mystic Dragon School, I wonder? Ah ... yes, the Old Devil once told me about the Old Whore only pretending to use Wudang moves, when actually she was using Snake Island karate. I bet Mystic Dragon Island is just a fancy name for Snake Island. It must be! They call themselves Dragons because Snakes would sound too common. Misty learned some of his stuff from the Old Whore, so he must have passed it on to me. That's where I got it from.'

'Well?' said the Dhuta. 'Who is your Shifu?'

Trinket's thoughts ran on: 'I can't tell him that the moves were taught me by the Old Whore. If I do that, I'm done for: that's as good as confessing that I'm a Palace Eunuch.'

So instead he replied: 'I was taught a bit by one of my uncle's girlfriends, a fat lady called Liu Yan.'

The Dhuta was visibly thrown by this.

'Liu Yan? A girlfriend of your uncle's? What uncle?'

'His name's Wei, Treasure Wei.' (Trinket to the power of ten!) 'He's a very smart Peking gentleman. A very good-looking man, who likes to throw his money around. The fat lady fell for him at first sight, and since then she's been coming to our house all the

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time, jumping in and out over the garden wall in the middle of the night. I kept pestering her to teach me kungfu, so she taught me a thing or two.'

The Dhuta was almost inclined to believe him. 'What about your uncle? Does he know any kungfu?' 'My uncle? You must be joking!' Trinket burst out laughing. 'Auntie Liu was always grabbing him by the collar, and dragging him all round the house.'

The Dhuta asked a whole series of questions concerning Sister Swallow's shape and appearance, which Trinket was able to answer with total accuracy, adding that she loved to wear red embroidered shoes. This last detail clinched it. The Dhuta was now convinced of the truth of Trinket's story. He reached out his hand and tapped him lightly on the midriff, intending to open his Vital Point and send him on his way. But as bad luck would have it, his hand never touched the point. It hit instead upon the very spot where Trinket had secreted the Sutra.

'What have we here?' asked the Dhuta.

'Just a wad of banknotes I stole from home.'

'Rubbish! It's much too thick!'

The Dhuta reached forward, extracted the packet from Trinket's inner pocket, and unwrapped it. He was stunned by what he saw.

The Sutra! The Sutra!' he shouted, a big grin spreading all over his face.

He hurriedly wrapped the Sutra up again, and placed it in the bosom of his own gown. He

grasped Trinket by the chest, and lifted him up into the air.

'Where did you get this?' he yelled at him.

This was no easy question.

'Well. . . it's a ... a long story/ stammered Trinket nervously. Til need some time to explain everything

He was playing for time again, trying to figure out a story that would not only convince the Dhuta of the Sutra's origins (that was easy enough), but also persuade him to relinquish possession of it.

'Who gave it to you?' the Dhuta asked loudly.

Trinket from his vantage point in mid-air caught sight of a party of seven or eight monks in grey climbing up the mountainside. He was soon able to identify them as some of the Eighteen Shaolin Lohans whom he had seen in the temple behind the Pure Coolness Monastery. When the Dhuta swivelled him in a new

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direction, he saw a few more clambering up from the west. He counted. Yes, there were altogether eighteen of them. Trinket cheered silently to himself:

'Damn you, you putrid Dhuta! You'll never beat the Eighteen Lohans of Shaolin, not in a month of Zen Sundays!'

'Tell me, quickly!' the Dhuta barked. 'Where did you get it from?'

He noticed Trinket looking around and, following his line of vision, spotted the monks climbing slowly from the east, north, and west. But he did not seem particularly concerned.

'What are they doing up here?' he asked nonchalantly.

'The fame of your kungfu has probably reached them, and they want to be your disciples!'

Trinket taunted him.

'I don't take disciples,' the Dhuta said, somewhat obtusely, shaking his head. 'Hey, you bonzes,' he bellowed. 'Scram! Go away!'

His mighty voice echoed across the valley.

But the monks continued climbing until finally they reached the spot where the Dhuta was standing. One of them, an old monk with especially long eyebrows, placed his palms together, and said:

'Reverend Father, are you the renowned Fat Dhuta from Liaodong?'

Trinket, still dangling in mid-air, couldn't help laughing. The old monk was surely mocking old Bag-of-Bones.

To his great surprise the Dhuta replied loudly in the affirmative.

'Yes, I am the Fat Dhuta. And I don't take disciples. Who are you?'

'I am Brother Cordial of the Shaolin Monastery,' replied the old monk. 'I have the honour of presiding over the Dharma Hall. These are my seventeen Brothers, who all hail from the same place.'

The Dhuta put Trinket down.

'Ah. ... So you are the Eighteen Lohans of Shaolin. Well, if it's a fight you're after, I'm afraid I can't oblige. You can hardly expect me to take all of you on single-handed.'

'We have no cause to fight. We are all believers in the same faith,' protested Brother Cordial, still holding his palms together. 'It is our most excellent karma to meet you today. We have long heard tell of the unmatched kungfu prowess of the Two Dhutas of Liaodong—yourself and your brother-in-arms, the Thin Dhuta.'

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As for ourselves, we are unworthy of the name we bear. The Eighteen Lohans of old were holy men. We were merely given their name as a small mark of esteem by our friends in the Martial Arts fraternity.'

The other seventeen monks brought their palms together and bowed.

Fat Dhuta bowed back.

'What brings you here to Wutai?' he asked.

There is a karmic bond between our Shaolin Monastery and this young gentleman,' said Brother Cordial, pointing to Trinket. 'We would like to ask you to show him mercy and release him.'

Fat Dhuta hesitated a moment, reflecting that he was greatly outnumbered. These were formidable fighters whom he could only hope to handle in single combat.

'Very well. I shall set him free out of respect for Your Holiness!'

He bent down and opened Trinket's point by rubbing lightly on his midriff. Trinket stood up at once and reached out his right palm.

'Give me back the Sutra,' he said to the Dhuta. 'It was given to me by a friend of these Eighteen Lohans. He asked me to take it ... to the Shaolin Monastery and hand it over to the Abbot. So I'd like it back!'

'What?' Fat Dhuta screamed with fury. 'What's the Sutra got to do with the Shaolin Monastery?'

'Never you mind! You stole it from me!' Trinket had raised his voice. 'Hand it over or else!'

'Nonsense!' cried Fat Dhuta, turning around and setting off rapidly down the north face of the mountain.

Three of the Shaolin monks instantly leapt to their feet and tried to snatch him by the arms. Fat Dhuta dared not take them on, but eluded them effectively despite his great height by stepping nimbly to one side and dodging their threefold attack. This form of snatch is a branch of kungfu at which Shaolin monks excel. But the monks failed even to touch the hem of his gown. In an instant, four more monks had positioned themselves behind the Dhuta, barring his way with their interwoven open palms.

Fat Dhuta drew in a lungful of air and, letting out an ear-piercing scream, he thrust both palms forwards in the powerful move known as the Five Founding Fathers. Taking advantage of its phenomenal force, he spun round and dashed off towards the

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south. The four monks behind him opened their palms simultaneously, and attacked from left and right.

Meanwhile, Fat Dhuta caught a glimpse of three more snatching attacks coming at him from behind, as well as two karate blows on his left. He instantly leapt to his feet and threw himself kicking into mid-air. But the wide variety of claw-like snatches behind him—the Dragon, the Tiger, the Hawk—struck terror into his heart. He flailed his sleeves like a whirlwind, then landed on his left foot, seizing hold of Trinket with his right hand.

'Do you want him dead or alive?' he cried.

The Lohans—all eighteen of them—formed two circles, one inside the other. Fat Dhuta was trapped in the very centre.

The Sutra is very important to this young gentleman,' said Brother Cordial. 'So please be so kind as to return it to him. If you do this virtuous deed, we will all appreciate your kindness.'

Fat Dhuta dangled Trinket high in the air with his right hand and, placing his left hand on the very crown of the boy's head, he broke through the double circle and strode off down the

south face of the mountain.

The gravity of the situation was pretty clear. If the monks tried to stop the Dhuta, he would crush Trinket's head simply by applying a little extra pressure with his left hand. The monks standing in his path showed a momentary hesitation, but finally withdrew to one side.

Fat Dhuta went hurtling onwards to the south with Trinket, running faster and faster. The Eighteen Lohans glided closely behind him, hovering above the ground and moving at what seemed superhuman speed.

At this moment, Doublet, whose points had already been opened by the Shaolin monks, seeing that Trinket had been carried off, hurried in pursuit. She was a formidable fighter for her age, but not equal to the Shaolin monks in terms of her Inner Force. She found herself lagging a long way behind them. She was suddenly overcome by a sense of hopelessness, and burst into tears. Ahead of her she could see Fat Dhuta carrying Trinket with him, easily outrunning every single one of the Shaolin monks.

Fat Dhuta was now rushing with Trinket towards a high peak to the south. The Lohans spread out in a line chasing after them. By the time Doublet had reached the foot of the mountain, she was already out of breath. She looked up at the precipitous mountainside, wondering what terrible fate awaited her master. Suddenly

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a great rumbling interrupted her thoughts, and she saw a series of big rocks come rolling down the mountain. The Lohans evaded them by jumping to either side. Fat Dhuta was trying to deter his opponents from closing in, but his missiles failed to hit their targets. Doublet took a deep breath before setting off up the peak.

The peak they were climbing was the southernmost peak of the Wutai Mountains. There are five main peaks on Wutai, and at the top of each of them is a monastery, each dedicated to a different manifestation of the Bodhisattva Manjusri, patron saint of the whole range. This one, criss-crossed with a maze of winding paths, was known as the Brocade Peak. Once Doublet reached the top, she saw the Shaolin monks positioned outside the monastery called the Monastery of Universal Salvation. Fat Dhuta and Trinket had already entered.

'Master! Master!' shouted Doublet, running directly into the monastery grounds, where she found Fat Dhuta standing under the eaves of the Great Buddha Hall, with Trinket still firmly grasped in his right hand.

Doublet dashed forwards.

'Master/ she cried, 'did he hurt you?'

'He wouldn't dare,' said Trinket.

That's what you think?' bellowed Fat Dhuta furiously.

'If you dare to remove even one hair of my head,' said Trinket with a highly provocative smile, 'the Eighteen Shaolin Lohans will surely catch you, and change you back into the fat little dwarf you once were. Then you'll be in trouble!'

The colour drained from Fat Dhuta's face.

'What are you talking about?' he asked in a trembling voice. 'How . . . how ... do you know?'

In fact, Trinket knew nothing. He had simply been improvising (in his usual fashion) his own explanation for the strange contradiction between Fat Dhuta's skinny appearance and his bulky name. He seemed to have stumbled upon the Dhuta's innermost secret by pure chance, and could sense the fear in the man's voice.

'I just know,' Trinket replied with an icy sneer.

'But the monks would never do me any harm,' said Fat Dhuta.

Without warning, he aimed a terrific kick with his right leg at a drum-shaped stone block, which flew with a great crash directly into the screen wall facing the gate of the monastery

and instantly shattered into pieces, showering shards of stone everywhere.

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The Dhuta turned to Doublet and bellowed:

What are you doing here? Do you want to die?

'If he lives I live, if he dies I die!' came the brave response. 'If you hurt him the least bit, I'll fight you till my last breath!'

Tarmady!' blazed the Dhuta. 'What's so special about this little brat? Why do you care so much about what happens to him?'

Doublet flushed and hesitated before finally replying:

'My master is a good man, and you are wicked—that's why!'

'Amida Buddha! Amida Buddha!'

The voices of the Eighteen Lohans could be heard chanting outside.

'Honourable Fat Dhuta, please release the young gentleman, and give him back the Sutra! If you harm a child, you will be reviled on FUver and Lake!'

'Stop bothering me with your nonsense!' growled the Dhuta. 'Or I'll really give you something to worry about! I'll kill the child and destroy the Sutra.'

'Your Reverence, what are your terms for releasing the boy and returning the Sutra?' asked Brother Cordial.

'I can set him free, but I'm not going to return the Sutra, no matter what happens.'

The Eighteen Lohans outside all fell silent.

Fat Dhuta looked carefully all around the hall, figuring out how to make his escape. But suddenly a series of grey figures flashed before his eyes. The Eighteen Lohans had sneaked into the hall. Five of them were moving along the left-hand wall behind his back, another five along the right-hand wall. Once again he was surrounded.

'If you have the nerve, I'll fight you in single-handed combat!' he bellowed.

He raised his left foot and rested it on Trinket's head, giving a scornful sneer.

Turtle Stele

Breathing in the smell of the dirt on the Dhuta's sole, Trinket was both fearful and angry. Here he was, having his head trodden on by a smelly shoe, confused and unable to figure out what to do—his eyes darted around looking for some eye-catching object in the hall, anything around which he could concoct some drivel to attract Fat Dhuta's attention. Once he was distracted, then the Lohans

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could come to the rescue. Unfortunately Trinket's head was pinned to the ground and his field of vision was limited to what lay out in the courtyard. There he saw a big stone turtle with a large upright stone tablet on its back: an engraved stele with a long inscription.

'Fat Dhuta,' he called out, 'your dad's out there crawling around the courtyard, with a big boulder on his back! Don't you think it's a bit tough on him? Aren't you going to save him? You're not much of a son, are you!'

'What are you blathering on about? What's all this about my dad crawling in the courtyard?' replied Fat Dhuta angrily.

'And there are eight Sutras altogether, so what's the point of getting just one without the other seven?' continued Trinket.

Where are the other seven?' asked Dhuta anxiously. 'Do you know?'

'Of course!'

'Where? Tell me! Or I'll squash your brain under my foot.'

'I didn't know until just a second ago . . .'

'A second ago? What are you trying to say?'

Trinket craned his neck to get a proper look at the stele. It was covered in rows and rows of squiggly seal-script characters, not one of which he could decipher (needless to say). This did not deter him in the slightest.

There are in all,' he began to improvise, mimicking to perfection the tone of voice of someone reading from some ancient inscription, 'eight copies of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. Of these, the first copy is hidden in such-and-such Monastery on such-and-such Mountain in Henan Province—I'm afraid there are one or two bits I can't quite make out there . . .'

He made a great performance of squinting into the courtyard to get a better view of the inscription.

The second copy is hidden in such-and-such Nunnery on such-and-such Mountain in Shanxi Province. ... Fat Dhuta, I'm afraid I don't know the characters and they're rather worn. You're so clever at everything, I think you should try to have a look yourself.'

Fat Dhuta picked Trinket up by the scruff of the neck and edged his way closer to the doorway, from which vantage point he was able to get a clearer view of the stele. He peered at the inscription. It was certainly writing of some sort, but the Dhuta was quite unable to read it. He had never learned seal-script. Trinket meanwhile had begun again:

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The third copy is on such-and-such Mountain in Sichuan Province—I'm afraid I can't make that one out at all.'

Fat Dhuta had heard that there were eight copies of the Sutra, and that if (and only if) one could collect all eight of them one might be able to do something rather special (what it was exactly he had no idea). He also had absolutely no clue as to where they were, and no reason to doubt Trinket's charade. He relaxed his foot and dragged Trinket to his feet.

'And the fourth copy?'

Trinket squinted, and wagged his head from side to side.

'I just can't make it out

Fat Dhuta yanked him up, took three large steps forward, and deposited him right in front of the stele.

'I've got a terribly itchy scalp!' complained Trinket.

'What?'

There are fleas in this place, and they're biting me to death! Fatty old friend, give my head a bit of a scratch. I'm itching too much to read the writing!'

Fat Dhuta removed Trinket's hat and began scratching his scalp with his massive fingers.

'Is that better?'

'No, over to the left! That's where they're biting me. You're too far over to the right!'

Fat Dhuta tried to oblige, but then Trinket protested that one of the fleas had jumped down his neck. The Dhuta gave up, released his wrist, and told him to scratch for himself.

The little blighter,' exclaimed Trinket. 'It obviously hasn't had a meal for three or four years, it must be starved of blood. Once upon a time it was a fat, juicy, bouncing little thing, now it's all skin and bones . . .'

Fat Dhuta tried to ignore Trinket's taunts.

'Well, where's the fourth copy?'

Trinket strained his eyes once more.

The fourth copy is on ... such-and-such Mountain ... in the ... Dharma Hall of... the Shaolin Monastery

Fat Dhuta started.

The Shaolin Monastery?'

Trinket knew he was scared of the Eighteen Lohans. He could see him glancing uneasily out of the corner of his eye.

'And the fifth?'

Trinket remembered Old Hai and the Old Whore talking

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about the Wudang and Kongdong Mountains and their respective Schools of kungfu, so he decided to bury the fifth and sixth copies somewhere on their mystic peaks. Fat Dhuta's face was beginning to take on a scowling expression. The seventh copy, Trinket said, had fallen into the hands of the Mu Family, while the eighth was with some Satrap or other in Yunnan Province. ... (If Fatty tried to beard Satrap Wu in his lair, thought Trinket, he'd be in for a bit of a scrap!)

This last invention of Trinket's suddenly brought a new expression to Fat Dhuta's face.

'Did you say the Satrap?' he growled.

Trinket hedged:

'I couldn't quite make it out, but I think so . . .'

Fat Dhuta was getting angry.

'Rubbish! That stone must be at least five hundred years old, and Satrap Wu's still alive!'

It was true. The stone, and the stone turtle it sat upon, were dark and worn and moss-covered, and must have been several hundred years old at least.

'Drat!' thought Trinket, aware that he had put his foot in it rather badly. He improvised again frantically:

'I told you I couldn't quite make it out. ... It might be some other Satrap, not Satrap Wu at all! There must have been one in the olden days. Satrap Pooh, or Loo, or something! Wait a bit: there's some more writing underneath . . .'

Fat Dhuta's curiosity got the better of his anger (and his scepticism).

'Well, what does it say?'

Time to play the Snake Island card, Trinket calculated.

'It's really squiggly. ... I can hardly make it out. Let me see now, something about Mystic Dragons. . . . Then there's something about "Long Life to Our Great Leader Hong"

Fat Dhuta went into a paroxysm of joy.

'I knew it! A miracle! It was prophesied in ancient times!'

'Yes, I think you're right,' said Trinket. 'Look down there, down in the left-hand corner. It says: "These words were spoken by the Great General Xu of the Mighty Tang dynasty, and this stone was erected by the Founder of the dynasty ..." So it's a prophesy, made many years ago: one day, many days in the future, during the conquest of the Qing Tartars, a Great Leader will arise on Snake Island, and Long Life and Blessings will be his!'

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Trinket had hit the jackpot. Fat Dhuta was hopping around with uncontrollable joy.

'I wonder what's written on the back of the stone,' said Trinket.

Fat Dhuta walked behind the stone tablet to have a look.

This was what Trinket was waiting for. He leapt up and ran for it. Fat Dhuta tried to grab him, but four of the Shaolin monks intercepted him, two on each side. He parried with his bare fists, and four more of the Lohans threw themselves into the fray. By now Trinket was safely out of reach.

There were now eight Lohans surrounding Fat Dhuta in a circle, striking out at him in a whirlwind of blows, each taking the other's place in rotation. It was clearly a formation they had mastered from lifelong practice. Fat Dhuta fought well, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. Eventually he conceded defeat and cried out:

'Enough! You can have the Sutra!'

At a command from Brother Cordial the eight Lohans moved their circle three feet further away from Fat Dhuta. He held out the Sutra. Brother Cordial, having first circulated his Inner Force and strengthened his Cinnabar Field, braced three fingers of his left hand in preparation for some deadly sudden attack, held out his right hand, and slowly took hold of the Sutra.

To the surprise of all watching, Fat Dhuta made no attempt at foul play, but handed the Sutra straight to Brother Cordial with a smile.

'Brother Cordial, it seems a little cowardly for famous fighters like yourselves to take me on—eighteen against one!'

'You must excuse us,' said Brother Cordial, bringing his palms together and bowing, having first placed the Sutra safely in the pocket of his gown. 'I'm afraid we would none of us have been a match for you in single combat.'

Again he made a gesture with his left hand, signalling the monks to take another step backwards. Some five or six of them were standing to the side guarding Trinket, for fear that Fat Dhuta might once again try to carry him off.

'Mr Wei,' said Fat Dhuta, 'I have a request.'

'What is it?'

'I would like to invite you to our island as an honoured guest of the Mystic Dragons.'

Trinket was startled at the idea.

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'What? Me go to the Mystic Dragon Island? Not likely.'

'Your Sutra is now in Brother Cordial's keeping, and he will take it to the Abbot of the Shaolin Monastery/ continued Fat Dhuta. 'Come to the island, and our Sect members will treat you as one of our most distinguished guests. After you have met our Leader, I promise to bring you back safe and sound.'

Trinket looked very doubtful, and pulled a face. Fat Dhuta turned to Brother Cordial.

'Brother Cordial, please be my witness. Have I ever broken a promise?'

'We all know that you always keep your promise. The problem is Mr Wei. He has very important matters to attend to.'

'Yes,' cried Trinket. 'I'm terribly busy. Another day, when I have the time, I'll come and visit you and your Great Leader.'

'No, no, no. . . . Please!' said Fat Dhuta hurriedly. 'You've got it the wrong way round! You must say Leader Hong and his subordinate Fat Dhuta. In that order! No one in the whole world should ever be mentioned before our Great Leader! It would be highly disrespectful!'

'Even the Emperor?' asked Trinket.

'Even the Emperor,' replied Fat Dhuta. 'Another thing: in the Leader's presence no one else has the right to be called by titles like Dhuta or Lohan or Holy One. He is the one true Holy

One in this world.'

Trinket stuck out his tongue.

'Sounds like I'm better off keeping out of this Leader's way!' he muttered inaudibly to himself.

'Our Leader is full of benevolence and love, his mercy reaches into the farthest corners of the earth. Our Leader is sure to admire a young hero such as yourself. He is certain to shower with you gifts, and, if he is pleased, he may even reward you by teaching you a secret kungfu move or two. Such knowledge would give you power; it would be something to treasure for the rest of your days.'

Fat Dhuta talked like a true fanatic. While he was speaking he was bent double and holding his mouth right next to Trinket's ear. Trinket did not like the sound of what he heard at all. Then Auntie Tao's remarks about the Mystic Dragon Sect flashed through his mind, and with them a host of images—the Mystic Dragon riders at the 'haunted' Zhuang mansion; the Empress Dowager and her sinister associates (Sister Swallow, and the man-maid), all of whom

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had some secret connection with the Mystic Dragons. He found himself feeling a sudden sense of revulsion towards the whole lot of them. By comparison, Fat Dhuta seemed positively decent. But Trinket still didn't trust him. There was something suspicious about his sudden change of attitude, from outright hostility to fawning flattery. This invitation of his might well turn out to be another sinister plot. Once the Lohans were out of the way, he might easily revert to his former behaviour.

Trinket shook his head.

'No, I'm not going!'

Fat Dhuta's emaciated face darkened.

'Since you refuse to visit our island,' he said gloomily, 'I shall have to bid you farewell.'

Trinket politely said goodbye, trying to urge Fat Dhuta to leave first, so that he could set off in the opposite direction.

Fat Dhuta shook his head uncooperatively

'No, you go ahead. I still have work to do. I'm going to make a rubbing of the inscription.'

Poor Dhuta! He actually believed in the stele—or rather in Trinket's off-the-cuff, garbled version of it! Trinket couldn't help chuckling softly to himself as he went on his way.

CHAPTER 14

In which Trinket travels to Snake Island, and is initiated into the Sect of the Mystic Dragon



An Ambush, and a Journey to the Sea

The Eighteen Lohans accompanied Trinket and Doublet down the mountain.

'Will you be going back to Peking immediately Mr Wei?' asked Brother Cordial, handing the Sutra to Trinket. He added: 'We've been asked by Venerable Yulin to act as your bodyguards on the way there.'

Trinket was delighted.

'Excellent! I was just worrying what old Bones was going to try on me next. But if all of you come with me, who'll be left to protect Brother Wayward?'

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'Don't worry about that, Mr Wei. Venerable Yulin has seen to that.'

Trinket was beginning to be rather impressed by Venerable Yulin. On the surface the old recluse seemed totally obsessed with Zen, to the exclusion of everything else. Even if the sky fell down all around him, it looked as though he would just carry on sitting there meditating with his eyes firmly closed. But all the while he was quietly taking care of things.

With their Lohan escort, Trinket and party encountered no further danger on their journey, and saw no more of Bag-of-Bones, nor of any other roving outlaw for that matter. Within a few days, they arrived at the outskirts of Peking, and there the Lohans took their leave.

'Now that you're in Peking, we must return to Shaolin,' said Brother Cordial.

'Brothers,' began Trinket, sinking to his knees and kowtowing to the monks. 'It... it was very kind of you to come with me all this way.'

Brother Cordial hurriedly reached out his hands to help him up.

'Say nothing of it, Mr Wei! Actually, thanks to you, this has been a most pleasant journey for us all.'

On the way down from Wutai, Trinket had hired nineteen mule-carts, one for Doublet and himself, and one for each of the Eighteen Lohans. He had instructed Wurtle to ride on ahead at full speed, so as to arrive at each of their stopping places a day in advance of the main party and arrange accommodation, tea, dimsums, and vegetable dishes for them all.

No expense was to be spared. In every place they passed through, thanks to Trinket's foresight (and lavish tipping), the innkeepers and waiters treated the Eighteen Lohans like living Buddhas. Shaolin monks normally led very simple, austere lives, having transcended all desire for the good things of life; but on this occasion the Lohans could not help feeling gratified at the lengths to which Trinket had gone to ensure that they were treated with respect.

As for Trinket, he was an incorrigible talker, and once he got going there was no stopping him. But he also genuinely enjoyed making new friends, and giving them a good time. During the journey, he had many a pleasant conversation with the monks, and hit it off with them wonderfully well, with the result that when the

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time came for them to part, he was genuinely sad, and tears ran down his cheeks.

There is no need to be so upset, my boy' said Brother Cordial. 'One day when you have a chance, you must come and visit us at the Shaolin Monastery.' 'Yes, I must!' sobbed Trinket. Brother Cordial and the other monks cupped their hands together, and made their farewells.

By the time Trinket and his two remaining companions entered the city, it was too late to return to the Palace. Instead Trinket went to rather a grand hostelry called The Happy Return, just inside the West Straight Gate, and there he rented an upper room, planning to stay overnight before reporting to Kang Xi the next day.

Tat Dhuta is obviously desperate to get hold of my Sutra,' he thought to himself, 'and he may have trailed me here. Without the Eighteen Lohans to protect us, Doublet and I wouldn't stand a chance. I'd better hide the Sutra for the time being. Tomorrow I can come back for it with an escort of guards, and take it to His Majesty. That sounds like a pretty foolproof plan!'

He despatched Wurtle to buy some necessities and sent Doublet out of the room as well, shutting the door behind her. He looked around carefully outside to make sure that Fat Dhuta was not lurking anywhere, and closed the windows. Then he wrapped the Sutra in oilskin, moved the table away from the wall, and took out his dagger. Prising a brick from the wall where the table had stood, he slid the package into the hollow, replaced the brick, and resealed it as best he could. When he'd finished, his handiwork was barely noticeable. Early the next morning, Trinket sent Wurtle off to prepare their mule-cart. Trinket was feeling extremely pleased with himself at the successful completion of his Wutai duties, and in a mood for celebration. He thought he would take Doublet out for a slap-up breakfast, and then swagger into the Palace in style, wearing his guard's uniform, with his Yellow Jacket on top. He could already picture the look on the other guards' faces! Climbing onto the cart with Doublet and Wurtle, he addressed the driver in the convincing Peking brogue he had by now mastered.

'First of all, take us to the Polestar Inn in Xidan. They do a first-rate fried lamb's tail there,' he added for Doublet's benefit, 'and their mutton dumplings are delicious.'

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'Yes, sir,' replied the driver respectfully. The next thing he knew, the mule-cart was heading out through the West Straight Gate.

'Hey, I said go to Xidan!' cried Trinket. 'What are we doing heading out of the city?'

'I'm really sorry, sir!' apologized the driver. 'My mule's got this strange habit: the moment he sees the Gate, he wants to go for a little trot outside the walls. There's no stopping him!' Trinket and Doublet burst out laughing. The cart headed north after leaving the Gate, and continued for nearly half a mile without showing the slightest sign of stopping or turning back. Trinket grew more and more suspicious.

'What the hell are you playing at?' he shouted at the driver. 'Turn around and go back!'

'Yes sir, yes sir, I'm trying my best!' answered the man, making a great show of wheeling his mule around, and waving his whip wildly in the air. But the mule just kept on hurtling northwards, getting faster all the time.

Turn round, you smelly creature!' shouted the driver. 'Whoa there! Stop, you stinking pile of tarmady dung!'

At this very moment, they heard the sound of hooves approaching fast, and two massively built horsemen came galloping up behind them, closing in on the cart from both sides.

'Now!' Trinket whispered to Doublet, who instantly leaned forward, and dug a finger into the small of the driver's back. The man immediately toppled over, and fell from the cart. He let out a cry of pain as the horse galloping up on that side of the cart trampled him into the dust. One of the riders now jumped from his horse and took the driver's seat. Doublet repeated her previous maneuver, poking him in the small of his back, but this man responded by grabbing her wrist. Doublet twisted her palm and struck him in the face, but the man fended off her attack with his left hand, seizing her shoulder with his right. They exchanged some eight or nine such moves as the mule-cart continued to career forwards.

'What's up?' the other rider yelled from the left. Doublet lashed out with her right palm, struck her man on the chest, and threw him flying out of the cart. The man on horseback cracked his whip at Doublet, who grabbed the end of the whip and lashed it to the cart, which was still rolling along at full speed.

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The man was instantly dragged screaming from his horse, and forced to let go of his whip. Doublet had no idea how to drive a mule-cart. She passed the reins to Wurtle, and asked him to bring the cart under control. But this was a mule with a mind of its own, and he was no better at controlling it than she was. Trinket now jumped into the driver's seat, seized the reins and yelled to the mule, mimicking the driver's tone of voice. He applied what little basic technique he had learned from horse riding, loosening the left rein and tightening the right. The mule wheeled round obediently.

At this moment Trinket heard the thunder of hooves up ahead, and saw a party of some dozen horsemen come riding towards them. He tugged frantically on the reins, steering the mule off the road and down the slope to the right. The horsemen chased after him. A horse can easily outstrip a mule, and in a minute or two the cart was completely surrounded.

'What's going on?' shouted Trinket, observing that the riders were all armed. 'Is this a hold-up?'

'No, we're not robbers! We are here to deliver an invitation,' said one of riders, with a smarmy smile. 'Mr Wei, we have orders to invite you for a drink.'

Trinket's first reaction was a stunned silence. Then he asked:

'Who from?'

'You'll find out soon enough. A friend of yours, of course!'

Trinket found these strangers and their 'invitation' highly suspicious.

'Out of our way!' he shouted.

'As you wish!' cried another of the riders. Even as he spoke, he raised his sword, and swung it downwards with all his might, chopping clean through the mule's neck. The headless beast collapsed to one side, dragging the cart down with it. Trinket and Doublet leapt to the ground, and Doublet flew into the attack, flailing around her like the wind. She was too small to reach the bodies of her enemies, but she poked very effectively at their horses' eyes and began jabbing the Vital Points on the riders' legs.

The riders were soon thrown into utter confusion and the place echoed with the sounds of men shouting and horses neighing. Several of the men dismounted, and ran forward with swords drawn. Doublet responded with phenomenal speed, and in no time seven or eight of them were lying dead on the ground. The rest of the riders, about four or five, observed this girl's devastating kungfu

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with utter astonishment and were wondering what on earth to do next, when suddenly they saw another cart approaching at a fast trot down the road, and heard a woman's voice cry out from within it:

'Stop! Lay down your arms! We should all be friends here!'

Trinket recognized the voice at once.

'Ha!' he cried, beside himself with joy. There comes my wife!

Doublet and the surviving men instantly stopped fighting. Doublet was greatly perplexed to hear her master referring to his wife. He had certainly never said anything about being married, although it was quite common at that time for young men to get married at the age of fourteen or fifteen.

The cart stopped in front of them, and out jumped—Fang Yi. Trinket beamed at her happily, stepped forward, and took her by the hand.

'Dearest sister, I've missed you so much. Where have you been?'

'Let's talk later,' said Fang Yi, shocked to see the tangled pile of dead bodies on the ground, and the blood streaming from the beheaded mule. 'How did this happen?'

'Miss Fang,' said one of the riders, bowing to her, 'we delivered the invitation as instructed, but I'm afraid we must have somehow offended Mr Wei.'

Fang Yi turned to Trinket.

'Did you really get the better of all these men? Your kungfu must have improved enormously since I last saw you.'

'Hardly,' replied Trinket. 'It was Doublet. She saved me. She killed them all.'

Fang Yi took a good look at this Doublet. She found it hard to believe that such a delicate, bashful-looking girl of fourteen or so could be a brilliant fighter.

Tell me, little sister, what's your name?'

'Mistress,' answered Doublet, sinking to her knees, 'I'm your maid Doublet.'

Trinket burst out laughing. Fang Yi flushed.

'What. . . what did you call me?'

Doublet stood up.

'My master said you were his wife. Since I'm his maid, naturally you're my mistress.'

'Don't go believing what he says,' said Fang Yi, shooting Trinket a fierce glance. 'He just blurts out the first thing that comes

into his head. How long have you been serving him? Surely you know his ways by now! Anyway, you can just call me Miss Fang.'

Doublet smiled. She glanced at Trinket. He was looking so proud and happy. She recalled the scene on Wutai, when he had told Fat Dhuta that she was his wife. Apparently he made a habit of calling young girls his wives. ... A flush stole over her cheeks.

'All this time we've been apart, and you're as silly as ever!' said Fang Yi, shooting another look at Trinket, and ordering her men to prepare themselves to set off again. Doublet opened their Vital Points for them one by one.

'If I'd known the invitation was from you,' said Trinket with a smile, 'I'd have flown to your side.'

Fang Yi gave him a supercilious glance.

'I hardly think so,' she said. 'You'd obviously forgotten all about me.'

'How could I?' Trinket began to wax sentimental: 'How could I forget you for a single moment? If I'd known it was you, I'd have gone in a flash! You could have poured horse-piss or poison in my cup!'

'Flattery will get you nowhere!' said Fang Yi, fixing her fine eyes on him. Try and be serious for a moment. Suppose I were to invite you to come with me to the ends of the earth—and then drink poison? Would you really accept?'

A faint smile played on her lips. Trinket gazed at her. Standing there bathed in the rays of the morning sun, she seemed to him an indescribable, adorable vision of beauty. His whole body tingled with a feeling of warmth. He was glowing.

'Of course!' he said. 'If you asked me to climb the Mountain of Knives, or throw myself into a wok of boiling oil, I'd do it—for you!'

'Your word is still your wand?'

'Wizard Trinket at your service!' cried Trinket loudly, slapping himself on the chest.

The two of them burst out laughing.

Telling Doublet to drive her cart, Fang Yi got horses for Trinket and herself and they set off together, riding side by side. And so they headed slowly eastwards, with her surviving men following behind.

As they rode, Trinket asked after the Little Countess, Brother Xu, and the rest of their party. When we were separated, in the haunted house, how did you

manage to get away from those Mystic Dragons? Were you saved by Widow Zhuang?'

'Who's she?'

The lady of the haunted house.'

The lady of the house? We never even saw her,' replied Fang Yi, shaking her head. The Mystic Dragons were after you, but they didn't really mean to hurt you. As soon as they lost track of you, they set us free. The Little Countess and the others are a short distance ahead of us. You'll be seeing them soon.'

As she said this she turned to look at Trinket, with a cross little frown.

That's the seventh time you've asked about her. All you seem to care about is the Little Countess.'

That's not true,' Trinket defended himself smilingly 'If she'd been here in your place, I'd have asked her about you at least seventy times.'

'You'd have needed ten mouths to do that,' replied Fang Yi flippantly. 'But then perhaps

not: you probably do more talking than ten people put together.'

They travelled three or four miles in this fashion, skirting the northern walls of the city, and then heading due east away from Peking.

'Are we nearly there yet?' asked Trinket.

'No, we've still got a long way to go! Stop being so impatient!' said Fang Yi with more than a hint of anger in her voice. 'If I'd known you were pining for her so much, I'd have asked her to come and collect you instead of me.'

Til never mention her ever again!' declared Trinket, sticking out his tongue.

'You may not mention her, but you'll be thinking about her all the same!' cried Fang Yi.

'And that'll make me even crosser!'

She was beginning to sound extremely jealous. Trinket found it highly amusing.

At midday they stopped for some refreshment in a little county town, then set forth again, still heading east. This time Trinket dared not even ask where they were going. He only knew that they were by now a long way from Peking, and that it would be out of the question for him to see Kang Xi that day.

'Anyway/ he thought to himself, 'Misty didn't set a deadline for my return. For all he knows, I might have stayed on at Wutai for a few more days, or been carried off by Fat Dhuta.'

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As they travelled, he and Fang Yi chatted on every subject under the sun. In the Palace, they'd been closeted together in the same room, but the Little Countess had always been with them, which had cramped their style, and made Fang Yi rather reserved. Now, as they rode slowly along side by side (with the rest of the party tactfully lagging a long way behind them), she behaved quite differently, talking happily and smiling gaily. In the Palace, Trinket had made a big thing of calling Fang Yi his wife, but that had been mainly to tease her. Perhaps he had been a tiny bit flirtatious. But he was only very slightly in love, if at all. Today it was different. Meeting her again, seeing once more the tantalizing expression on her face when she got angry, the delightful way she had of talking and smiling, he couldn't help falling head over heels in love with her. After half a day's ride, she was flushed with exertion, and tiny beads of sweat stood out on her face. Trinket found her beauty utterly bewitching. He kept staring at her, transfixed.

'What's the matter with you?' asked Fang Yi lightly.

'Dearest sister! You . . . you just look so beautiful. I think . . . I think . . .'

Think what?'

'Don't get angry when I say it,' said Trinket.

'If you're serious, I won't get angry; but if you're being silly again—'

'I think . . . if you really were to become my wife, I'd be the happiest person alive!'

Fang Yi glowered coldly at him, and turned away.

'Dear sister, what's wrong?' he asked anxiously. 'Are you cross with me?'

'Of course I am! Very cross indeed!'

'But I'm being very, very serious,' said Trinket. 'I really mean it.'

'And what about me? Listen to you! Really this . . . really mad. . . . Anyone would think you were the only person in the world who mattered! What about me? Don't I really exist?'

Didn't I really mean what I said? In the Palace, I promised to serve you for the rest of life!

Don't you think that was real?'

At that moment Trinket was blissfully happy. If he'd been riding on the same horse as Fang Yi, he would have squeezed her tight, and kissed her on her lovely cheek. As it was, he just took her left hand in his right.

'I'll be faithful to you for a thousand years, no, ten thousand years!'

'How could you possibly? Silly boy!'

Fang Yi gave a peal of laughter, and turned away. But she left her hand in his, and Trinket felt as if he would burst with

joy-Time flew as they rode along and chattered togedier on dieir journey. That evening, they stopped at a largish country town and took lodgings for the night in an inn. The next morning, Trinket asked Wurtle (who had been keeping discreetly in die background) to hire a large cart, and now he and Fang Yi were able to sit side by side during their journey.

When he talked of love, and put his arm round her waist and kissed her on the cheek, she did not resist. But she refused to allow him any further intimacy. Trinket had no first-hand experience of such tilings, and was more than satisfied with what she granted him. His only desire in life was that tiieir journey would never come to an end, and that the cart would rumble on and on to die end of the world with him sitting inside it, his arm round his fair love.

The joys of sweet love had chased all thought of duty from Trinket's mind: his Imperial commission, the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections, even the Old Emperor on die Wutai Mountains—all these tilings were quite forgotten. In his dazed state of infatuation, Trinket was oblivious of die passage of time, and of how far they had been travelling.

One evening, their cart finally arrived at the sea. Fang Yi took him by die hand and walked with him to the shore, talking to him softiy.

'Why don't you and I sail across the sea? Would you like to do that? Shall we explore die world togedier? We could live a magical life, like a pair of immortals? What do you say?'

As she spoke, Fang Yi held his hand and rested her head softly on his shoulder, leaning on him gently.

Trinket put his arm round her waist, for fear that she might fall. Her silken hair brushed against his face, he felt her slender body tremble slighdy. He was somewhat taken aback by this sudden proposal. The whole idea of setting sail and crossing the ocean struck him as decidedly dangerous. But in die circumstances, in the glowing halo of romance that enveloped diem, how could he possibly say no?

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Snake Island

A large ship was anchored just off shore. When the sailors on board saw one of Fang Yi's men wave a blue handkerchief, they sent a small boat to pick up first Trinket and Fang Yi, and then the rest of them. Wurtle had never seen the sea before and was convinced he'd be seasick. He begged to be left behind, and Trinket gave him a hundred taels, and sent him back happily on his way to Shanxi.

Once on board the ship, Trinket was taken to a luxuriously furnished cabin, fit for a prince, with a thick carpet laid on the floor and sumptuous food and drink set out on the table.

A momentary doubt flickered through his mind: 'She couldn't be up to something, could she?' But the thought went as quickly as it had come.

At this moment, two attendants entered the cabin and handed him and Fang Yi hot towels, before serving bowls of noodles topped with slices of chicken. The chicken had an exquisite, almost other-worldly flavour. There was a sudden movement, and they knew that the ship had set sail.

Trinket found life on board utterly blissful. Fang Yi was by his side all day, drinking and playing 'guess-finger' games, chattering away with him freely until midnight, when she

would see him to bed, and settle herself in the next cabin. In the morning, she would come over to help him dress and comb his hair.

'She still thinks I'm a eunuch,' Trinket mused to himself one day. 'She still thinks this being together is all a sham, and that we could never be like a real married couple. I wonder when I should tell her the truth?'

A few days later, what seemed like a perfect opportunity presented itself. They were standing together at the cabin window, watching the spectacle of the sun rising above the eastern sea, its golden beams swimming like so many sea snakes on the surface of the water.

Fang Yi heaved a sigh.

'When I went to Peking to kill the Tartar Emperor, I honestly believed it was my destiny to die there in the Palace. Then by the grace of Heaven, I met you! And now here we are, having this wonderful time together. I wish you'd tell me something about yourself, who you are, and where your family comes from.'

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How did you end up in the Palace? Where did you learn your kungfu?'

There are a couple of things I was planning to tell you,' replied Trinket with a slightly nervous smile. 'But I was afraid they might come as a bit of a shock. Or else you'd be so happy you'd faint with joy!'

'If I'm happy, so much the better,' whispered Fang Yi, moving closer to him. 'But whatever it is, just tell me the truth. I... I... I won't mind. I promise.'

'In that case/ said Trinket, I'll tell you the whole truth. Here goes. First of all, I was born in Yangzhou. My mother worked in a whore-house.'

'A whore-house?'

Fang Yi started. She looked him in the eye.

'What did she do there?' Her voice was trembling. The washing? The cooking? The cleaning? Or perhaps she served tea? How did she end up in such a dreadful place?'

Trinket saw the horror on her face. His heart sank. If she was so appalled by the mere mention of the word 'whore-house', how could he possibly tell her that his mother was a whore? She would never show him any respect or love ever again.

He managed a short laugh.

'Oh, don't get the wrong idea! My mother was only a little girl at the time. She was hardly even seven years old when she first went there.'

'Seven?' asked Fang Yi, recovering her composure slightly.

'Well, you see,' Trinket continued, playing for time while he tried to work up a decent pedigree for his mother, 'the Tartars killed so many Yangzhou people after the conquest—I'm sure you know all about the Ten Day Massacre of Yangzhou. My grandfather was an important official in Yangzhou during the Ming dynasty, and he was brave too. He died defending the city against the Tartars. My mother was just a little girl then. When he was dead she had no one to turn to, so she started roaming the streets of Yangzhou, and was taken in by this man, a kind man, a rich man, who happened to be ... a customer at this whore-house. First he took her on as his little maid, then later when he found out whose child she was he adopted her as his own daughter. A few years later my mother married my father. He was from another rich Yangzhou family.'

'Ah, I see!' said Fang Yi, only partially believing this rigma-

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role. 'You gave me a bit of a turn at first. I thought your mother actually worked in the whore-house as some sort of servant, you know, waiting on those . . . horrible, bad women.' Trinket had grown up in the whore-house, and had never thought of his own mother (or any of the other whores) as 'horrible' or 'bad'. He could barely contain his anger.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' he muttered silently to himself. 'Tamardy! If you ask me, you snotty-nosed Mu Family girls are much worse sluts than the whores in Vernal Delights ever were!'

He had wanted to tell her the plain truth about himself, but now he was stuck with his story and had to go on to describe his father's fabulous wealth, and the opulent decor of his family home, the details of which were in fact borrowed straight from Vernal Delights. Fang Yi still seemed unimpressed.

'I thought you were going to tell me something to make me very happy? Surely it can't have been that!'

Trinket's resolution to tell her that he was a fully equipped man, not a eunuch, had quite evaporated.

'Yes, that was it,' he replied as casually as he could. 'I can see you're not happy at all.'

'Yes I am,' replied Fang Yi casually, obviously not meaning it.

After a few moments of silence, they saw land on the horizon in the north-east, the direction their ship was heading. An hour later, they were very close to the shore of an island, and they could distinguish lush green trees and an endless vista of beautiful beaches covered with fine snow-white sand.

'We've been at sea so long,' said Fang Yi. 'And so cooped up. Shall we take a look around the island?'

Trinket agreed to this with alacrity. Fang Yi called the ship's captain to the cabin and asked him about the island.

This is the famous Fairy Island of the Eastern Sea,' he replied. 'People say magical fruits grow here. Anyone who eats them becomes immortal. But only the lucky few ever find them. Why don't you and Mr Wei try your luck?'

Fang Yi nodded. When the man had left the cabin she murmured softly to Trinket:

'I don't want to be immortal, or a fairy. I'm happy just being with you.'

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Trinket was ecstatic.

'Let's spend the rest of our lives together on this island.' .. 'Yes, let's,' whispered Fang Yi, leaning gently against him.

They went ashore and walked along the fine sand. A faint scent of flowers drifted to them from the trees, as if they really had entered some fairyland.

'I wonder if anyone lives here?' asked Fang Yi.

'I don't believe so/ replied Trinket with a smile. 'Not until today. But now the island is inhabited by a beautiful fairy, and her obedient little servant—me!'

'Why couldn't I be your maid instead?' said Fang Yi with an enchanting smile.

The word 'maid' instantly reminded Trinket of Doublet, who was nowhere to be seen. He felt guilty for having neglected her during the past few days; but then again, he reflected, how much harder it would have been for him to be intimate with Fang Yi, if Doublet had been there.

Trinket and Fang Yi walked hand in hand through the trees, and the scent of flowers grew stronger all around them.

The flowers here smell so sweet,' said Trinket. 'Do you think they're magical?'

He walked on among the trees, when suddenly he heard a rustling in the grass and saw

something yellow moving in front of his eyes. To his horror, seven or eight yellow-and-black-striped venomous-looking snakes came slithering out of the undergrowth.

'Aiyo!' he cried, and, dragging Fang Yi after him, turned around and ran, only to find the path behind them blocked by another seven or eight snakes, this time blood-red in colour, hissing and sticking out their tongues. Their heads were triangular, and they looked extremely poisonous.

Fang Yi shielded Trinket, drawing her sword and brandishing it at them.

'Run!' she shouted to Trinket. 'Take care of the snakes!' 'Trinket naturally refused to escape on his own. He drew his dagger, crying:

'Come this way!'

He dragged her with him off to one side. After stumbling no more than a couple of steps, he felt something cold, and to his horror saw that it was a snake dangling in one of the trees, and

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beginning to coil itself around his neck. He was petrified, and started shouting loudly for help. Fang Yi reached out her hand and tried to grasp the snake by its body, but it whipped round, and sunk its teeth into her arm.

Trinket swung his dagger through the air, and sliced the snake in two.

By now there was a huge, writhing mass of poisonous snakes entwined around their legs.

Trinket continued to slice at them with his dagger, but soon he too was bitten (on his left leg), and virtually immobilized.

Fang Yi threw her sword to the ground, and held him tightly.

'We shall die here together!' she sobbed.

With his sharp dagger, Trinket was able to slice through the snakes one at a time, but the more he sliced, the faster they multiplied. The two of them struggled their way out into the open, their bodies covered with snake-bites. By now Trinket was beginning to feel dizzy, and gradually he sank into an almost comatose state. Fang Yi gazed desperately out to sea, where she could see the little boat that had carried them to shore making its way back towards the large ship. She shouted to the sailors a couple of times, but they could not hear her.

She rolled up Trinket's trousers, and bent down to suck the poison from his leg.

'No!' gasped Trinket. 'Don't! You . . . mustn't!'

Suddenly they heard footsteps approaching behind them.

'What are you doing here?' asked a voice. 'Are you trying to get yourselves killed?'

Trinket struggled to turn his head and saw three middle-aged men.

'Snakes!' he moaned. 'We've been bitten! Please, I beg you, help us!'

One of the men produced a herbal substance from an inside pocket, chewed on it, and then applied it to Trinket's wounds.

'Put . . . put some on her wounds first,' stammered the barely conscious Trinket. His legs were by now black and had lost all feeling.

Fang Yi took the medicine herself, and applied it to her own wounds.

'Dearest. . .' murmured Trinket, but before he could even finish the sentence, he lost consciousness altogether, and slumped backwards onto the ground.

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Doctor Lu

As Trinket gradually came to, the first thing he became aware of was that his lips and tongue were parched, and that he had a bad pain in his chest. He groaned.

'Excellent!' exclaimed a voice. 'He's waking up!'

Trinket slowly opened his eyes, and saw a man preparing to feed him from a bowl full of some medicinal broth. The medicine, whatever it was, gave off a nasty stench and tasted extremely bitter, but he drank it down without hesitation, then turned to the man.

Thanks for saving my life!' he said. 'What about. . . her? Is she all right?'

'She is out of danger/' replied the man. The two of you are very lucky. If we had come any later, both of you would have died. What you did was extremely reckless. Why did you come to the island?'

Trinket was hugely comforted to learn that Fang Yi was alive and well, and thanked the man profusely. Then he became aware that he himself was lying on a bed, naked under a bedspread, and that he was quite unable to move either of his legs. The man beside the bed, administering the medicine, was a hideous sight, his face pitted with scars, but in Trinket's eyes he was a blessed saviour. Trinket breathed a sigh of relief.

'One of the sailors told us that there were magical fruits here on the island,' he said, 'and that if we ate them, we would live for ever.'

The man laughed drily.

'I see. In that case, why didn't they come and pick the fruits themselves?'

'It must have been a plot!' cried Trinket. 'Oh dear! One of my friends is still on board their ship. She ... she may be in trouble too. Please think of some way of helping her.'

The ship left three days ago, I'm afraid. It's too late.'

Three days ago?' Trinket sounded puzzled.

'Yes. You've been unconscious for three whole days and nights.'

Trinket couldn't help feeling most concerned at the thought of Doublet, all alone in the middle of the sea, at the mercy of those wicked sailors. However good a fighter she was, she would have great difficulty escaping.

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'It's no use worrying about that now/' urged the man. 'You must rest. The snakes on this island are extremely poisonous. You will need at least seven days of medication to neutralize the poison inside you.'

He asked Trinket for his name, and introduced himself as Mr Pan.

After another three days, Trinket was able to get up and walk slowly, propping himself against the wall. Mr Pan took him to visit Fang Yi, who was being taken care of by some women, but who still looked pale and weak. When they met, a combination of happiness and sorrow overtook them. They clung onto one another, weeping with emotion.

On the morning of the seventh day, Mr Pan came to visit Trinket again.

'Our doctor, Doctor Lu, has just returned to the island, and I've asked him to come and see you.'

Shortly afterwards, an agreeable man in his mid forties, identifiable by his dress as a member of the scholar class, entered the room, and began asking Trinket in detail about the snakebites.

'All the inhabitants of this island are issued with a quantity of Realgar Elixir,' explained Doctor Lu. 'Provided you've taken the Elixir, it acts as an antidote. Even if a snake attacks you, it will not dare bite you but will escape instantly'

'I see!' said Trinket. 'So that's why Mr Pan and the others weren't afraid of the snakes.'

Doctor Lu checked his wounds and then produced six pills, three for Trinket and three for Fang Yi, one to be taken every day for three days. Trinket took out a two-hundred tael

banknote, and handed it to the doctor as a token of his appreciation.

At first Doctor Lu was taken aback, but Trinket insisted on his keeping the money, and in the end he did so with gratitude. Doctor Lu invited the two of them to stay at his house that night, and his invitation was joyfully accepted. That evening, Trinket and Fang Yi were fetched in two bamboo chairs, with bamboo carrying-poles along both sides—the islanders led a simple life, and did not have anything as sophisticated as a real sedan-chair.

They were borne along the side of a stream, and the sound of gurgling water, and the sight of the lush green trees all around them, greedy revived them. Their good spirits were only marred by the thought of the countless poisonous snakes that must be

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writhing among the great trees and tall grasses. Finally, after some two or three miles, the chairs stopped in front of three bamboo houses, their roofs and walls all solidly constructed of bamboo poles as thick as a large bowl in diameter. Nowhere, either in the regions to the south of the Yangtze River, or north of the Yellow River, had Trinket and Fang Yi ever seen houses like these.

Doctor Lu came out to welcome them into his house. In the living-room, a middle-aged woman came out to greet the guests. This was Doctor Lu's wife. She held Fang Yi's hands in hers, and spoke to her warmly. Doctor Lu invited Trinket to take a seat in his study, where the bamboo shelves were piled high with an endless array of old thread-bound books, and the walls were covered with calligraphic scrolls and paintings. It was clearly the room of a scholar and connoisseur of art.

'Residing as I do on this remote wilderness of an island, I am, alas, both ignorant and uncouth,' declared the doctor. 'You, Mr Wei, hailing as you do from the fertile plains of central China, proud scion of the Chinese race, are doubtless a young man of broad culture, and have a keen appreciation of calligraphy and the pictorial arts. Would you deign to glance at these humble scrolls of mine, and tell me if you think they pass muster?'

Trinket found his bookish language almost incomprehensible, but his eyes followed the doctor's fingers as they pointed in the general direction of the scrolls. The first thing he saw was a landscape painting, then a painting of a white stork and a tortoise. He smiled.

'Not a bad old turtle!'

Doctor Lu gave him a decidedly old-fashioned look. Then he indicated a vertical scroll covered in an antique style of calligraphy.

'Mr Wei, what do you think of this example of the Stone-Drum style?'

Trinket looked at the inscription, with characters that twisted and twirled all over the paper like Taoist talismans, and nodded his approval.

'Good, very good!'

'And what of this rubbing? It is one of the famous stone inscriptions from the Qin dynasty, carved on Langya Terrace,' continued Doctor Lu, pointing to another scroll.

Thinking that variety was probably a desirable feature of his performance as a connoisseur, Trinket shook his head.

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'Not quite up to scratch

'Mr Wei, would you be so kind as to indicate for my enlightenment the outstanding faults in this inscription?' asked Doctor Lu solemnly.

'Not exactly outstanding faults/ replied Trinket, thinking he'd latched onto some specialist jargon. 'I'd say they were more instanding . . .'

Doctor Lu was appalled. He managed to murmur:

'Brilliant, brilliant! Most. . . interesting!'

He turned to another scroll written in the free Grass style.

'How do you find this one, Mr Wei?'

Trinket cocked his head to one side and subjected the scroll to his expert appraisal. He shook his head.

'Dreadfully dry. I can't understand why the painter didn't put more ink on his brush. And all those straggly lines all over the place look a real mess!'

Doctor Lu was horrified. The colour drained from his face. A fine piece of Grass-style calligraphy should alternate 'hollow' and 'solid' strokes, the former being 'dry' (written with a brush lightly laden with ink), the latter 'moist' (black and thick). In this way the two kinds of stroke complement each other, and enhance each other's beauty. The 'straggly lines' are what calligraphers call 'silken threads'. The well balanced interweaving of these 'threads' between individual strokes or characters lends to the aesthetic harmony of the piece as a whole. In just a few words, Trinket had betrayed his utter ignorance of the art of calligraphy.

Doctor Lu pointed to another scroll.

This is a rubbing of an inscription in the ancient Oracle-Bone script. Unlettered as I am, I can recognize none of these words. I crave your instruction, Mr Wei.'

Trinket found himself looking at some tadpole squiggles which somehow reminded him very much of the inscription he had seen on the stone tablet in the Monastery of Universal Salvation, in the Wutai Mountains—the one he had interpreted so fluently for the benefit of Fat Dhuta. He had a sudden brainwave.

'I can read this!' he exclaimed. 'It says: Long Life to Our Great Leader Hong of the Mystic Dragon Sect! Blessings be on Him!'

'Heaven be praised!' cried the doctor. 'You really do know the words.'

Trinket grew suspicious at the doctor's joyful expression, and his trembling voice.

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'Why's he so happy all of a sudden/ he thought to himself, 'just because I can decipher a few words? Unless of course he's a Mystic Dragon himself? Oh no! Wait a minute. Snakes . . . snakes. . . magical snakes . . . mystic dragons! Is this Snake Island?'

Where's Fat Dhuta got to?' he blurted out. : >• Doctor Lu started, and retreated a couple of steps.

'You . . . you know?' he cried in a panic-stricken voice.

Trinket nodded, although in fact he knew virtually nothing.

'So long as you know, then everything's fine/ said Doctor Lu in a serious tone of voice.

He walked to his desk, ground some ink, and spread out a sheet of paper. Then he dipped his writing-brush in the ink, and gestured to Trinket to come over to him.

Would you be so kind as to explain some of the words in the rubbing for me? Write them down. Tell me which is the word "Hong" and which is the word "Sect"?'

Trinket uttered a silent cry of despair. He would rather die than try to write. But the doctor's face looked grim, he dared not refuse. He walked up to the desk, sat down, and reached out his hand to take hold of the writing-brush. Then he clutched it tightly— like someone holding a chopstick, or a butcher with a knife about to slaughter a pig, or someone with a hammer about to drive a nail into the wall. The last thing he resembled was a calligrapher holding a brush.

Doctor Lu tried to control his rage.

'Very well then/ he said slowly, 'write your name first/

All of a sudden Trinket leapt to his feet, and flung the brush to the ground. Ink splashed everywhere.

'I don't know how!' he shouted hysterically. 'Not a dog's fart! I can't even write the word fart! All that stuff about "Long Life to Leader Hong" was a load of rubbish. I just made it up to fool old Bones! So if you want me to write, you'll have to wait for my next life. You may as well just kill me now!'

'You don't know how to write a single word?' said Doctor Lu coldly.

'Not a word! Not even "smelly turtle" or "stupid jerk"!'

Trinket's game was up. He felt a mixture of shame and anger. Here he was stuck on Snake Island, doomed to death, with no hope of escape. He might as well try and score a few verbal points at Doctor Lu's expense.

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Doctor Lu lapsed into silence. He took up the writing-brush and began writing some tadpole-like characters on the paper. 'What word is this?' he asked.

Top your mother's!' howled Trinket. 'I already told you—I said I can't read and I meant it!'

'Good!' muttered Doctor Lu, nodding his head. 'Now at least we know where we stand. So Fat Dhuta fell for your little trick. But what do we do now? We have already reported the inscription to our Leader, damn you!'

Suddenly he leapt forwards, caught Trinket by the neck with both hands, and began squeezing him, tighter and tighter.

'It is all your doing!' he spat out bitterly. 'Now we are guilty of deceiving our Leader! Our own lives are in danger! Sooner or later every one of us will come to a horrible end. So we might as well all die now, and save ourselves the endless torment!'

Trinket was suffocating. His face was swollen and purple, his tongue was protruding from his mouth. A little more pressure from the doctor's hands, and the boy would be dead. But Doctor Lu seemed to lose his nerve. He loosened his fingers, threw Trinket to the ground, and stomped out of the room in a rage.

A long time passed before Trinket was able to overcome his terror and rise to his feet again. Mentally he reviled Doctor Lu a hundred times as a 'dead turtle', and a 'mother-fucking scumbag'. But his thoughts soon turned to escape. It was no use trying to hide in the woods; that would only be to endanger his life yet again. He went to the bamboo door and tried to push it open, but it was locked from the outside. Then he moved over to one of the windows and gazed down. Beneath the house lay a deep gorge, with no visible way out of it. He turned around and looked at the scrolls hanging on the walls.

This stuff makes me want to puke!'

He took the writing-brush, dipped it in the ink, and began doodling an endless series of turtles of various shapes and sizes all over the doctor's precious scrolls. Eventually he grew tired of doing this, threw the brush on the ground, curled up in a chair, and was soon fast asleep. It was already the middle of the night when he got up, and still no one had come bothering him. He was starving.

'Now I suppose turtle Lu is trying to starve me to death/ he thought.

A long while later, he heard the sound of approaching

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footsteps, and a light shone through a crack in the bamboo door. The door opened, and Doctor Lu entered the room with a candlestick in his hand, his head tilted to one side, his eyes fixed on Trinket, who could read no recognizable emotion on his face, but was terrified

none the less. As he put the candlestick down on the table, the doctor caught sight of the turtle-graffiti on his scrolls. They were ruined beyond repair. He burst into an uncontrollable rage.

'You . . . you . . .' he howled, his hand raised to strike. But then he checked himself in mid-flight.

'You . . . you . . .'

His voice was so choked with emotion, he could not utter another word.

'What do you reckon?' quipped Trinket with a nervous smile. 'Did I do a good job?'

Doctor Lu heaved a deep sigh and sank to the ground.

'Wonderful!' he muttered. 'Just wonderful!'

Improvisations on a Tadpole Theme

To Trinket's intense surprise, Doctor Lu, so far from hitting him, appeared to be complimenting him on his 'work of art'—his Turtle Improvisations on a Tadpole Theme. But the doctor's lugubrious expression soon betrayed his underlying pain. Trinket felt a certain sense of remorse.

'Doctor Lu, I'm so ... so sorry I've ruined your paintings.' 'It doesn't matter,' replied the doctor, burying his head in his hands. After a long while, he turned to Trinket.

'You must be hungry. Let's go and have some refreshment.' In the main room, a sumptuous meal—four dishes (including one chicken dish and one fish dish), and a pot of soup—had been set on the table. Doctor Lu's wife accompanied Fang Yi into the room, and the four of them sat down together to eat.

'Maybe he really is pleased with me. Maybe this nosh is his way of thanking me for my turtle-art,' Trinket mused to himself. But he soon dismissed the idea, and did not venture to bring up the subject during their meal for fear of upsetting the doctor, who still looked distinctly moody.

The meal was finished in silence, and Doctor Lu led Trinket back to his study. He picked up the writing-brush from the floor, and wrote the words Trinket Wei' on a piece of paper.

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This is your name. Can you write it?'

The words know me, but I don't seem to know them,' answered Trinket. 'No. I can't.'

Doctor Lu cleared his throat and gazed out of the window, lost in deep thought. A moment later he took the candlestick in his left hand, and walked over to the rubbing in the Tadpole script hanging on the wall. He examined it again in minute detail, following the characters one by one with his finger and mumbling them quietly to himself. Then he returned to the table and began writing something energetically on a sheet of paper. As he wrote he kept going back and counting the number of characters on the rubbing, then checking it against the number on his own scroll; time after time he altered his own text, then went to examine the rubbing again.

These three characters look exactly the same,' he mumbled to himself. 'But these two are only a passable approximation. They have to be a perfect match.'

Again he was lost in deep thought for quite some time. Then he made a few more alterations on his own scroll, and gave a cry of joy.

That's it!'

Trinket had no idea what was going on. He had eaten, and was no longer hungry: that was the main thing. He paid Doctor Lu little attention. The doctor spread out another sheet of paper and began writing.

This time he wrote slowly and with great care—it was evidently a fair copy. When he had finished, he read it through softly, his head swaying gently to the rhythm of the text. Trinket was able to catch the odd phrase such as 'Mystic Dragon Island', and 'Long Life to Our Great Leader Hong'. Then towards the end, he heard him mumble something about the locations of the first copy and second copy. Suddenly it dawned on him. The squiggly text on which the doctor was lavishing such calligraphic effort was simply Trinket's own impromptu version of the stele he had spotted in the courtyard of the Monastery of Universal Salvation, the version he had invented for the benefit of Fat Dhuta. Old Bones must have swallowed his nonsense literally, made a rubbing of the (to Trinket) unintelligible squiggles on the stone, and committed the Authorized Trinket Version of their meaning to memory; then he had communicated the whole thing to the doctor—the rubbing of the text and the word-for-word oral interpretation—on his return

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to the island. Trinket had turned down Fat Dhuta's earlier invitation to the island. But an ironic twist of fate (in the form of that romantic cruise on the boat) had now brought him to the island anyway, where his little stele-prank had been shown up for what it was! And the worst thing about it was that the Great Leader (whoever he was) had been officially told about the stele and its wonderful prophesies! The Leader was sure to fly into a hideous rage when he found out that he had been duped, and would have both Trinket and Fang Yi thrown into some terrible pit, to be consumed alive by thousands of poisonous snakes! Trinket shuddered with terror at the very thought.

Doctor Lu turned round with a smile of satisfaction.

'Mr Wei, we must compliment you on having been able to decipher the Tadpole inscription on the stone tablet. It must have been a Blessing vouchsafed to Our Great Leader, that such a Divine Prodigy as yourself appeared at such an opportune moment!'

Trinket cleared his throat.

There's no need to tease me. Me, know Tadpole script? You'll be telling me I know Frog's-Leg script next, or Toad script. ... I just made the whole thing up to fool old Bones.'

The doctor smiled.

'Mr Wei, you are being too modest! What we have here is indeed the inscription on the stone tablet exactly as you recited it. See, I have copied it down. Please listen carefully and tell me if there are any mistakes.'

The doctor began:

In the Second Year of the Zhen-Guan Period of the Tang Dynasty, the year Six Hundred and Twenty-Nine according to the Great Western Calendar, the Tenth Lunar Month, the Day Jia-Zi, His Majesty's four loyal subjects Lord Li Jing, General Cheng, the Minister of War Li, and the Governor of Xuzhou Qin Shubao, being assembled on the Embroidered Peak of the Wutai Mountains, did behold in the rosy firmament of the eastern heaven, inscribed in great characters of gold that shone mightily against the clouds, the following marvellous proclamation:

'One thousand years from now, there will come to pass the great conquest of the Qing Tartars. In the eastern sea there lies an island, its name is the Isle of the Mystic Dragon. On that isle will preside a Great Leader, and his name will be Hong. He will hold sway over his subjects with mighty awe, wielding magical power over them. They will practise strange rites, and great will be their power that will be restored

thereby. Long Life and Blessings to the Great Leader! May He Live For Ever!'

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A link while later, and the heavens were emblazoned with farther characters in black: 'To the Great Leader Hong will be vouchsafed transcriptions of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. There will be in all Eight transcriptions of the Sutra. These will be concealed in the following locations: the First will be concealed in the Great Spirit Monastery, on Ox Mountain in the province of Henan; the Second will be concealed in the Heavenly Heart Nunnery, on Brush Stand Mountain in the province of Shanxi; the Third will be concealed in the Taoist Priory of the Pierced Cloud, on Green City Mountain in the province of Sichuan; the Fourth will be concealed in the Shaolin Monastery, on Mount Song in the province of Henan; the Fifth will be concealed in the Taoist Abbey of Truth and Might, on Wudang Mountain in the province of Hubei; the Sixth will be concealed in the Kasyapa Monastery, on Mount Kongdong in the Western Marches; the Seventh will be concealed in the estates of the Mu Family in Kunming, in the province, of Yunnan; and the Eighth will be concealed in the Palace of the Satrap Wu, Prince of the West, also in Kunming in the province of Yunnan.' These words of prophecy we have most reverentially inscribed upon this tablet of stone, that they may bear witness to men of future ages.

Doctor Lu recited the words singsong fashion, and when he had finished, turned to Trinket. 'Is that correct?'

'Yes, but tell me/ said Trinket, remembering the objection raised by Bag-of-Bones. 'If this stone tablet was carved in the Tang dynasty, how did they know about Satrap Wu?'

The Almighty in his wisdom knows all. If he knew about Our Great Leader Hong, of course he knew about Satrap Wu.'

'Fair enough,' Trinket nodded.

But he was meanwhile laughing to himself and thinking:

'I hope the Almighty-in-his-washroom (or whatever) knows what you're on about, because / certainly don't!'

The inscription needs to be recited with complete accuracy,' Doctor Lu went on. 'Heaven blessed you with an extraordinary ability to read Tadpole script. You are a prodigy. But in order to avoid any possibility of misinterpretation in later times, I want you now to memorize the whole inscription, so that you can recite it perfectly by heart when you are summoned into the presence of Our Great Leader Hong. Our Leader is sure to be pleased, and will reward you generously.'

Trinket finally realized what Doctor Lu had in mind. He nodded several times in succession.

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'I see, I see!'

He was able to piece together what had happened. Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu had reported to Leader Hong that they had found a child prodigy who had been able to interpret the Tadpole inscription, and the Great Leader had demanded to set eyes on the prodigy for himself. Now that Doctor Lu knew that the Authorized Trinket Version of the inscription was a fake, he had decided to create another inscription of his own (along the lines of the Authorized Version), in order to cover up their deception of the Great Leader. He had taken enormous care to make his new version tally with the number of characters in Fat Dhuta's rubbing.

'Now, I'm going to read it to you again sentence by sentence,' said Doctor Lu, 'and you are to repeat it after me, until you have memorized every word perfectly.'

Trinket really had no choice. And anyway, he found the whole idea of being in cahoots with Doctor Lu and fooling the Great Leader rather appealing. It might be a lot of fun. So he did as he was told, and repeated the sentences after Doctor Lu. He had always had an excellent memory, and was able to memorize large chunks of normal speech with ease. Doctor Lu's inscription was short, but it was full of difficult bookish expressions ('rosy firmament' and 'vouchsafed', for example, were quite beyond Trinket's normal vocabulary). Luckily Doctor Lu was an extremely patient teacher. By the thirtieth repetition, Trinket had managed to get it off pat.

He spent what was left of that night at Doctor Lu's house, and recited the text perfectly by heart once more the following morning, much to the satisfaction of the doctor, who now took his brush, spread out another sheet of paper, and began writing down all the Tadpole-script characters, teaching him how to decipher (and how to write) the squiggly words, even the ones for 'rosy firmament' and 'vouchsafed'. It was torment for Trinket, who was a reluctant and restless student at the best of times. But somehow Doctor Lu succeeded. Doctor Lu knew that the original inscription, the one on the stone in the monastery courtyard, had meant something quite different. His only concern was to make up a text with exactly the same number of characters as the rubbing, and with a content designed to please the Leader—at least for the time being. There

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were discrepancies between the two texts which a careful examination (especially by a man as intelligent as the Leader) would soon uncover. But in the limited time available, this was the best he could do. Let the future take care of itself!

Trinket's progress at writing was extremely slow. By noon that day he had learned a total of four Tadpole characters. Luckily the original graphs themselves were weird enough, so even in Trinket's ungainly hand they looked almost plausible. He learned three more graphs in the afternoon, and two more that night, which made a grand total of nine in one day. But he kept screaming and yelling during his practice, and threw his brush on the ground more than once. Doctor Lu threatened and cajoled him, and it was only when he thought of asking Fang Yi to sit next to the boy that Trinket finally settled down a bit and tried to work at it. All this time Doctor Lu was fretting that the Leader would summon Trinket before he had learned the whole inscription, in which case not only would Trinket lose his head, but Doctor Lu and the whole of his family would be put to death as well.

But there was no hurrying Trinket. The more Doctor Lu pressed him, the slower was his progress. The tadpoles just seemed to swim around in Trinket's head in ever widening and more confusing circles. A few days later, although Trinket had totally recovered from his snake-bites, he could still barely decipher thirty-Tadpole graphs.

A Summons

The doctor heard Fat Dhuta's voice at the door.

'Doctor Lu, our Leader has summoned Mr Wei.'

The doctor's face turned pale, his hands trembled, and he lost hold of his writing-brush which fell onto his robe and splashed him with ink.

In came Bag-of-Bones. Trinket greeted him with a smile.

'Bones, it's been so long!'

From the drawn expression of Doctor Lu, Fat Dhuta could see that all was not well.

'I should have known right at the start that this boy was only mucking around!' he muttered. 'It's just that I so badly wanted to achieve something for the cause! And all I've done is to dig my own grave!'
'You've only got yourself to worry about!' grumbled Doctor

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Lu. 'What about me? There are eight people in my family to think about!' Fat Dhuta heaved a long sigh.
'It's our fate. It must have been predestined. Even if this hadn't happened, our Leader might not have allowed us to live very long.'
'One moment, Fat Dhuta,' said Doctor Lu gloomily. 'I have something to say to my wife.'
A little while later, Doctor Lu returned to his study, with traces of tears visible on his cheeks.
'Brother Lu, please give me one of your Ascension Tablets,' said Fat Dhuta.
Doctor Lu nodded, produced a little porcelain phial from inside his gown, removed the stopper, and tipped out a tiny red pill.
'Remember, the moment you put this into your mouth, you're a dead man,' he said grimly.
'I won't forget!' replied Fat Dhuta with a wry smile, reaching out his hand to take the pill.
Trinket, who had witnessed a very different Fat Dhuta on Wutai, in full fighting form against the Eighteen Lohans, shivered to see him contemplating the possibility of suicide, rather than face the wrath of an unforgiving Leader.
As the three of them left the study, Trinket heard the sound of weeping issuing from the women's quarters.
'Where's Miss Fang?' he asked. 'Isn't she coming with us?' 'Quite the little ladies' man!' quipped the Dhuta. 'On Wutai you had that girl Doublet, now you've got this Miss Fang! Come on—let's go!'
He lifted Trinket up in the air with his left hand, and strode off in an easterly direction, quickening his pace until he was soon going as fast as a trotting horse. Doctor Lu kept up with them, moving with an athletic stride that contrasted strangely with his gloomy preoccupied air.
The three of them soon turned and began heading towards a peak on the northern end of the island. There were poisonous snakes all around them—some hanging from the trees, some crawling in the grass and on the road itself—but strangely the three of them passed through them all unscathed. They had rounded two hills, when they saw a cluster of large bamboo buildings on the very top of the peak a long way ahead of them.
The road narrowed as they climbed towards the peak, and

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there was no longer room for Doctor Lu to walk alongside Fat Dhuta. He therefore fell several yards behind.
Fat Dhuta then whispered in Trinket's ear:
'So what's happened to the copy of the Sutra you found?'
'I don't know. / haven't got it,' replied Trinket.
'Don't worry, I know that. I've already had a good look. Where have you put it?'
'I suppose the Shaolin monks must have given it to their Abbot,' said Trinket, thinking that Fat Dhuta would never dare try to seize the Sutra from the Abbot of the Shaolin Monastery.

Since Fat Dhuta had in fact himself surrendered the Sutra to Brother Cordial, he was ready to believe Trinket's story.

'When you see our Leader, whatever you do, don't mention the Sutra,' muttered Fat Dhuta. 'If he asks you for it, and you can't oblige, he'll throw you into a cave crawling with poisonous snakes.'

Fat Dhuta was obviously terrified of the Leader, and nervous lest Doctor Lu should overhear their conversation. Trinket turned to him and whispered:

'You're the one who gave the Shaolin monks the Sutra—he'll throw you into the snake-cave for sure. Or send you to Shaolin to get it back . . .'

Fat Dhuta trembled with fear, and fell silent.

After proceeding for about the time it would take to consume an average meal, they reached the top of the peak, where they saw four youths dressed in blue approaching hand in hand, each with a long-sword strapped to his back.

'Comrade Dhuta, what's this boy doing here?' asked the youth furthest to the left.

'Our Leader has summoned him,' replied Fat Dhuta, depositing Trinket on the ground.

From the other side came three girls all in red, laughing and simpering, each of them also equipped with a long-sword. They saw Trinket and his companions.

'Is this your love child?' said one of them, turning to Fat Dhuta with a grin and pinching Trinket on the cheek.

'Very funny/' replied Fat Dhuta. This boy has been especially summoned by our Great Leader, who wants to question him on some important matters.'

Any further banter was forestalled by the sudden ringing of a

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bell. The boys and girls turned around and dashed towards one of the bamboo buildings.

'The Leader is calling an assembly,' Fat Dhuta explained to Trinket. 'Mind your tongue when you meet him.'

Poor Dhuta, thought Trinket. It was pathetic that such a formidable fighter should seem almost nervous in the presence of these children.

The Great Leader

People were flooding towards the bamboo building from every direction. Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu led Trinket in, and after walking down a long covered walkway, they found themselves at the entrance to an enormous hall, big enough to accommodate more than a thousand people. Trinket had spent quite a long time in the Imperial Palace, and he was accustomed to large halls: but even he was impressed by this one.

Inside the hall he found groups of young acolytes dressed in different colours. They stood in five different parts of the hall according to their colours—the boys in blue, white, black, or yellow, the girls in red. Each one of them had a long-sword strapped on their back. Each colour group was approximately a hundred strong. At the far end, in the centre of the hall, stood two bamboo chairs set with brocade-covered cushions; on both sides of the chairs stood several dozen adults, both men and women, ranging in age from thirty to seventy, all unarmed. Altogether between five and six hundred people were gathered in the hall, but there was dead silence. Not a single cough could be heard.

Tamardy!' Trinket exclaimed silently to himself. Who does this big guy think he is! The Emperor or something?'

After an interval, he heard the bell ring nine times, and footsteps could be heard coming

from the inner hall.

Ten men walked in, all in their thirties, each dressed in one of the five colours, and took up their positions on either side of the bamboo chairs. After another interval a great bell sounded, followed by the tinkling of hundreds of little silver bells. Everyone in the hall knelt, and the chanting began:

'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him!'

Fat Dhuta tugged Trinket lightly by the collar, signalling him

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to kneel down. Trinket reluctantly complied. He glanced up, and saw a man and a woman walk out from the inner hall and seat themselves down on the chairs. The silver bells tinkled again, and everybody rose to their feet.

The man looked positively ancient. He had a long white beard hanging down to his chest, and his face was covered with scars and wrinkles. He was altogether rather an ugly sight. So this, mused Trinket, was the Great Leader of the Mystic Dragons. The woman, on the other hand, he was happy to note, was ravishingly beautiful. She looked about twenty-three or twenty-four years old, and had an enchanting smile.

'Wow!' Trinket whistled silently to himself. 'She's even prettier than Fang!'

A man in blue standing to her left now took two steps forward, and, holding a blue sheet of paper in his hand, began to declaim:

'Let us read the Treasured Teachings of Our Most Merciful and Mighty Leader. It is written: "United we stand, United we will triumph! Our Power will reign Supreme!"'

Everyone in the hall repeated this in unison.

'United we stand, United we will triumph! Our Power will reign Supreme!'

Trinket was staring goggle-eyed at the handsome lady. The chanting shocked him out of his reverie.

'Long Life to Our Leader! Courage to all Comrades! With Him we will Surmount Every Challenge! With Him we will Conquer the World! We will Live for Him, and Die for Him! Obey His Every Command! May His Grace Shine upon us like the Light of the Sun and Moon!'

The man in blue continued declaiming, and the assembly chanted the words after him in chorus.

'The Leader's Treasured Teachings my arse!' thought Trinket to himself. 'Our Triad passwords sounded better than this load of crap!'

The chanting finished with the words: 'Obey His Teachings! Follow Him to Victory!'

The acolytes were especially enthusiastic in their chanting. Leader Hong's ugly face registered no emotion whatsoever, while the exquisite lady by his side smiled sweetly as she murmured the chants along with the others.

The assembly fell silent again.

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Madame Hong and the Dragon Marshals

Still smiling, the fair lady glanced across the hall.

'Black Dragon Marshal, you are due to present the Sutra today.'

She spoke slowly, enunciating the words clearly and with an attractive intonation.

She held out her left hand and opened her palm. Trinket could see even from a distance that

her hand was superbly smooth and white; it looked as if it had been carved from a piece of flawless white jade.

'She'd make a lovely wife!' he found himself thinking at once. 'None of the whores at Vernal Delights were a patch on her! She'd have had all the old men breaking the door down!' An elderly man in black standing to the left of the two 'thrones' now moved a couple of steps forward.

'I wish to report to Madame that we have received news from Peking about the whereabouts of four of the Sutras.'

His voice was trembling with fear.

'Our people are working according to the Leader's instructions and sparing no effort—not even their lives—to lay hands on the Sutras and present them to the Leader and Madame.' What a pity she's married to the Leader,' thought Trinket. 'What a waste to have such a beautiful flower growing in such a pile of shit!'

'Your Leader has extended the deadline three times,' said the lady with a sinister little smile. 'But you always delay. You aren't working hard enough. Don't you think you're being a bit disloyal to the Leader?'

'I owe everything to the Leader and to Madame,' grovelled the man referred to as the Black Dragon Marshal, prostrating himself lower and lower to the ground. There have been certain obstacles. Two of the six people I sent to the Palace have given their lives: Deng Bingchun, and Liu Yan. I beg for more time.'

So, mused Trinket, the Fat Sow (Liu Yan) and the cross-dressing maid (Deng Bingchun) were acting on orders from this Black Dragon Marshal. It seemed that the Marshal was even higher up in the Mystic Hierarchy than the fake Empress Dowager. The lady waved her left hand to Trinket. 'Come here, little man,' she said, with that irresistible smile of hers.

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At first Trinket was too shocked to respond.

'Me?' he finally mumbled.

'Yes, you.'

Trinket glanced quickly at Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta who were still standing next to him.

'Madame is summoning you,' said the doctor. 'Go on, salute her respectfully.'

'And what if I decide to fart in her face?' Trinket thought to himself. But he did as he was told.

'Long Life to Our Leader and to His Wife!' he said, bowing deeply. 'Blessings be on You Both!'

'You're a clever little man, I must say!' said Madame Hong, visibly amused. 'And who told you to add "and to His Wife"?''

Actually Trinket had emended the immutable Mystic Mantra without thinking too much about it. After all, it didn't cost him anything to be a little obsequious. And this beautiful lady clearly had a lot of authority.

The Leader's Long Life wouldn't be much fun without His Wife to keep him company,' he replied. 'How lonely he would be if His Wife rose to heaven a hundred or two years before he did!'

Madame Hong shook with laughter on hearing this, and even the Leader could not help laughing, rocking his head from side to side and twiddling his long beard.

Members of the Mystic Dragon Sect, whatever their rank, stood in absolute terror of the Leader, and never under any circumstances ventured to talk frivolously in his presence. They were astonished, and hugely relieved, to see Trinket emerge unscathed.

'So it was your own idea to add the few extra words?' asked the smiling lady.

'Yes. I had to, because your name was on the Tadpole inscription too.'

Doctor Lu's heart sank.

'After all the trouble I went to, to teach him the inscription!' he thought. 'Now that he has added her name, our inscription will not have the same number of words as the original.

They will soon discover our secret!'

Madame Hong was equally surprised at Trinket's words.

'You mean, my name was on the stone tablet?'

'Yes.'

No sooner had Trinket said this than he realized what a spot

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he'd be in if she asked him to recite the inscription. But luckily for him, she did not.

'Your surname is Wei, isn't it? And you come from Peking?' 'Yes,' Trinket replied.

'Comrade Dhuta told me that you once met a fat lady called Liu Yan in Peking, and that she taught you some kungfu skills. Is that right?'

Figuring that Fat Dhuta must have reported everything he had said to the Leader and Madame Hong, except for the whereabouts of one of the Sutras (the one supposed to be in the Shaolin Monastery), Trinket resolved to keep on lying. After all, the Fat Sow was dead, and could not contradict him.

'Yes/ he answered. 'Auntie Liu was a good friend of my uncle's; she often used to drop by.'

'What for?' Madame asked with a sly little smile. 'She used to like chatting and joking with my uncle. Sometimes they even used to cuddle and kiss a bit. They didn't know I was watching/ said Trinket, thinking that details like this might make his story more plausible.

'You naughty boy! Spying on other people like that!' Madame Hong was still smiling. Then she turned to the Black Dragon Marshal, and her tone of voice altered. 'Did you hear what he said? I don't think the boy is lying.'

Trinket saw the Black Dragon Marshal's countenance change. Shaking with abject terror, he threw himself on his knees and knocked his head again and again on the ground.

'I... I have been negligent/ he said, 'and for that I deserve the harshest punishment. But I beg you to have . . . mercy on me so that I can atone for my fault with good service/

Trinket was puzzled. What had his story about the Fat Sow messing about with his 'uncle' got to do with this old man? Why was he so terrified?

'Atone with good service? What good service have you ever performed?' The smile was still there, but fainter. 'I thought that the people you sent to Peking on this mission were doing their duty properly, working loyally for their Leader. But it seems they were just indulging in debauchery/

The Black Dragon Marshal kept knocking his head on the ground, and blood was pouring from his forehead. Trinket felt sorry for him and wanted to put in a good word for him, but could think of nothing to say.

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The Black Dragon Marshal hobbled forward on his knees. 'Leader, I braved so many dangers with you!' he cried. 'What's the use of talking about the past?' sneered Madame Hong. 'You're getting old. It's high time you stepped aside.'

The Black Dragon Marshal raised his head and turned to Leader Hong.

'Leader, have you no feeling left for an old Comrade?'

'There are too many useless old men in our Sect,' replied the Leader. His voice was expressionless, and there was not the least trace of emotion on his face. 'It's time for some

reorganization.'

This was the first time that Trinket had heard his voice. It was deep and muffled. Suddenly a loud chorus rang out from the massed acolytes:

'Obey His Teachings! Follow Him to Victory!'

The Black Dragon Marshal heaved a desperate sigh, and staggered to his feet.

'Out with the Old! In with the New!' he said. 'It seems it is time for us old people to step aside. Time for us to die.'

He turned around.

'Bring it to me.'

Four acolytes in black standing in the doorway hurried into the hall, each bearing a wooden plate with a brass cover. They placed the plates on the ground in front of the Black Dragon Marshal and retreated quickly. Everyone else in the hall took a few paces back.

'Obey His Teachings! Follow Him to Victory!' mumbled the Black Dragon Marshal. Then suddenly: 'Ha ha. . . . Not this time I won't!'

He stretched out his hand and, taking one of the brass covers by its knob, lifted it up. Something wriggled out from under the cover. It was a bright banded little snake. There was a sudden flash of light, and the blade of a knife struck from the side, slicing the snake clean in half. It fell twitching back onto the plate.

Trinket cried out in surprise, as did the whole assembly.

'Who did that?'

'Who's the rebel?'

'Get him!'

Treason! Who dares defy the Leader?'

Madame Hong suddenly stood up with her arms folded, and swayed her body three times from side to side. This was clearly a

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prearranged sign. It was immediately followed by the clanking sound of swords being drawn from their scabbards. A massed phalanx of acolytes came rushing up to the front of the hall, and, dividing themselves neatly into small groups, according to the colour they were wearing, proceeded to surround each of the fifty or sixty Marshals, including Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu.

'You must have spent months rehearsing this, Madame,' said a black-bearded Taoist in his fifties, laughing. 'It seems a rather heavy-handed way of dealing with old folks like us.'

'Don't be insolent to the Leader and Madame,' shouted two of the eight young girls in red who had surrounded him, their swords pointed at his chest.

'Madame/ continued the Taoist. 'It was I who did it. I, Rootless the Taoist, killed the snake. Punish me. There is no need to put the blame on anyone else.'

'So you confess. Very good.' Madame Hong smiled as she returned to her chair. 'But why? The Leader has been so good to you; he appointed you Red Dragon Marshal, above all other Comrades except for himself. Why would you want to turn against him?'

'I have no desire to turn against him. I just wish to beg mercy for the Black Dragon Marshal. He has done so much for our Sect over the years. It seems wrong to kill him just because some of his subordinates have failed to perform their duties.' 'What if I decline your request?' Still the smile.

'It is true that the Leader founded the Mystic Dragon Sect,' replied Rootless the Taoist. 'But thousands of other Comrades also braved dangers and played their part. Altogether one thousand and twenty-three of us elders took part in the armed struggle then, and now less than a hundred remain. Some died at the hands of our enemies. Others were eliminated by

the Leader. I beg the Leader to be merciful to us and not to demand our lives. If he has had enough of us, and wants to replace us, he can just dismiss us.'

'Since it was founded, no one has been allowed to leave the Sect alive,' said Madame Hong grimly. 'You must be out of your mind.'

'So you reject my request?'

'I regret that our rules do not allow this to happen.' 'I see.' Rootless the Taoist laughed. 'So you are going to put us all to death.'

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She smiled.

'Not necessarily. The Leader will always be good to any loyal Comrade. Total loyalty to the Leader is the only thing that matters.'

She turned to the others with a smile and continued: 'Raise your hands if you are loyal to the Leader.'

The acolytes in the hall all raised their left hands at the same time, and so did all the elders, including Rootless the Taoist. Trinket raised his hand too.

'We vow unshakeable loyalty to the Leader,' they cried in one voice.

'Very good,' said Madame Hong, nodding her head. 'So everyone in this room is loyal to the Leader, including apparently this boy who doesn't even belong to our Sect.'

(Yes, I took the oath—to be loyal to an ugly old turtle! Trinket muttered silently to himself.)

'So that means there isn't a single traitor here. It's curious, isn't it? There must be something wrong somewhere. I think I'd better look into this carefully. I'll need to ask a few questions. Sorry to have to put the older Comrades to such inconvenience.'

She turned to the acolytes:

'Tie them up!'

'Wait a moment!' cried a big burly man.

'What do you propose, White Dragon Marshal?' Madame asked.

'Nothing. I just feel it's unjust.'

'Are you accusing me of being unjust?' she asked, clicking her tongue.

'No, I would never dare do that. I have followed the Leader for twenty years and have fought bravely by his side. These boys and girls weren't even born when I risked my life for the Sect. Why do you consider them loyal to the Leader but not us?'

'So you are indispensable to the Sect, are you, White Dragon Marshal?'

'The Mystic Dragon Sect was founded by the Leader. We're only his followers, but—'

'But what?'

'If we deserve no credit, then these young people deserve even less.'

'And that includes me?'

'In a way,' he answered hesitantly.

'If none of us can claim any credit, then you can't blame me for killing you, can you?' she said slowly. There was a murderous

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look in her eyes, though her smile was as sweet and charming as ever.

'My life is unimportant, of course,' cried the White Dragon Marshal angrily. 'But if you execute others who are loyal or who have rendered meritorious service, you will be destroying the very foundation and future of the Sect.'

'I see. Oh dear, I'm feeling so tired . . .'

Her languid yawn was, in fact, a secret sign to commence the execution. On hearing it, the seven boys dressed in white surrounding the White Dragon Marshal thrust their swords into his body in one concerted movement. As they withdrew the swords, blood spurted from the seven wounds, and splashed all over their white clothes.

'My Leader,' cried the White Dragon Marshal in pain, 'you . . . you . . . you have a heart of stone.'

So saying, he fell dead to the ground.

The seven boys marched smugly out of the hall.

The other elders all trembled with fear. The White Dragon Marshal was a veteran kungfu expert, and yet even he was powerless against the swords of these boys. Clearly they had received secret training from the Leader and had practised the manoeuvre many times.

Madame Hong put her left hand lightly to her pretty little lips and yawned again. Even when yawning she managed to look seductive. The Leader showed not the slightest sign of emotion; it was as if nothing had happened.

'Blue Dragon Marshal, Yellow Dragon Marshal,' said Madame Hong softly. 'Do you think White Dragon Marshal deserved his punishment?'

'He had been planning this rebellion for a long time,' said an old man with small eyes and a pointed chin. 'I reported it to you several times, Madame. But you insisted on giving him another chance, because he was an old Comrade. You were too forgiving! White Dragon was evil! It was kind of you to let him die such a quick death.'

'What an arse-licker!' thought Trinket.

Mutiny on Snake Island

'What about you, Blue Dragon?' said Madame Hong with a smile. 'What do you think?'

'Stand back!' cried a tall, thin man in his fifties, glaring at the

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acolytes in blue who were standing around him. 'If the Leader wants me killed, I can do it myself.'

The eight boys reached out their swords until the tips of the blades were touching the edge of his gown.

'Ha ha ha!' the man laughed contemptuously, and raising his hands slowly, he took hold of the front of his gown. 'Leader Hong, > Madame Hong, when I swore with the other Dragon Marshals to , devote myself to the Sect, I never dreamed that things would come to this. Yellow Dragon is a vile coward . . .'

With a rapid movement of his hands and the sound of tearing cloth, Blue Dragon ripped his long gown in two, and flailing his arms outwards he wound the long strips of cloth around the boys' swords and sent them clanging across the room. Next came a flash of light, and he produced two twenty-inch short-swords of his own, one in each hand. He moved into the attack like a deadly whirlwind. There was a nasty sound of tearing flesh as he drove his twin swords into the boys' chests one after the other. They fell to the ground in a neat circle around him, blood spurting from their wounds.

Gasping with horror, Madame Hong clapped her hands several times, and in answer to this summons, more than twenty more boys came forward and surrounded the Blue Dragon Marshal again, each pointing a sword at him.

'Ha ha ha!' laughed Blue Dragon again. 'Madame, these little brats of yours are no damned good! Our Leader will need something a bit better than them if he wants to achieve Victory . . .'

The Leader seemed as unconcerned about the killing of the eight boys as he had been about the killing of White Dragon. He sat in his chair motionless and unmoved. Madame Hong glanced at her husband, almost with a feeling of remorse. Then she gave a pretty smile and sat down.

'Blue Dragon Marshal,' she said, 'you're certainly a master with the sword

Suddenly there was a resounding series of clangs as swords fell from the hands of the acolytes in the hall and crashed to the ground. One by one the young fanatics fell dizzy and exhausted to the floor. In a matter of seconds, the hall was strewn with prostrate bodies.

'What. . . what's going on?' cried Madame Hong fearfully. She herself felt weak, and slipped from her bamboo chair.

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'Leader,' said the Blue Dragon Marshal, standing erect and proud, with a hideous grin on his face. 'When you had so many of us put to death, did you never think you would see this day?'

He clanked one of his swords against the other, and, stepping over the bodies, walked towards the Leader.

'Not exactly/ the Leader said contemptuously. He clutched one of the arms of his chair and snapped off a piece of it. The Blue Dragon Marshal took two steps backwards, changing countenance in an instant.

'Leader/ he said, 'our great Sect is being broken up and divided against itself. I suppose you now realize who is the source of all the trouble, don't you?'

The Leader cleared his throat. Suddenly he slipped from his chair to the floor. Just as the Blue Dragon Marshal hastened forwards in delight, something came whistling towards him at high speed. It was the broken arm of the Leader's bamboo chair, thrown with such phenomenal strength that, although the Blue Dragon Marshal managed to catch it on the blade of his sword and slice it in two, one half of it impaled itself in his chest, breaking five or six of his ribs and piercing through to his lung. He cried out in pain, and panted hoarsely for breath. He staggered, and his swords dropped from his hands, straight into the prostrate bodies of the two boys lying beneath him.

A chorus of cheers rose from the hall to see the Leader getting the better of Blue Dragon.

The Leader now tried struggling to his feet, propping himself up with one hand; but no sooner was one leg straight than he felt weak in the knees and tumbled clumsily over onto the ground again. Then the others began to realize that they had all, including the Leader, been given a poison which had incapacitated them.

The only person left standing in the hall was Trinket. He was only short, but he towered above the body-strewn hall like a giant. He had no idea what everyone was doing lying on the ground. When he had recovered from his surprise, he tugged at Fat Dhuta's gown.

'Didn't the poison have any effect on you?' asked Fat Dhuta incredulously.

'Poison? I... I don't know/ said Trinket, puzzled. He tried hard to help Fat Dhuta up onto his feet, but Fat Dhuta was too weak and had to sit down again.

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'Comrade Xu,' said Doctor Lu abruptly, addressing Blue Dragon, 'what. . . what kind of

poison did you use?'

The Blue Dragon Marshal seemed drunk. He was swaying from side to side, holding onto a pillar for support, and coughing persistently.

Too bad/ he said between coughs. Too . . . too bad! I was so nearly there! And I failed. I'm . . . I'm really useless.'

'Was it Seven Worm Disabling Potion?' Doctor Lu asked again. 'Or Thousand Mile Devitalizing Scent? Or... was it Blood . . . Blood and Bone . . . Combustion Powder?'

He had mentioned three potent types of poison, and when he came to the last one, his voice trembled in grave fear. The Blue Dragon Marshal was coughing badly and unable to reply.

'Why is that Mr Wei hasn't been affected?' Doctor Lu seemed quite bewildered. 'Ah!' He suddenly cried, as if he had at last understood the truth. 'You put some Floral Serpent Bane on the tips of your swords. What a superb stratagem! Mr Wei, would you be so good as to go and smell the Blue Dragon Marshal's two swords, and see if you can detect the scent of flowers?'

Trinket was damned if he was going to start sniffing poisoned swords.

'I can smell it from here,' he told Doctor Lu. Trinket had already detected a faint but intoxicating fragrance in the air.

'Ah, there we have it then!' said Doctor Lu, beaming happily. 'Floral Serpent Bane is a secretly distilled perfume, which produces a pungent smell when it comes into contact with blood. This normally has a pleasant, relaxing effect. But., . on the island we regularly take Realgar Elixir to protect us against snakes, and when the Bane reacts with the Elixir, it will make us feel weak for twelve hours or so. Superb, Comrade Xu! You had it all planned. And you yourself must have stopped taking the Elixir several months ago.'

Blue Dragon was sitting on the dead bodies of the two boys.

'But in the end Hong Antong's evil hands got the better of me!' he said, shaking his head.

'Man proposes, but fate disposes!'

'How dare you call the Leader by his holy name!' cried one of the boys. 'Madman! Heretic!'

Blue Dragon rose slowly to his feet, picked up a sword from the floor, and staggered towards the Leader.

'So they won't let me call you by your name?' He was

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overtaken by another coughing fit. 'Let's see, shall we. . . . When you're dead, perhaps then they will!'

The boys cried out in alarm. Then came the deep, hoarse voice of the Yellow Dragon Marshal.

'Kill Hong Antong, Comrade Xu, and all of us will revere you as the new Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect. Say after me, everyone: We swear to obey Leader Xu's Command, to follow Him with Unswerving Loyalty.'

There was a brief silence, then twenty or thirty voices could be heard repeating the oath, some firmly, others more hesitantly.

Blue Dragon took a few steps forward, and started coughing and swaying again. He was badly injured, but he knew that come what may he must kill the Leader first.

Madame Hong suddenly laughed.

'You're finished, Blue Dragon,' she said in her ever sweet and softly mesmerizing voice.

'Your legs are weak and the blood is draining from the wound in your chest. You're going to die. Sit down, you must be very tired. Sit down, that's right, sit down and have a rest. Put down your sword and come over here. Sit down beside me, so that I can treat your wound.'

That's right, sit down, and put down the sword.'

Blue Dragon took a few more steps and finally sat slowly down on the floor, letting his sword slip from his grasp.

Realizing that Blue Dragon was all done in, Yellow Dragon decided to try another volte-face. 'You, our Leader? You little rat!' he jeered. 'Just take a piss and have a good look at yourself! You're no Leader!'

'What a mean, shameless fellow you are, Yellow Dragon!' shouted Rootless the Taoist, the Red Dragon Marshal. Tacking with the wind. Once I can move again, the first thing I'll do is to have your head!'

'Why are you so angry? I . . . I . . .' protested Yellow Dragon, but seeing Blue Dragon struggling shakily to rise to his feet, he decided it imprudent to say any more. All eyes in the hall were focused on him.

'Comrade Xu,' said Madame Hong softly, 'you're very tired, you'd better sit down. Look at me, I'll sing you a little song. Have a good rest. I'll sing you a little song every day from now on. Do you think I'm beautiful?'

'Yes, you . . . you're very beautiful. . .' mumbled Blue Dragon. 'But I... I don't dare look at you . . .'

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He was too weak to stand and sat on the floor again. But he knew that if he stayed sitting and did not kill the Leader, all the elders would be in grave danger. The Leader had the most powerful Inner Force. He would be the first to recover, and then he would kill all the elders.

'Doctor... Lu ... I can't move,' he said. 'You must think . . . of a way out. . .'

He was coughing again. Doctor Lu turned to Trinket.

'Mr Wei,' he said, 'the Leader is merciless. As soon as the poison wears off, he will dispose of us all. You'd better kill him and Madame Hong now!'

Trinket to the Rescue

Trinket had already seen the danger Doctor Lu was telling him about, of course. He picked up a sword from the floor and slowly walked towards the Leader.

'Madame Hong is a fox,' warned Doctor Lu. 'She's a witch. Don't look at her. Never look into her eyes.'

'All right/' said Trinket, holding the sword and walking a few steps further forward.

'Don't you think I'm beautiful, little man?' murmured Madame Hong in her soft, bewitching voice. Trinket immediately turned to look at her.

'Don't!' cried Fat Dhuta. 'She's an evil woman!'

Trinket shuddered and closed his eyes tightly. Madame Hong gave a soft laugh.

'Look at me, little man! Go on, you can see your reflection in my eyes!'

Trinket looked into her smiling, glistening eyes. His heart melted. He raised his sword and advanced towards the Leader, thinking to himself, 'How could I ever harm a beautiful woman like you? But I still have to kill your husband.'

Suddenly a voice rang out from his left side.

'Don't, Brother Wei!'

It was a very familiar voice. Startled, Trinket turned around and saw a pretty girl lying on

the floor, dressed in red. It was the Little Countess, Mu Jianping. Trinket was utterly astounded. She was the last person he would have expected to find there.

'What are you doing here?' he asked her, hastening to lift her up.

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She ignored his question, but repeated that he must on no account kill the Leader.

'Have you joined the Mystic Dragons?' said Trinket, in amazement. 'What's going on?'

Her body was as soft as if every bone in it had melted. Resting her head on Trinket's shoulder, she whispered into his ear.

'If you kill the Leader and Madame Hong, that will be the end of me. These old men are sure to kill all of us.'

'But surely if I ask them not to hurt you, they'll listen to me,' said Trinket.

'Oh no they won't!' cried the Little Countess. 'Anyway, the Leader has given us all the drug, and no one but he has the remedy for it.'

Trinket was so happy to see her again after such a long separation, and now, with her sweet body in his arms and her soft voice in his ear, he found it hard to go against her wishes.

'But if I don't kill the Leader,' he said, holding her tightly and whispering back, 'he'll kill me instead, as soon as the poison wears off.'

'Why would the Leader and Madame Hong want to do that, if you were the person who saved their lives?' said the Little Countess.

Trinket agreed with her. The best solution would be to spare the Leader and his wife, and at the same time somehow to save the lives of Fat Dhuta, Doctor Lu, and Rootless the Taoist.

'All right, doll,' he said to the Little Countess, giving her a kiss on her left cheek. 'Even if the Leader kills me, I'll do my best to save you.'

Her face flushed and a joyful look came into her eyes. He laid her gently back on the floor and turned to Doctor Lu.

'Neither the Leader nor Madame Hong should be killed,' he said. 'The inscription prophesies Long Life and Blessings for both of them. It must be obeyed.'

That inscription is a fake!' protested Doctor Lu heatedly. 'Stop fooling around. Dispatch them both at once or we will all die a horrible death.'

Trinket shook his head.

'You mustn't talk like that, Doctor Lu. Have you got the antidote? No, we must help the Leader and Madame to recover from the poison as soon as possible.'

'You're right, little man,' said Madame Hong softly. 'You

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really are very clever. A young hero like you must have been sent by Heaven to assist the Leader. We are very lucky to have you in the Sect.'

Her words gave Trinket a thrill of pleasure.

'But Madame, I'm not a member of the Sect.'

'That's simple enough,' she replied. 'You can join the Sect right away; I'll be your sponsor.'

She then turned to the Leader.

'What position should we appoint this young hero to, considering the remarkable service he's rendered to the Sect?'

'Since White Dragon has been executed for treason,' answered the Leader, 'we should make this young person the next White Dragon Marshal.'

'An excellent idea!'

Madame went on to explain the workings of the Sect to Trinket.

'Under the Leader, there are the Five Dragon Marshals—the Blue, the Yellow, the Red, the White, and the Black. It is an unprecedented honour for you to be made a Marshal as soon as you join the Sect. It shows that the Leader thinks very highly of you. We know that your family name is Wei. What other names do you have?' Trinket,' he replied. 'And on River and Lake they sometimes call me Little White Dragon.' The nom de guerre given him by Whiskers strangely foreshadowed his impending elevation. 'What a miraculous coincidence!' purred Madame Hong. 'Fate certainly moves in mysterious ways!' 'Beware, Mr Wei,' cried Doctor Lu agitatedly. 'Don't you see? Even if they do make you White Dragon Marshal, they will dispose of you whenever they feel like it. Look what they did to the last White Dragon! Kill them! Act now, and we will make you our new Leader!' Fat Dhuta, Xu the Blue Dragon, and Rootless the Taoist all gasped at the sheer audacity of the doctor's proposal. But this might be the only way out. Somehow they had to lure him into taking the plunge. He must kill. The important thing was to get rid of the present Leader and his wife. Afterwards, even if this boy did become the new leader, they could easily control him. 'Yes, yes!' they cried in unison. 'We swear to obey Leader Wei's Command, to follow Him with Unswerving Loyalty!'

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This was beginning to sound rather interesting, thought Trinket. He glanced at Madame Hong out of the corner of his eye. She was half sitting, half reclining on the bamboo chair, her body softly wrapped around it as if there was not a hard bone in it. He took in the gentle curve of her breast, the rosy glow of her cheeks, the moist gleam that shone from her eyes. His mind wandered. 'Being Leader wouldn't be much fun. But she's gorgeous . . .' But after a moment's reflection he dismissed the idea. The whole thing was altogether too dangerous. These Dragon-folk were capable of anything. They'd use him, and then dump him. If there was one thing he wanted above all else, it was to stay alive.

'I have another idea/ he said, turning to the Leader and Madame Hong and addressing them both. 'Will you agree to forget what's happened today? Will you forgive Doctor Lu and Blue Dragon for everything?'

Then turning to Doctor Lu, he continued: 'And I want you to give them the antidote for the poison. Then everyone can make up.'

'Very well,' the Leader hurried to answer before Doctor Lu could speak. 'Let's do as White Dragon suggests. He wants us to live in harmony, and let bygones be bygones. I'm ready to forgive and forget.'

'Wonderful!' cried Trinket with delight.

Doctor Lu could see that Trinket was not going to do it. He heaved a long sigh.

'In that case, I should like our Leader and Madame Hong to swear an oath.'

'I, Su Quan, will forgive and forget everything that has happened today,' declared Madame Hong. 'If I ever go back on my word, may I fall into the Dragon Pool and be bitten by ten thousand snakes.'

'May I, Hong Antong, the Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect,' declared the Leader in his deep voice, 'fall into the Dragon Pool, and my flesh and bones be consumed by ten thousand snakes if I ever blame any old Comrade for what has happened here today.'

'What do you think, Blue Dragon?' asked Doctor Lu.

'I... I'm dying anyway . . .' gasped the Blue Dragon Marshal.

'What about you, Rootless?' Doctor Lu inquired.

'Very well,' said Rootless the Taoist loudly. 'Our Leader was once a great man, and we supported him loyally. Ever since he took Madame as his wife, he has changed. That was when he started

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promoting these children, and eliminating old Comrades like us. Actually, Blue Dragon was only trying to protect himself.'

'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him!' cried all the boys and girls in the hall.

'Mr Wei,' said Doctor Lu, 'it is very easy to dispel the effects of the poison. Go outside, fetch some cold water, and give each of them some to drink.'

Trinket went outside, but could not see any water. Rounding the building, he saw a row of over twenty stone vats filled with water for putting out fires. He immediately filled up a bucket and brought it into the hall. He gave the first ladle of water to the Leader, the second to Madame Hong, and the third to Rootless the Taoist.

'You're a great hero,' he said to Rootless.

He then helped Fat Dhuta, Doctor Lu, and the Little Countess drink the cold water. They all threw up on taking it, and gradually recovered movement in their limbs. When Doctor Lu was able to get to his feet, he went to help Blue Dragon and treated his wounds. Fat Dhuta and the others started ladling out cold water for their friends. Before long, Mu Jianping got up and gave water to a few of the girls from her Branch. Soon the hall stank of vomit.

'Go and rest, all of you,' said Madame. 'We'll meet again tomorrow.'

'I forgive you all,' said the Leader. There must be no more quarrelling, and no taking of revenge. Anyone who offends against this order will be severely punished.'

The assembly vowed obedience, but their hearts were filled with suspicion and anxiety.

'Come with me, White Dragon Marshal,' Madame Hong said softly, beckoning to Trinket, who at first had no idea that she was calling him.

The Leader and Madame walked out of the hall together, followed by Trinket the White Dragon Marshal. Those Sect members who were now able to move bowed to them as they passed, shouting:

'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him!'

Trinket the White Dragon Marshal

They walked along a black flagstone road, round to the left of the assembly hall. After passing through a large grove of bamboos, they

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came to a level terrace. On the terrace, several more large bamboo buildings had been constructed, and a dozen armed youths stood guard at the front and rear entrances. They all bowed to the Leader as he approached.

Madame led Trinket inside one of the bamboo buildings. This is Mr Wei,' she told a boy in white. 'He's the new Marshal of your White Dragon Branch. Show him the way to the east wing where he can rest, and attend to him well.'

Casting Trinket a smile, she went on into the inner house. A number of boys in white greeted Trinket with a bow. Trinket, having been both a senior Palace Eunuch and a Triad Lodge Master, was by now quite used to this kind of subservience and merely nodded in reply.

The boys led him into the east wing and served him tea. The 'wing' was in fact a palatial

apartment furnished in the grandest style, with gold and jade antiques on the tables and shelves, calligraphic scrolls and paintings hanging on the walls, and the most elegant brocade coverlets spread on the bed. It was known as the Abode of Immortal Bliss, and was reserved for the Leader's most honoured guests.

That afternoon, Trinket asked the boys in white to tell him something about the way the Sect was organized. He learned that each of the five Branches (or Dragon Gates as they were called) of the Mystic Dragon Sect consisted of a Marshal, twenty or so elders, a hundred acolytes (boys and girls), and several hundred rank and file members. The elders were distinguished veteran generals who had rendered outstanding service to the Sect; but recently, the Leader had gone to great lengths to promote new recruits, and so acolytes in their twenties were often appointed to positions immediately under the Marshals. For this reason, they were not in the least surprised that young Trinket had become the new White Dragon Marshal.

The next morning the Leader and Madame Hong called another assembly in the hall. There was a general air of apprehension. Despite his promises of the previous day, the Leader was both inscrutable and unpredictable. Anything could happen. He and Madame Hong seated themselves. Trinket was asked to stand fourth among the five Marshals.

'How is the Blue Dragon Marshal?' asked the Leader.

Doctor Lu bowed.

'His injuries are serious, Leader. He is not yet out of danger.'

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'Here are three Breath of Life Pills/ said the Leader, producing a little red porcelain botde from his bosom. 'Give them to him.'

Widiout even the slightest movement, the Leader released die botde, and it flew slowly through the air in die direction of Doctor Lu, who caught it in his outheld hand.

The doctor prostrated himself.

'You are most gracious, Leader.'

He knew how precious these Breath of Life Pills were. Some time ago, die Leader had sent far and wide to search for die rarest herbs—including three-hundred-year-old ginseng, the gall bladder of die white bear, and pods of the snow lotus. Boiling up the ingredients and making them into pills was a long and difficult process. Only a dozen had ever been made. With these, Xu should make a full recovery.

The odier elders also bowed and thanked the Leader, thinking diat if he had forgiven the Blue Dragon Marshal, they themselves must be out of danger. The atmosphere in die hall lightened noticeably.

'I understand that on the Wutai Mountains you came across a stone tablet with a Tadpole inscription. Is that right, White Dragon Marshal?' asked Madame Hong.

'Yes,' Trinket answered, bending at his waist.

'I made a rubbing of the inscription,' said Fat Dhuta, producing an oilskin packet from inside his gown. He opened the packet, took out a large rubbing, and hung it on the eastern wall of the hall. The strange, squiggly white characters on a black background were quite unintelligible to die assembled company.

'Read us out the characters if you know them, White Dragon Marshal,' said Madame.

'Certainly,' said Trinket and, looking at the rubbing, he began to recite loudly the text concocted by Doctor Lu:

'In the Second Year of the Zhen-Guan Period of the Tang Dynasty . . .'

He recited the text slowly, and whenever he was having trouble remembering a word, pretended not to be able to decipher one of die characters on the rubbing. When he came to

the bit about 'Long Life and Blessings to the Great Leader! May He Live For Ever!', he changed the words to 'Blessings to the Great Leader and His Wife.' The 'and His Wife' sounded a bit crude. The learned doctor

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would doubtless have come up with a much more elegant turn of phrase. 'You see! I'm actually in the inscription, Leader,' said Madame Hong, beaming with joy. 'The White Dragon Marshal couldn't possibly have made it up.' The Leader also seemed very happy. He even smiled and nodded his head. 'Excellent! So our Sect was prophesied as long ago as the Tang dynasty.' 'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him!' resounded through the hall. Even Rootless the Taoist and the other elders seemed impressed. Trinket finally came to the last part of the inscription where the location of the eight copies of the Sutra was divulged. 'How strange that they even predicted Satrap Wu,' said Madame Hong. 'It seems that the eight Sutras are ours by right, Leader. It's just a matter of time.' 'Yes.' The Leader smiled and played with his beard. 'Long Life to Our Leader! Long Life to Our Leader!' rang out again. When the chanting had subsided, the Leader gave the order that the altar be set up—he now wanted to install Trinket ceremonially as Marshal of the White Dragon Branch. Trinket noticed how different their ritual was from that of the Triads. On top of the altar stood five golden plates, each containing a small snake of a different colour: blue, yellow, red, white, and black. Their bodies were coiled, but their heads were raised and their tongues flicked in and out. Trinket bowed before the Five Miniature Mystic Dragons, then he kowtowed to the Leader and Madame Hong. He was congratulated by Rootless the Taoist and the other elders. Madame Hong then poured him three cups of the famous Realgar Elixir. 'Drink this elixir, and the Mystic Dragons on this island will recognize that you are one of us; they won't bite you any more.' The Leader presented Trinket with a string of realgar beads and ordered him to wear it underneath his clothing, saying that this too would protect him from any kind of poison. Then the elders and acolytes of the White Dragon Branch came over together to pay their respects to their new Marshal.

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'Since the Blue Dragon Marshal is sick and in need of rest/ announced the Leader, 'and since Comrade Dhuta has made a contribution by making the rubbing of the inscription, Comrade Dhuta will be in charge of the Blue Dragon Branch until the Blue Dragon Marshal has recovered.' Fat Dhuta bowed. The five Marshals and Doctor Lu should proceed to the inner hall/ commanded the Leader. 'I wish to hold a council.' He and Madame Hong immediately descended from their seats and made their way to the inner hall, with the six others following at their heels.

The Five Dragon Disc

The inner hall was situated behind the main hall, and smaller in size. The Leader and Madame Hong sat down on two large bamboo chairs in the centre. Fat Dhuta, as acting

Blue Dragon, and three other Marshals sat on four of the five stools placed in front of the bamboo chairs.

'Please be seated, White Dragon Marshal,' said Fat Dhuta.

Trinket hesitated, seeing that Doctor Lu was still standing.

'Go ahead, White Dragon Marshal,' said the doctor with a smile. 'An ordinary Comrade such as myself has no right to be seated in the Hall of the Hidden Dragon.'

Trinket sat down, and Doctor Lu remained standing next to the Black Dragon Marshal.

Suddenly, the four other Marshals rose to their feet. Without even thinking, Trinket stood up too.

'Obey His Teachings!' they chanted in unison.

Trinket promptly joined in: 'Follow Him to Victory!'

His high-pitched voice stood out from the others. The Leader nodded his head, and they all resumed their seats.

The inscription tells us that the eight copies of the Sutra were scattered in different places,' began the Leader. 'But according to the Black Dragon Marshal's report, four of those copies are now in the Palace. How has this come about?'

'One was originally in the Shaolin Monastery, one was in the Mu Family estate and two were elsewhere,' answered the Black Dragon Marshal. 'Later all four were seized and taken to the Palace by the Tartars.'

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The Leader brooded for a moment. Black Dragon looked extremely nervous.

'Have you any news from your brother-in-arms?' said the Leader, turning to Fat Dhuta.

'Leader,' replied Fat Dhuta respectfully, 'Thin Dhuta once told me he'd come across something in the possession of the Head of the Bordered Blue Banner. But it never came to anything.'

The Bordered Blue Banner?' ran Trinket's thoughts. 'Where have I heard that before? Isn't that where Auntie Tao's Master used to work? And Fat Dhuta ... so, he's got a brother-in-arms called Thin Dhuta

The Leader spoke again.

Tell him to speed up his investigation. There must be no more slacking.'

'Yes, Leader! Yes, Leader!'

'Since there's been no progress, perhaps we should send someone new/ said Madame Hong.

'Wonderful idea/ commented the Yellow Dragon Marshal hastily. 'Why not send the new White Dragon Marshal? Look at the red glow between his eyebrows—after the Leader and yourself, he must be the one among us most favoured by fortune/

'But he's only a child/ said the Leader, smiling and playing with his beard. 'Can he be entrusted with such an important mission?'

Being a Dragon Marshal was not a career that appealed enormously to Trinket on any long-term basis, especially since it apparently involved being marooned on this snake-infested island. It was of course great fun goggling at the gorgeous Madame Hong, but if he did too much of that, the Leader would undoubtedly notice and find some way of eliminating him. In the circumstances, going to Peking on official business seemed by far the best option.

'Leader, Madame Hong/ he said, 'I'm not good at much, I know, but I reckon I could sneak into the Palace and steal those four Sutras for you.'

The Leader nodded.

'According to Black Dragon/ said the Leader very slowly, 'the people he had working for us in the Palace came to hear of a boy eunuch close to the Young Emperor, someone with a name like Laurie . . .'

Trinket's heart missed a beat. For a moment he wondered if the Leader had seen through his entire story.

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'It seems the Young Emperor sent this Laurie to the Wutai Mountains to meddle in our Sect's activities there/ the Leader continued. 'We sent several groups after him, but none of them managed to find him—not even Comrade Fat Dhuta. And now we've found you instead . . .'

The Leader paused.

'Didn't I say that fortune had smiled on him!' mumbled Yellow Dragon.

The Leader nodded.

'White Dragon Marshal,' he continued, 'when you get into the Palace, I want you to find out what the Emperor had in mind in sending this eunuch of his to Wutai.'

'Yes, Leader!' responded Trinket smartly. By now he was in a cold sweat.

The eight copies of the Sutra contain secret doctrines,' said Madame Hong. 'Important doctrines concerning the preservation of Long Life. Our Leader is certainly destined to receive them. Do this for the Leader, White Dragon Marshal, and he will certainly grant you another reward.'

Trinket stood up and bowed low.

'I will always be grateful to the Leader and to Madame,' he declared. 'I will devote my life to my country and die on the battlefield.'

Trinket, as usual, had dredged something up for the occasion from his repertoire of storytellers' tags. An appropriate declaration for a general setting off on a campaign, perhaps. But not quite the thing for the present context.

'Loyally said!' Madame Hong smiled. 'You can choose a few people to go with you.'

Trinket was not too keen on the idea of other Comrades breathing down his neck.

'We don't need too many people. Don't want to give ourselves away. Perhaps one or two girls from the Red Dragon Branch—they could always disguise themselves as Palace maids.' He had in mind the Little Countess, of course.

'•I'm afraid my girls are not much use,' remarked Rootless, the Red Dragon Marshal. 'But you're welcome to them. Choose whichever ones you want, provided the Leader and Madame approve.'

'Leader, Madame/ began Doctor Lu, 'I committed a grave

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error yesterday. Thanks to the Leader's magnanimity, my life has been spared and—'

'Please don't keep harping on about what happened yesterday/ said the Leader, waving him aside with a frown. 'None of you are ever to mention it again.'

Thank you, Leader/ said Doctor Lu. 'What I was wanting to say was, I should like to go with the White Dragon Marshal myself. It would be a way of showing my gratitude.'

'You are certainly a resourceful and cool-headed person/ replied the Leader. 'And adept with both sword and pen. You know how to cobble together a plausible enough text too.

Very well, Comrade Lu, you can go with the White Dragon Marshal/

Doctor Lu pondered that phrase of the Leader's about cobbling together a text. It appeared the Leader knew only too well that the inscription was a forgery.

'Leader, Madame/ said Fat Dhuta, 'I too am willing to go with the White Dragon Marshal to Peking and render you service/

The Leader nodded his approval. Then he noticed that the Yellow Dragon Marshal was

about to offer as well.

'We can't have too many people going, or we will give the whole thing away. Only Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta. The two of you are to act on the White Dragon Marshal's orders.'

'Yes, Leader!' Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta bowed.

Madame then produced a miniature dragon from her bosom. It was very colourful, cast from bronze, gold, copper, silver, and iron: the five metals representing the five Branches of the Sect.

This is the Leader's Five Dragon Disc, White Dragon Marshal/ she said. 'It's yours for the time being. When they see it, members of the Sect will obey you just as they do the Leader. It gives you absolute power over their lives. You are to return it when you have completed your mission.'

'Yes/ replied Trinket, accepting the disc respectfully in both hands.

Trinket had fresh worries on his mind. Originally he had thought he could forget about the Mystic Dragon Sect once he had returned to Peking. But now that he had this Five Dragon Disc, he would probably be in for a whole lot more trouble.

'White Dragon Marshal, Doctor Lu, and Fat Dhuta, I want you to stay here for a while/ Madame Hong ordered. The rest of you may leave.'

Rootless, Black Dragon, and Yellow Dragon saluted and left.

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The Leader now produced a black porcelain bottle, and tipped out three bright red pills. To reward your courage in undertaking this Peking mission/ he said, 'I now bestow on each of you a Leopard Embryo Pill.'

A combined expression of delight and awe suddenly entered the faces of Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu. They bent their right knees to thank the Leader, then each of them took his pill and swallowed it. Trinket copied their actions exactly. Seconds after swallowing his pill, he felt a wave of warmth rising from the pit of his stomach, circulating slowly through his bloodstream and diffusing an indescribably pleasant sensation of well-being throughout his entire body.

'White Dragon Marshal, stay for a while,' Madame Hong commanded. 'You two may leave.' Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu retreated from the inner hall.

Three Beauties and Three Heroes

Madame Hong gave one of her disarming smiles.

'What weapons do you normally use, White Dragon?' she said.

'I've only ever learned how to use my dagger,' he replied.

'Show it to me.'

Trinket extracted the dagger from his boot, and held it out, handle first, to Madame Hong. 'A fine weapon!'

She pulled out one of her hairs and passed it lightly over the blade, which sliced it clean in two. The Great Leader made an approving noise. Trinket, ever quick to see an opportunity for ingratiating himself, immediately offered his dagger to Madame Hong as a present.

'A fine dagger such as this needs a beautiful owner,' he said, vaguely remembering some storyteller's proverb. 'And where could it find a more beautiful owner than you?'

Madame Hong simpered.

'What a dear boy! Come here, I'll teach you something very special in return. Three kungfu moves. They are known as the Three Beauties.'

She took out a silken handkerchief and used it to bind the dagger to her right calf. Then she

turned to the Great Leader.

'Would you be so kind as to demonstrate the moves, Leader?'

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The Leader graciously stepped forward. Suddenly, he shot out his left hand, gripped Madame Hong by the back of her neck, and hoisted her up into mid-air. Trinket's breath was taken away by the sheer speed of the move.

Madame Hong now twisted herself around, and kicked out with her right foot against the Leader's stomach. He in turn pulled back, and she then curved into the hollow made by his withdrawal, throwing her left arm around his neck and taking hold of her dagger with her right hand, pressing the point of it against the small of his back.

That move is known as the Twirling Princess!

Trinket clapped his hands in delight.

The Leader gently lowered Madame Hong to the ground. She replaced the dagger, did a quick little somersault, and landed prostrate on the ground. The Leader now thrust his right foot forward, placed it above her back, and made as if to point his sword against the back of her neck.

'Surrender?'

Just as Trinket thought she must have no other option, Madame Hong moved her head to the side and the Leader found himself thrusting into empty space. Another somersault and she had flipped between the Leader's legs and was holding the dagger at his back again.

'Excellent kungfu!' cried Trinket.

They carried on with this breathtaking display, demonstrating the second Beauty, named after another Princess, and then the third, known as the Princess Flying Swallow, a series of hair-raising (and deadly) moves in which Madame Hong came so close to slicing through the Leader's throat that she had Trinket gripping the back of his chair in suspense.

Madame Hong went through the intricate details of the Three Beauties for Trinket's benefit, and the Leader helped him to practise them. Flying Swallow was a particularly dangerous move to execute. The slightest mistake could result in self-destruction.

The Leader seemed in high spirits.

'Now it's my turn! I too should like to teach you three moves. Mine are called the Three Heroes. The Three Beauties are designed to kill. Mine are designed to make your enemy surrender.'

'You never mentioned your Three Heroes to me before!' complained Madame Hong.

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'I made them up just now as I was watching you do the Three Beauties. I'd like to test them out. You can be my judge.'

Madame Hong cast him a quizzical glance.

'Our Leader does seem in a jolly mood today!'

'Even the greatest Hero was never a match for Beauty—such as yours

Madame Hong gave a little laugh, and purred:

'Please! Not in front of the boy!'

The Leader cleared his throat.

'Now, I want you to pretend that I am the White Dragon Marshal.'

Madame Hong reached out her left hand and lifted the Leader off the ground—all two hundred pounds of him. It seemed to cost her no effort at all.

'On guard!' cried the Leader.

He turned his left hand slowly and gave Madame Hong a tickle under the left armpit. She began laughing and the strength went out of her at once. She lowered him to the ground. He then gripped her round the neck with both hands, lifted her up into the air, and threw her over his shoulder. It was all done slowly and effortlessly. Trinket watched it all, and found it unbelievably graceful. The Leader's kungfu was majestic, it was nothing short of transcendental. It made Madame Hong's seem elementary.

Madame Hong stood up and gave a little laugh.

That was for the benefit of White Dragon/ said the Leader. 'If he ever finds himself in a Ex, he can get himself out of it by light pressure—it doesn't have to be tickling—on the Ultimate Source point beneath the armpit. That Vital Point connects directly through the Lesser Yang meridian with the heart. First his opponent will lose his grip. Then if White Dragon is feeling strong he can try the throw—using slight pressure to close the Little Ocean and Ultimate Source points as he does so. That way he'll have his enemy on the ground and immobilized.'

Trinket clapped his hands in delight

Now the Leader lay face down on the ground and asked Madame Hong to tread on him, placing one foot on the small of his back. Meanwhile, with her right hand she took a wooden door-bar that was leaning against the wall, and held it to the back of his neck.

'Surrender?'

The Leader laughed.

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'I already have! Now I will kowtow to you.'

He made as if to kneel before her, but at the same time stealthily reached out with his right forearm and lowered it very slowly onto the door-bar. There was a crunching sound and the bar snapped in two.

Trinket was astonished at the sheer force in that slow, almost imperceptible movement.

'You won't have my strength,' commented the Leader, 'but you can use that special dagger of yours.'

Next he did a sudden somersault between Madame Hong's legs. It was only a feint, though. The next instant he had her by the ankles, twirled her round, and raised her into the air so that she was to all intents and purposes standing on her head.

'Put me down!' she cried. 'What are you doing?'

He gave a loud laugh.

'White Dragon, you're too small to do this one. But you could try dragging your opponent along the floor instead, and then use that dagger of yours. Then kick him on three Vital Points in the chest—the Reservoir of the Soul, the Seal of the Soul, and the Walkway—to prevent him from any sort of retaliatory move.'

Trinket liked the sound of that.

Next, for the third Hero, the Leader proceeded to place both his hands behind his back, and invited Madame Hong to attack him again. She moved behind him, seized hold of his wrists with one hand, and, taking one of the broken halves of the door-bar in her free hand, rammed it against his neck.

'Now she's got me in a very dangerous clinch!' said the Leader with a cunning smile. 'With the slightest pressure on my wrists, she can drain me of my strength. So . . .'

Trinket heard Madame Hong let out a little cry, then laugh and let go of the Leader's wrists. She jumped clear, her face flushed.

That's a dirty move! Not in front of the boy, please!'

The Leader laughed.

'What's dirty about the Groin Flip?'

'»

He continued in a serious tone of voice.

The sexual organs are, of course, among the most sensitive and vulnerable parts of the human body. Every school of kungfu has a move like this, even the Shaolin and the Wudang schools. But what I did just now was the Inverted Groin Flip. I had to, because of the grip she had me in.'

He paused for a moment.

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'Of course, your opponent may anticipate the move, and try stabbing you in the back of the head. In that case you have to try something a little different. . .'

Once again he put his hands behind his back and let Madame Hong hold him by the wrists. Suddenly he tensed his fingers and poked them into her breasts. She recoiled, crying:

'Very heroic!'

The Leader smiled.

'There are two deadly Vital Points on the chest: the Nipple Centre, and the Nipple Root. Both men and women have them.'

Again he invited Madame Hong to come at him and seize him by the wrists. This time, having feinted another lunge at her breasts, he did a somersault, leapt into the air and ended up on her shoulders with his thumbs pressing her Greater Yang point, his index fingers on her brow, and his middle fingers on her eyes. Another backwards somersault, and he landed about ten feet clear of her.

Trinket was hugely impressed. This was like being at the circus. But it all looked much too hard for him, and he said so.

'The three moves I've just shown you/ said the Leader, 'involve three main branches of kungfu: Catch-Can, Striking the Points, and what we call Flying. Each branch takes between eight and ten years to learn, if you want to master them properly. But if all you want to do is learn enough to do these three moves, that's a lot easier.'

He proceeded to break the moves down into their individual components, and took Trinket through them, patiently correcting any mistakes he made. The one part he did not dare try was jumping up onto the Leader's shoulders.

'Leader,' said Madame Hong, 'my Three Beauties took me years of instruction from my Shifu, and years of practice; you made up your Three Heroes in a few minutes. And yet they are more deadly than mine! You are truly a Great Master!'

The Leader acknowledged her compliment with a modest clasping of his hands.

The previous day in the great assembly, Trinket had been very unimpressed by the Leader. This acrobatic display had completely changed his opinion.

'Leader,' said Madame Hong, 'my Beauties have names. What about your Heroes?'

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'Yes, I'd better think of some,' replied the Leader.

He quickly coined three appropriately heroic names for them, slipping in a little sexual innuendo which seemed to cause Madame Hong both embarrassment and pleasure.

Trinket spent some time practising both sets of moves, and the Leader and Madame Hong gave him some more coaching. This lasted until midday.

Madame Hong insisted on giving Trinket back his dagger, saying that he might need it on

his mission to the Palace.

'You are the only person that the Leader has taught kungfu, apart from myself! It is a great honour. You must serve him loyally.'

Trinket acknowledged his great blessing.

Tomorrow you can set off by ship with Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta. You can say your goodbyes now.'

Trinket did so, and walked out to find the others.

Leopard Embryo Pills

All this time Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu were sitting in the rockery outside the hall waiting and wondering if something untoward might have happened to Trinket. Not until they saw him walk out with a grin on his face did they set their minds at rest.

'The Leader and Madame Hong have taught me some excellent kungfu!'

'Congratulations, White Dragon Marshal!' said Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu together. 'Such an honour!'

'I know,' replied Trinket in a tone of joyful pride.

'Did they mention when they would grant us the antidote for the Leopard Embryo Pills?'

'Antidote?' asked Trinket curiously. 'Are you ... are you . . . saying that the pills are a kind of poison?'

'Not exactly,' said Doctor Lu, looking fearfully back at the bamboo structure. 'Let's talk about it when we get home.'

As the three of them walked to the doctor's home, Trinket could not help noticing how miserable the two of them looked.

'What's up with these Leopard Pills?' he asked, when they had arrived. 'Are they a poison, or a magic elixir, or what?' Fat Dhuta heaved a sigh.

'We'll have to wait and see! But our lives are entirely in your hands.'

'Why?' asked Trinket, greatly perplexed.

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Fat Dhuta gave Doctor Lu a questioning glance. The doctor nodded.

'Hasn't it ever struck you as strange, White Dragon/ continued Fat Dhuta, 'that everyone calls me Fat Dhuta, when I'm so skinny?'

'Oh yes, I thought it was strange ages ago/ replied Trinket. 'I guessed it was some kind of joke. But I don't think the Leader is the joking type.'

Fat Dhuta heaved a long sigh.

'This is my second dose of the pills. Last time was such a terrible experience, I still have nightmares about it. You see, I used to be short and fat/

'Oh I get it!' said Trinket. 'You mean the first pill made you tall and thin? But that's great! I'm sure you're much better looking now than you used to be!'

'In theory, perhaps/ said Fat Dhuta with a bitter smile. 'But can you imagine how terrible it is to be stretched three feet in three months, till every inch of your skin is oozing blood? I would have been a couple of feet taller still if I hadn't, by a stroke of luck, returned to the island and been granted a dose of the antidote by our merciful Leader.'

Trinket suddenly started.

'But now we've all taken the pills! / don't mind being a couple of feet taller, but you two . . . you'll both be way too tall if you grow even a few more centimetres.'

This Leopard Pill is a miraculous medicine/ said the Dhuta. 'It can make you very healthy and strong, but if after a year you don't take some antidote, the poisonous ingredients in the

pill gradually come into effect. It doesn't necessarily make you taller. My brother-in-arms, Thin Dhuta, used to be extremely tall and thin; now he's all swollen and fat/
'All you need to do is swap names/ said Trinket with a smile, 'and everything will be fine!'
Fat Dhuta shook his head.
That wouldn't be any good.'
He sounded almost angry.
Trinket hastened to apologize.
'Fat Dhuta, I'm really sorry! I said a stupid thing. Don't be mad at me!'
'How could I be angry?' said Fat Dhuta. 'You have the Five Dragon Disc. I must always obey you. And anyway, I know you

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meant no harm. It's just that my brother-in-arms and I are two different people—we look different, we sound different, we have entirely different personalities. Changing my name would never turn me into Thin Dhuta, or him into Fat Dhuta.' 'I understand.' Trinket nodded. Fat Dhuta continued:
'Five years ago, our Leader sent me and Thin Dhuta on a very difficult mission. By the time we'd completed it, it was already three days beyond the due date. We travelled back to the island by ship as quickly as we could, but the poison had already started to work. The pain was unbearable. My brother-in-arms has a very hot temper. In a fit of rage he kicked the mast of the ship and broke it. After that our ship drifted aimlessly on the ocean. Days passed, and with every day I became taller and thinner, while he became shorter and fatter. We drifted for two months, and gradually ran out of food. So first we killed the captain, then the sailors one by one, and ate them. Luckily, we met another ship and were saved. We made them take us straight to Mystic Dragon Island. Once the Leader knew that we had completed our mission, and had not meant to return late, he gave us the antidote and spared our lives. But it was too late/
Trinket was horrified by Fat Dhuta's story. He turned to Doctor Lu, whose serious expression confirmed the truth of it.
'In that case we have exactly a year to find all eight copies of the Sutra and get back to the island?'
'Of course, that would be wonderful/ answered Doctor Lu. 'But it won't be so easy. If we can lay our hands on just one or two copies and be back in time, I am sure the Leader will give us the antidote/
Trinket was thinking to himself:
'I've got six copies of the Sutra already. At a pinch I can give the Leader one or two of mine.' His sense of panic was instantly dispelled. He laughed. 'If our Leader doesn't give us the antidote, maybe I'll turn into an old grandpa, and you'll turn into little children. That would be fun!'
Doctor Lu shuddered.
'I have racked my brains about these pills/ he commented. They seem to be compounded from a number of rare and extremely powerful ingredients—like leopard and deer embryos, human placenta, and seal kidneys. They have the effect of

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reversing the body's existing tendencies. I think our Leader was originally trying to use the drug to reverse the ageing process. But with other people it has turned out to have the most

unpredictable results—'

'You mean he hasn't taken the pills himself,' said Trinket. 'He's been testing them out on other people first?'

'I'm simply guessing,' Doctor Lu hastened to reply. 'It may not be true, so please do not breathe a word about this, White Dragon Marshal.'

'Don't worry/ said Trinket. 'I guarantee I'll be able to get hold of the antidote for you. Trust me! Please wait here a moment. I want to go and talk to Miss Fang.'

He very much wanted to tell Fang Yi that he had seen the Little Countess the day before.

But Doctor Lu told him that Madame Hong had already summoned her:

'She says you are not to worry about Miss Fang's safety here on the island. Madame Hong sent someone to fetch her, and left my wife a message to this effect. Miss Mu Jianping from the Red Dragon Branch will be staying here as well.'

Trinket groaned to himself. Madame Hong obviously did not trust him.

'It is one of our rules/ said Doctor Lu. 'You cannot take your family with you when you are on a mission.'

'But they're not my family/ said Trinket with a bitter smile.

'Almost/ replied Doctor Lu.

Trinket's hopes of leaving the island with the two girls were completely dashed. The Leader and Madame Hong were not only using drugs to control him; they were taking his two wives hostage as well!

The next morning he woke up to the sound of the blowing of horns, and a large number of men shouting outside the door. This was followed by the tinkling of musical instruments. He rushed outside to find three or four hundred acolytes and elders dressed in white, lined up outside his door.

'Every Success to Our Marshal!' they shouted together.

Next arrived a group in blue to bid farewell to Fat Dhuta, their acting Marshal.

The three of them boarded the ship. Just as Trinket was exchanging farewells with Rootless the Taoist and the Black Dragon Marshal, he heard pounding hooves and saw two horses galloping towards the jetty. To his astonishment and delight, he saw that the

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two riders, both dressed in white, were Fang Yi and the Little Countess. His heart started thumping wildly.

'Maybe Madame has changed her mind, and is letting them go with me after all/ he thought to himself.

The two girls dismounted from their horses, and took a few steps forwards.

'In the name of our Leader and Madame, we come to bid farewell to our White Dragon Marshal/ said Fang Yi loudly. Trinket's heart sank. Fang Yi bowed and continued:

'By Madame's gracious permission, we have both been transferred from the Red Dragon Branch to the White Dragon Branch, and are now under your command.'

At that moment it dawned on Trinket that the girls had been members of the Red Dragon Branch all along. They had been acting on the Leader's instructions, and their mission had quite simply been to get him, by one means or another, to the island. Where Fat Dhuta had failed to get him there by force, they were to use gentler means. . . . The ship they had travelled on must have belonged to the Sect as well. It had all been a plot. He was totally disillusioned. The happy words of endearment that had already formed themselves on his lips evaporated into a stunned silence.

And what about Doublet? What might they have done to her? He turned to the doctor.

'Doctor Lu, what about my maid Doublet? She was with me on the ship when I came to the

island. Where is she now?'

Doctor Lu hesitated. 'Don't worry. The Leader has taken good care of her.'

'What does that mean? Where is she? Send someone to get her. I'm taking her with me/

'But—'

'But what? Just do it!' yelled Trinket angrily. Doctor Lu dared not disobey. Quietly he instructed a subordinate of his, who jumped ashore and went running off.

Shortly afterwards, two horses came riding up at lightning speed. The rider in front had a slender build, and was soon recognizable as Doublet. With a cry of 'Master!' she vaulted nimbly from the saddle before the horse had even come to a halt, and landed weightlessly on the deck. In the eyes of a veteran like Rootless the Taoist, her 'flying' skills were nothing outstanding, but in view of

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her youth, and the elegance with which she executed the leap, everyone applauded heartily. Trinket was very happy to see Doublet again. He held her by her hands. Her face was pale and drawn, and her eyes were red from much weeping.

'Have they treated you badly?' he asked.

'No . . . no . . . ' wept Doublet. They . . . they just locked me up. But I missed you so.'

Trinket comforted her.

'Everything is fine now. We're leaving this place.'

There are so many. . . horrible snakes here!' Doublet burst into tears again.

Trinket glanced at Fang Yi, and recalled how she had lured him into the woods to be bitten by poisonous snakes, and how she had pretended to be affectionate towards him on the ship. He could feel himself about to explode with rage.

'Set sail!' he ordered.

As the sailors were raising the anchor, the people on shore let off firecrackers, and continued to shout 'Every Success to Our White Dragon Marshal!' and 'Obey the Leader's Teachings! Follow Him to Victory!' as the ship moved slowly away from the jetty.

'If I didn't know that Fang Yi was a member of the Sect, I'd be missing her dreadfully,' he thought to himself. 'But as it is, I couldn't care less!'

Even so, when he thought of her tenderness on their journey to the island, he couldn't help feeling disconsolate.

His thoughts ran on:

'How could the two of them have become involved with the Sect? It's very strange. They must have been captured in the haunted house, and then forced to join. Although Widow Zhuang promised to try and save them, she must have failed. If the Little Countess has taken the drug, then Fang Yi must have taken it as well. She probably had to cheat me into going with her to the island, or else die. . . I suppose I can't blame her for what she did. But she certainly had me fooled, the little tart! Oh tamardy! I don't know! I may be the White Dragon Marshal, but I haven't got a clue what this Mystic Dragon Sect is all about!'

It suddenly occurred to him that the old man in command of the riders in the haunted house might have spilled the beans and informed on him to the Leader, in which case the Leader would know that he, Trinket, was in fact Laurel (or vice versa!). But it

seemed that this had not happened, probably because the old man had been too frightened to admit his failure in bringing back Laurel alive.

And another thing—Fat Dhuta had kept quiet about the inscription being a fake.

Trinket had so many questions. . . . Why had Madame Hong taken such a liking to him? Or the Leader, for that matter?

It was all very puzzling.

CHAPTER 15

In which Trinket returns to Peking and meets the Princess Ning; is made a Manchu Bannerman Colonel and sent to the Shaolin Monastery; encounters the Wang Wu Clan en route; and, as Father Treasure, meets Two Interesting Young Ladies



Back in the Palace

Some days later their ship berthed at Qinhuangdao and they disembarked and continued their journey by land.

'I've got to think of some way of getting inside the Palace/ Trinket told his companions when they finally reached Peking, 'but I don't know how long this job is going to take. I think we'd better first look for somewhere safe to stay.'

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Doctor Lu made this his responsibility and rented a house for them in Hair Lane in a quiet part of the North City near the Gate of Military Proclamation. As soon as they had moved in there and were comfortably settled, Trinket went off on his own to make contact with his Triad friends at their headquarters in Sweet Water Lane; but the place had now become a tea emporium and his muttered password evoked only a blank stare. It was clear that the new occupant was not a Triad and that the Triads had moved their headquarters to somewhere else in the city.

He made his way to the Bridge of Heaven, reasoning that even if Xu Tianchuan, the Eight-Armed Ape, wasn't at his usual stand, having perhaps, like himself, been forced to join the Mystic Dragon Sect, he was bound to run into one or other of the Brothers somewhere in that area. But though he tramped round the whole of it three times, he didn't catch sight of a single one of them.

Abandoning the search, he made his way to the inn near the West Straight Gate where he had stayed last time he was in the city and where he had hidden the copy of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections entrusted to him by the Old Emperor. By generous tipping he was able to obtain the same upper room, which by a stroke of luck was unoccupied, and after a brief rest on the bed, having first made sure that there was nobody around outside, he used his

dagger to prise the brick out of the wall behind which the Sutra was concealed. To his relief it was still there in the hole. He took it out and undid the oilskin wrapping. After a brief inspection to make sure it was unharmed, he thrust it into the inside pocket of his gown, replaced the brick, slipped out of the inn, and hurried off to the Palace.

A little trouble with the guard on the Palace gate was quickly resolved when he identified himself and explained that he was disguised as a commoner because he had been on a secret mission and was hurrying back to report. Back once more in his own room in the Palace, he changed into his eunuch's uniform, wrapped the Sutra in an old cloth, and went straight to the Upper Library to see the Emperor.

Apprised of his coming, a beaming Kang Xi stood in the doorway of the inner library to welcome him.

Tamardy, Laurie!' he cried joyfully. 'What a long time you've been away! Bugger in!' (Kang Xi's ventures into the vernacular were sometimes a little wild. Fortunately it was only Trinket who ever heard them.)

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Trinket knelt and kowtowed.

'Congratulations, Your Majesty! It's very good news.'

Kang Xi knew that this meant his father was alive and well. A surge of emotion caused him to reel momentarily, so that he had to clutch the side of the doorway to steady himself.

'Come inside,' he said. 'I want to hear everything.' His voice was trembling.

After following him inside, Trinket closed and barred the door and looked carefully behind the bookcases before embarking on his story.

'Well, I saw His Old Majesty in the Wutai Mountains/ he began in a low voice.

Kang Xi grasped his hand.

'So ... so he did go there and become a monk. What did he say?'

Trinket told him about his meeting with the Old Emperor. He also told him about the attempt made by the Tibetan lamas to kidnap him and how he, Trinket, helped by the Eighteen Lohans from the Shaolin Monastery, had frustrated them. He may perhaps have embroidered the facts a little, particularly when speaking of the part he had played himself in that affair. The young Emperor was horrified.

'How terrible! I must send a thousand of the guards there immediately.'

Trinket shook his head.

'I don't think His Old Majesty would want that.'

He went on to tell him how the Old Emperor had praised his son, saying that Kang Xi was a better Emperor than he had been and must always continue to work for the welfare of his people. Kang Xi broke down and wept. When Trinket handed him the Sutra the Old Emperor had given him, tears fell on the cloth wrapping. They fell even faster when Kang Xi saw the inscription, Never Raise Taxes, on the flyleaf and recognized his father's own writing.

Tamardy!' thought Trinket. 'If he's going to carry on like this, I might as well cry too for company. A few tears don't cost anything; they might even add a bit to my reward.'

He had always cried easily. In Yangzhou, across his mother's knee, the tears had started falling even before her cane had made contact with his bottom. Soon he was putting on a very convincing performance.

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Somewhat surprised at seeing Trinket's real tears, Kang Xi checked his own weeping and

asked the reason for them.

'Boo-hoo,' sobbed Trinket, 'I was just thinking how kind His Old Majesty was to me when I saw him on Wutai. If I hadn't known how anxious you'd be if I didn't return, I'd have stayed on to look after him. I'm worried that someone else might try to harm him.'

'I'm worried about that too,' said Kang Xi. 'I tell you what, Laurie. It's a good thing my father has taken a liking to you, because although I really need you here, a good son ought to put his father's needs first and—'

Trinket's jaw dropped.

'Holy ting-a-ling bells!' he thought. 'Idiot! Why did I say that? He's going to send me back to Wutai to be a monk and look after his dad.'

And this was just what Kang Xi now proposed.

Trinket began sobbing again, this time with genuine feeling.

'I can't bear the thought of leaving you,' he said between sobs—not because he thought there was the slightest chance of Kang Xi changing his mind, but by way of explaining his tears.

Kang Xi patted him kindly on the shoulder.

There, there, Laurie! I'll be visiting the monastery from time to time. It's not as if you'll never see me again. I'll probably be paying a visit there in a month or two. Anyway, there's nothing to stop you becoming a layman again in the course of time. You can learn to read and write while you're in the monastery, so that when the time comes I'll be able to give you a really important post.'

Trinket knew that 'when the time comes' meant when Shun Zhi, who might yet live forty years, had died, so he was scarcely comforted. He didn't, in any case, want to end his days as a high-ranking Manchu official. However, his busy mind was soon thinking of ways in which he could deceive the Old Emperor into releasing him. For example, he might impress on that tender soul how much the Young Emperor was pining for his favourite eunuch, unable to eat properly and losing weight. The prospect cheered him and he promised Kang Xi continuing devotion in his new role.

To show his pleasure, Kang Xi gave Trinket carte blanche to reimburse himself from the Privy Purse for the expenses he had incurred on this last mission. But Trinket confessed that he had already helped himself rather generously while supervising, with Songgotu, the confiscation of Oboi's estate, and that, moved to

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repentance by the teaching and example of the Old Emperor, he had used the money pocketed on that earlier occasion, which strictly speaking was the Emperor's own, for pious donations during his Wutai visit.

'I shall be nicely covered now if there's ever an inquiry,' he thought. But Kang Xi, suspecting nothing, was impressed.

Kang Xi was curious to hear more about Wutai and its temples, but their conversation was interrupted by the sound of footsteps outside and a ringing female voice.

'Emperor-brother, when are you going to give me that fight?'

This was followed by some hefty knocks on the door and the rattle of someone trying impatiently to get in.

'Better open it,' said Kang Xi with a somewhat rueful smile.

The Tomboy Princess

A fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl dressed entirely in crimson brocade rushed like a whirlwind into the room as soon as Trinket had unbarred the door. She had a fine, oval face

with strikingly thin lips and a lively, somewhat imperious expression. Because of his fear of the Empress Dowager, Trinket avoided the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity as much as possible and had never met most of its occupants; but he knew that one of them was the Empress Dowager's own daughter, Princess Ning, and guessed that this was her.

'Emperor-brother,' said the Princess, 'you promised to give me a fight. Why do you keep putting it off? Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' said Kang Xi, laughing. 'I doubt you're even a match for my pupil here. I'm sure you're not good enough for me\'

He winked at Trinket, who gathered that he had been given a new role to play. He began formally presenting himself.

'I'm Laurie, Your Highness. His Majesty has been good enough to teach me some kungfu. May I humbly—'

As he bowed down low she gave a little laugh and, without any warning, just as his head had reached its lowest level, shot out a foot and caught him squarely on the jaw, driving it upwards so that his teeth bit almost through his tongue. When he opened his mouth and cried out in pain, the blood flowed freely down the front part of his gown.

Kang Xi was aghast, but the Princess only laughed.

This pupil of yours is useless, Emperor-brother,' she said. 'He

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couldn't even dodge the little kick I gave him. I don't suppose you're much better.'

'Are you all right, Laurie?' Kang Xi asked with concern. 'Your tongue must be very painful.'

'Not too bad,' said Trinket, trying hard to smile, though his tongue hurt so badly he could hardly speak.

'Dod doo bad,' the Princess mimicked. 'The odely half dead and I be feeling very sad.'

She grabbed her Imperial brother by the hand.

'Come on!' she said. 'Let's have this fight!'

The Princess had once or twice in the past watched the Empress Dowager giving Kang Xi lessons in kungfu and begged that she might have some herself; but the Empress Dowager, though not refusing outright, had been unwilling to give her much of her time, so she had gone off and badgered members of the Palace Guards to teach her. As they did their best to humour her and fell down each time she touched them, she considered herself a champion. But though she had picked up a good deal of the lingo, there was precious little else that she had learned from them. As a fighter she was negligible and had been beaten easily when she challenged her brother to a fight. Having recently got her Guards instructor to teach her a little Catch-Can, she was now anxious to make another trial of her skill. But Kang Xi was in no mood to indulge her.

'Not now,' he said. 'I'm really too busy. Train a bit longer and we'll have a match another time.' -. The Princess frowned.

'You promised. Refusing a challenge counts as defeat.'

'All right,' said Kang Xi. 'I concede defeat. Princess Ning is the champion. Her punch can knock out the Tiger of the South and her kick eliminate the Dragon of the North.'

'You mean the Little Worm of the North,' said the Princess, aiming another kick at Trinket, which this time, however, he sidestepped with the agility of a trained fighter.

The Princess could see that her brother wasn't going to fight with her; and since Trinket was about her size and appeared to have had some training, she decided that he would do instead.

'Very well,' she told Trinket. 'You'll have to fight me, since your teacher's too scared.'

'Yes, Laurie, you go and play with her,' said Kang Xi, who had

always had a soft spot for his tomboyish sister and didn't like to disappoint her. 'We can continue our discussion tomorrow.'

As they were on their way out, she suddenly stopped, squared up to Kang Xi, and raised her fists.

'Watch this, Emperor-brother!'

She tried to execute a Double Drumbeat on him, driving her fists against his temples; but Kang Xi was too quick for her, parrying with an Opening the Window defence which sent her reeling. Trinket could not help laughing at her discomfiture, which so enraged her that she seized his ear and twisted it painfully, then marched, still holding him by it, out of the Library and down the long corridor outside, past the eunuchs and guards, who, though they dared not show it, were no doubt entertained by the spectacle of the Emperor's favourite bowed down and trotting along behind her.

'All right, all right,' said Trinket. 'Let go of my ear and I'll follow you anywhere!'

'You're a dangerous criminal/' said the Princess. 'Now that I've arrested you, I can't possibly let you go. I shall have to immobilize you.'

She pointed a finger and jabbed it into his chest.

'Oh, I'm paralysed!' said Trinket, entering into the spirit of the thing by sitting down hard on the ground and freezing into immobility.

'Get up!' she said, and gave him a few gentle kicks. Then, as he still hadn't moved, she kicked him again, this time very hard, in the kidneys. Trinket decided that enough was enough and jumped up with a great 'Ow!'

That one released me,' he said. 'I don't think even your Emperor-brother could have done that.'

'Smarmy villain!' said the Princess. 'Who said I know anything about Vital Points?' (She didn't.)

But secretly she was rather pleased that he was playing along with her.

'Follow me!' she said.

She led him to the room in which he and Kang Xi used to do their sparring. When they were inside, she told him to bar the door.

'I don't want anyone stealing my methods,' she said.

'Silly bitch!' thought Trinket. 'What do you know about kungfu that anyone would want to steal?'

He closed the door; but when he turned to get the door-bar,

he found the Princess holding it. He thought she had picked it up to hand it to him, but the next moment there was an explosion in his ears and a sharp pain in the crown of his head and he fell down unconscious. When he came to, she was standing over him grinning, one hand on her hip, the other still holding the door-bar.

'You really are useless/' she said. 'A kungfu fighter needs eyes in the back of his head. You don't seem to have learnt anything.'

His head felt as if it was split in two, and from the sickly smell that filled his nostrils he knew that the stickiness which prevented him from opening his left eye properly must be caused by blood from his broken crown.

'Get up and fight, if you're a man!' shouted the Princess, aiming a blow at his shoulder.

He got to his feet and tried to wrest the door-bar from her, but while they were struggling it

caught him a crack on the right cheek-bone which made him see stars.

'Bandit!' she cried. 'Highwayman! Scum like you must be exterminated!'

She swung the door-bar in a great sweep and Trinket went down again, this time on his face. Pleased with her handiwork, she raised the bar in both hands and aimed at the back of his head. It would undoubtedly have brained him if he had not rolled away in time. As it was, it hit the floor with a mighty thump and hurt her hand.

'Horrible little eunuch!' she screamed in rage. 'How dare you dodge away when I'm trying to hit you!'

More blows followed when he had struggled once more to his feet, including one that nearly broke his arm.

This isn't playing/ thought Trinket. 'She's out to kill me. The Empress Dowager must have put her up to this!'

Princess or no princess, he wanted to stay alive. In desperation he went for her eyes, and when she recoiled in fear, tripped her up with his foot, picked up the door-bar, and raised it up to strike. But almost at once he knew that he couldn't do it. If he did, he would be guilty of high treason, the penalty for which was considerably worse than death by door-bar.

'Horrible little eunuch!' said the Princess while he hesitated. 'Help me up. You're no match for me. I just tripped over, that's all.'

Almost without thinking what he was doing, he helped her

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to her feet. The blood from his head-wound was trickling down over his face and blinding him. He tried wiping it with his sleeve.

'Useless creature, let me wipe it for you/ said the Princess. 'On River and Lake, people are supposed to help each other when they are in trouble.'

She took out a snow-white handkerchief and set about wiping the blood from his face. They were standing very close and he could smell the scent she was wearing. Suddenly he realized that she was rather pretty.

'I was wrong/ he thought. 'She's not trying to kill me, she really is playing. It's just that she's overdoing it a bit/

But his martyrdom was not over yet.

Turn round/ she said, and he did so obediently: but instead of a gentle touch on his head he felt a sharp pain in the small of his back and an encircling leg round both of his which brought him once more face downwards on the floor. Next moment she was stabbing the back of his legs with a knife she had extracted from one of her little boots.

'Is that painful?' she asked. 'If you say "Not too bad" again, I shall do it harder/

'It's very painful indeed/ said Trinket. 'If this really was River and Lake, you'd release me, now that I'm in your power.'

'Ah, some crimes can't be forgiven/ said the Princess. 'A great pirate like you must first be made to confess/

She bound his feet with his own belt, then tied his hands behind him with a strip of cloth cut from his gown. With mounting horror he watched her go to a table at the side of the room on which were some candlesticks and a tinder-box and light one of the candles. She was going to burn him! She did in fact hold the candle-flame to a corner of his gown, but soon grew impatient when it didn't at once catch fire. Then her eye lit on his long, glossy pigtail and she gleefully set fire to that. A flame leapt up and engulfed his head, and the whole room was filled with the acrid smell of burning hair. Such was his panic that he managed, trussed up as he was, to struggle to his feet and ram his burning head into her stomach. The flames were extinguished and the Princess was temporarily winded; but

having recovered herself, she kicked him in the head and, for the third time, he fainted. This time when he came to, she was standing over him with a packet of white stuff in her hands.

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This is salt,' she said. 'I got this tip from the guards. They say it's very good for getting a confession/

Using her knife again, she cut away the front of his gown and made a few incisions in his chest into which she proceeded to rub some of the salt. Then she rolled him over and sprinkled some of it into the cuts she had made in his legs. His whole body was now in such anguish that he was nearly mad with pain. He knew now that she was only playing but that, to this spoiled, unfeeling girl, eunuchs and maids-of-honour were scarcely human, and killing one of them was of no more consequence than squashing an ant. The thought that he was only an ant to her made him furious. Rage gave him superhuman strength. Wriggling about as she bent over him, he kicked out with both his feet and caught her in the solar plexus, knocking all the wind from her body and laying her out temporarily unconscious. In the brief respite this gave him he managed, by several contortions, to extract the dagger from his boot with one of his bound hands and cut through the belt which bound his feet. Then he plunged the dagger into a leg of the table, sat on the floor with his back to it, and freed his hands by rubbing the cloth which bound them against the blade. Though the whole of his body was in agony, a great happiness swept over him. He went over to the Princess and kicked her once more in the stomach.

Curiously, this second kick had the effect of bringing her back to consciousness. She gave a little sigh, opened her eyes, and got up slowly on her feet.

Almost at once she began cursing him:

'Horrible little eunuch . . . !'

But Trinket's wrath was now thoroughly roused and he slapped her hard on both cheeks. Then he punched her in the chest and sent her sprawling by sweeping her feet from under her with his leg. When she tried to get up, he sat down on her facing her feet and began fiercely pummelling every part of her that he could reach, legs, back, and bottom.

'Stinking little tart!' he cried, as his fists flailed down on her. 'Whore's abortion! I'll killyou!' 'Don't you dare!' she screamed. 'I'll tell my mother. I'll tell the Emperor. I'll have you executed by a thousand cuts/

This gave him pause. Execution by a thousand cuts, sometimes known as the Slow Process, was a particularly nasty form of death, a lingering farewell to this world, during which bits of the

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body were sliced away one by one. But then he thought that now he'd started, he might just as well go on, so that, whatever the consequences, at least he would have had the satisfaction of giving her a good thrashing.

'I don't give a damn,' he said. 'Damn you! And all your ancestors!'

He laid into her again, but after a few more thumps she gave a little giggle.

Trinket stopped in surprise. He pulled his dagger from the table-leg and, using his free hand to turn her over, pointed it threateningly at her throat.

'What's so funny?'

The Princess's face was full of smiles.

'You can go on hitting me if you like,' she said coyly 'only not quite so hard.'

Trinket was mystified. Was this some sort of trap? He put his dagger away and placed a foot on her chest.

'Don't try anything,' he said. 'I'm not falling for any more of your tricks.'

She tried to raise her head, but he pushed her back by her forehead. Then she let fly a kick. It caught him on one of the salt-filled cuts, which were already throbbing painfully. In a fury he began slapping her—left, right, left, right—on both sides of her face.

'Don't hit my face,' she said. 'If you hurt my face, the Empress Dowager will notice it and start asking questions.'

He gritted his teeth and gave her a couple of savage pinches on her left arm.

'Aiyo, aiyo!' she cried and frowned a little: but there was a look almost of happiness in her eyes.

Tamardy! said Trinket. 'You liked that, didn't you!'

She kicked again. This was too much. He tied her hands and feet up with both their belts, knelt on her shoulders, and began pinching her all over as hard as he could.

She laughed.

'Horrible little eunuch! I mean dear eunuch, darling eunuch! Have mercy!'

Trinket got up, panting. His body hurt all over and he felt he was going to faint. His anger had subsided somewhat, giving way to a sensation rather like the one he had experienced when he was with Fang Yi on the voyage; but he still couldn't make her out.

This is fun,' she said. 'Can't we go on playing?'

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'Fun!' said Trinket. 'Your "playing" has just about killed me.' 'I can't hurt you while I'm tied up,' said the Princess. 'You can go on hitting me though if you like.' He spat.

'You're no Princess,' he said. 'You're a little tart.' 'Are you really not going to play any more?' she asked. 'Let's meet again tomorrow, then.' He shook his head.

'I can't come tomorrow. It will take me more than a day to get over these injuries. More like a month, I should think.' He began untying the belts round her hands and feet. 'You must come tomorrow,' she said. 'I shall be waiting here for you at the same time. If you don't come, I shall show the Empress Dowager what you've done to me.'

She rolled up one of her sleeves and showed him her arm. It was entirely covered with black and blue bruises where he had pinched her.

'All right,' he said. 'Til come on condition that you don't hit me any more.' After some argument she agreed.

'Whenever I try playing with one of the guards or one of the other eunuchs,' she said, 'they won't fight back properly. The only person who's ever given me a proper fight is the Emperor, and even he has never really hurt me like you did. So don't worry, Laurie, I shan't kill you. I can't afford to lose you.'

Quite suddenly she leant forwards and gave him a kiss, then turned and fled, blushing, from the room.

Trinket sat down heavily, his head spinning. She must be a bit mad, this Princess. The more you hit her and swore at her, the more she seemed to like it.

Tamardy! he thought. 'Can she really have taken a fancy to me? I'm supposed to be a eunuch!'

But for the time being he was feeling too muzzy to think properly. Slowly getting to his feet, he dragged himself off to his room, where, utterly exhausted, he threw himself down on the bed and went straight to sleep.

He must have slept for about five hours, because it was already getting dark when he awoke.

His whole body hurt so much that he could hardly help crying out, and when he got up and went to wash the salt out of his wounds, he found that the blood from them had congealed and stuck to his clothes, making it agony to undress. He did eventually succeed in undressing, all the time

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cursing the hateful girl who was responsible for his suffering, and when he had washed and dried the numerous cuts and stab-wounds she had inflicted, he sprinkled them liberally with wound-powder.

Emperor and Shifu

Trinket went on duty next day sporting two black eyes. His nose, cheeks, and lips were swollen and his eyebrows and most of his hair, including his long, glossy pigtail, had been burnt away. Kang Xi knew that this was the handiwork of his precious sister, but was shocked by the extent of the damage.

'Did the Princess do this?' he asked. 'I hope you're not seriously injured.'

'It's not too bad,' said Trinket, managing a rueful smile. 'I'm afraid I let you down badly, Majesty. I'll have to train at least another three years before I can be a credit to you.'

Kang Xi was relieved that he was taking his beating in good part. He had been worried that Trinket might ask him to side with him against the Princess, which he could not possibly have done, since she was a member of the ruling class whose prerogative it was to beat servants as and when they pleased. In that case Trinket might have carried his resentment with him to the Wutai Mountains and been considerably less enthusiastic about serving the Old Emperor.

'You're a good fellow/ he said. 'I really must do something to reward you. What would you like?'

'Perhaps you could give me a few tips that I could use in future combat,' said Trinket.

Kang Xi was rather tickled.

'All right,' he said, and proceeded to demonstrate a few of the methods he had learned from the Empress Dowager. When Trinket thought he had mastered them, he dropped to his knees and kowtowed, knocking his head altogether eight times on the floor.

'Majesty, will you be my Shifu, and have Trinket Wei as your first pupil?'

Since his return from the island he had noticed that, though Kang Xi had not grown physically during his absence, he had gained considerably in authority and self-importance and was no longer the carefree Misty with whom he had romped and wrestled in the past.

Kang Xi, for his part, saw that they could no longer pretend to be equals, even when they were alone, and rather wel-

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comed the new teacher-pupil relationship that Trinket was offering him.

'All right,' he said. 'I was the one who started this and an Emperor shouldn't go back on his word. I accept you as my pupil. Only you must never let anyone else know about this.'

He called for service, and two guards and two eunuchs came running in. Kang Xi made them stand in a row, shoulder to shoulder, then, taking a pair of scissors from his desk, he walked along behind them, selected the largest, glossiest pigtail of the four, and cut it off. It belonged to one of the eunuchs. The wretched fellow, scared out of his wits, dropped down on his knees and began kowtowing.

'Your Majesty, Your Majesty,' he whimpered, 'forgive me, forgive me.'

'Don't be afraid,' said Kang Xi. 'I award you ten taels compensation. Now be off with you all!'

The pigtail-less eunuch got up, and the four of them, totally nonplussed, walked backwards, bowing, from the room. The ways of Heaven and the whims of Princes were alike unfathomable. Who were they to question them?

'You'd better take this,' Kang Xi said, handing Trinket the pigtail when the two of them were once more alone together. 'You won't need any hair when you're a monk, but in the meantime this will make you look a bit more presentable.'

Trinket kowtowed his thanks and stood watching him expectantly. The young Emperor had sat down at his desk and appeared to be lost in thought. Here he was, pretending to be Trinket's teacher, Kang Xi was thinking, yet in actual fact neither of them was much good at kungfu, or would be of much use to his father in a crisis. Who were the great masters of self-defence? Probably the most dependable to have around you in times of need were the monks of the Shaolin Monastery, where the arts of self-defence had been preserved and cultivated for centuries. A plan began forming itself in his mind.

'You can go now,' he told Trinket. 'Come and see me again tomorrow.'

Mistress and Slave

When Trinket got back to his room, he sent for one of the Imperial Physicians, who assured him, after examining his wounds and applying medication to them, that although they were so painful,

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they were only superficial and ought to heal up in a couple of weeks or so; then, after finishing his lunch, he went off to keep his appointment with the Princess. Rather surprisingly, though apprehensive that she might try to hurt him again, he found himself quite looking forward to seeing her.

As soon as he entered the room, she was on him with a shout; but this time he was ready for her. He warded off the blow and soon had her bending forwards with an arm twisted behind her back.

'Horrible little eunuch!' she cried. 'A bit livelier today than yesterday, aren't you!'

'My name's Laurie, if you don't mind,' said Trinket. 'Just say "Laurie", will you, or "dear Laurie", unless you want me to break your arm.'

But the Princess was unwilling to admit herself beaten, and put up a struggle. He gave her a few thumps, and she smilingly informed him that she only felt really happy when she saw his blood flowing. This made Trinket completely lose his temper, and he gave her such a trouncing that she ended up helpless on the floor. After much pleading, and only after she had promised not to try hitting him again, he consented to help her up and support her on her way back to her apartment, which was on the west side of the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity where the Empress Dowager lived. As soon as they arrived at the entrance, he turned to go.

'No, come inside,' she said. 'There's something I want to show you.'

There were four eunuchs and four Palace ladies on duty outside, so he couldn't argue. He had to submit while she took him by the hand and led him through to her bedroom. Soon two Palace ladies came in with hot towels. The Princess took one and wiped her perspiring

face with it, then handed one to Trinket. The women goggled somewhat to see the Princess treating a mere eunuch almost more politely than she did her own mother. 'What are you staring at?' she shouted, going for the eyes of the nearer one with her nails. Fortunately she missed the woman's eyes, but left deep red scratch-marks beside her left eye, from which the blood trickled down to her chin. The two women dashed from the room in terror. 'You see what whining slaves they are!' said the Princess. 'Nobody will stand up to me but you.' Trinket wondered what she was planning to do next.

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'I'm tired of always being a mistress,' she said. Today we'll change places. You can be the master and I'll be your slave.' Trinket objected, but when she threatened to scream blue murder and then claim that he had assaulted her, he submitted in order to keep her quiet. She sat him down in a chair and made him a deep curtsy. 'Now, Prince Laurie,' she said, 'I'm sure Your Highness would like to rest. Let me help you undress.' 'No, thank you,' said Trinket. 'I don't feel like sleeping yet. You can give me a very gentle massage if you like.' 'Very good,' said the Princess eagerly, and kneeling with one knee on the floor, she laid one of his legs across her other knee and began to massage it, taking great care to avoid the parts that were still sore. After a while she took his boot off and began massaging his foot. 'Thank you, slave,' said Trinket, pinching her gently on the cheek. 'I think you made a very good job of that.' The Princess was delighted. When she had finished giving the same treatment to the other leg, she asked him to lie down. 'Now, Prince Laurie, if you will lie down on the bed, I'll massage your back for you.' Trinket could see that he would never get away until he had let her go through with this, so he got up on to what was the most luxuriously appointed, ravishingly perfumed bed he had ever come across and lay down on his side. The Princess drew a quilt over him and began gently pummeling his back. Trinket was growing drowsy and just beginning, in his drowsiness, to enter fully into the spirit of his new role, when there was a chorus of voices outside the apartment: 'Her Imperial Majesty the Empress Dowager!' He sat up with a start. 'There's no time to get away,' said the Princess in a great panic. 'Get under the bedclothes and don't move!' Trinket quickly lay down again and disappeared beneath the quilt. Through it, almost fainting with terror, he could hear the muffled sound of someone thumping on the door. The Princess drew the bed-curtains together and ran to unbar the door. As soon as it was open, the Empress Dowager came striding in. 'Barring the door in broad daylight! What does this mean?'

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'I'm feeling very tired/' said the Princess, forcing a smile. 'I was just about to lie down and have a sleep.' The Empress Dowager seated herself in a chair. 'What mischief are you up to this time?' she said. 'Your face is as white as a sheet.'

'I told you/ said the Princess. 'I'm very tired.'

As the Empress Dowager looked around her, her glance lit on a pair of men's boots by the side of the bed. She also thought she could detect a slight movement of the bed-curtains.

'Go and wait outside, all of you/ she said to the eunuchs and women who attended her. When they had all trooped out, she ordered the Princess to shut and bar the door. The Princess did this with an ill grace, then, following her mother's steely glance, she noticed the boots beside the bed and coloured.

'Oh, those,' she said lightly. 'I've been dressing up. I was going to ask you what you thought. I think I make rather a handsome boy.'

'I'd like to see what that boy in the bed looks like/ said the Empress Dowager grimly, striding over, drawing the curtains apart, and lifting up the quilt. She seized the hapless Trinket by the collar and raised him up from the bed. He was shaking in every limb but was careful to keep his head turned away from her.

'Don't hurt him!' cried the Princess. 'He's one of the Emperor's favourite eunuchs/ The Empress Dowager was not seriously worried by her discovery. She assumed that the Princess, having reached an age at which the first stirrings of sexual awakening are felt, was playing at 'mothers and fathers'—harmlessly, in this case, since the playfellow she was experimenting with was a eunuch. She forced him to turn his face towards her and dealt it a couple of slaps.

'Now be off!' she said. 'And don't let me see you anywhere near Her Highness again!'

But then she looked more closely and realized who it was.

'Oh!' she said in surprise. 'So it's you?'

'No/ said Trinket somewhat illogically, 'it's not/

The Empress Dowager took a firmer grip on his collar.

'Since you seem to deliberately run towards trouble/ she said, 'you can hardly blame me for the consequences.'

'I asked him to lie down in my bed/ said the Princess. 'It really isn't his fault.'

The Empress Dowager ignored her and, raising her free hand

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high up in the air, prepared to deliver a blow that would send Trinket speeding from this world to die next. In frantic desperation he resorted to one of the disreputable kungfu tricks that the Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect had taught him—the third of the Three Heroes.

He caused her to disengage by putting his hands behind him and squeezing her breasts.

Then, stamping with his feet on the edge of the bed, he executed a clumsy back-somersault which landed him on her shoulders. As he straddled her neck from behind, he pressed his thumbs against the Greater Yang point on her temples and held a finger over each eye.

'If you move/ he said, 'I'll gouge your eyes out.'

The Princess burst out laughing.

'Naughty, naughty!' she said. 'Let the Empress go, Laurie!' Trinket raised his right foot and drew the dagger from his boot. Then he slid down from the Empress Dowager's shoulders, all the time keeping the dagger aimed at a Vital Point on her back.

While he was executing these manoeuvres, the Five Dragon

Disc had slipped out of his inside pocket. It now fell to the floor

with a metallic clink. The Empress Dowager looked down at it and gasped.

That—that thing!' she cried. 'How did it get here?' Trinket already knew that she must have some connection with the Mystic Dragon Sect from the fact that she had harboured two of its members, Liu Yan, otherwise known as Sister Swallow, and the cross-dressing Deng Bingchun, both of them disguised as her ladies-in-waiting. He wondered if she would know

about the disc and submit to its authority. It was worth a try.
'What do you mean, that thing!' he said. 'How dare you! Don't you recognize the Five Dragon sign when you see it? Don't you know what it means?'
'I do, I do/ said the Empress Dowager, trembling all over.
'Very good, then repeat after me/ said Trinket: 'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him!'
'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him!' .
'Obey His Teachings!' Trinket intoned. 'Follow Him to Victory!'
'Obey His Teachings! Follow Him to Victory!' she echoed reverently.
Inwardly sighing with relief, Trinket put away his dagger and seated himself imperiously on the bed.

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The Empress Dowager turned to the Princess.
'Go outside!' she said. 'And don't breathe a word of this to anyone, or I shall kill you.'
She looked as if she meant it, too.
The Princess glanced wonderingly at Trinket.
'Is this some secret business of Emperor-brother's?' she asked.
'Yes,' said the Empress Dowager. 'And when you see him, you mustn't let on that you know about it, or he will be very angry.'
'I'm not that stupid,' said the Princess, and obediently left the room.
After a few moments, during which Trinket and the Empress Dowager looked at each other in silence, the Empress Dowager suggested, very deferentially that if they wanted to talk, it would be safer if they did so in the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity.
Trinket nodded. But first, he thought, he had better explain the disc.
'I'm the new White Dragon Marshal,' he said, in a very low voice. 'I'm here on the Leader's instructions. He gave me the disc when he sent me out on my mission.'
The Empress Dowager bowed to him submissively.
'Your servant,' she murmured.
'So she's only an ordinary Comrade/ he thought. 'I'm actually higher up than her.' He found it hard to imagine how a person of such exalted rank came to be a rank and file member of the Sect.
While he was musing on this, she mistook his silence to mean that he was feeling resentment. The red marks where she had slapped him were still plainly visible on his face.
'I had no idea until now who you were,' she said. 'I hope you will forgive me for anything I did or said while I didn't know.'
She wondered for a moment if this boy really could be who he said he was; but then she remembered hearing that the Leader and his wife had lately begun a campaign to import new blood into the Sect and that several of the old guard had been killed or fallen into disgrace.
'Probably he really is the new White Dragon Marshal,' she thought, 'but in that case I'm in for a hard time. I know how much he hates me. Better kill him now, before he can do me any harm. No one need know I did it.'
At the mere idea of it, an evil gleam came into her eye. Trinket noticed it with alarm.
'She's going to kill me,' he thought. 'I must say something to

scare her.'

'I suppose you know who taught me that trick I played on you just now,' he said.

'It wasn't... it wasn't the Leader, was it?' she asked nervously.

They both taught me a lot,' boasted Trinket. The moves the Leader taught me were all lethal. I decided to combine one of his Three Heroes with one of her Three Beauties—it's called Princess Flying Swallow—because I didn't want to kill you. Even so, I didn't do it properly. To do it properly I should have gouged your eyes out. I left that bit out so you didn't get hurt.' The Empress Dowager shivered.

'You are very kind,' she said. 'I shall try to find some way of showing you my gratitude.'

'I've brought Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu with me on this mission,' said Trinket nonchalantly, at the same time picking up the Five Dragon Disc and putting it back in his inner pocket.

'Oh,' said the Empress Dowager, instantly abandoning all thought of killing him. She knew these two senior members of the Sect and was aware how formidable they were. If they were his subordinates in this mission (whatever it was), she would, by killing him, be signing her own death-warrant.

'Marshal Zhong was a traitor and had to be killed,' said Trinket. 'I'm his replacement. And the Leader was so dissatisfied with Black Dragon's failure to get the Sutras, that he's given me the job.'

The Empress Dowager could see that she would soon be having to answer questions about these Sutras—something she had been dreading ever since the three copies she had been at such pains to acquire had gone missing.

The Sutras, yes, that's a long story,' she said. 'If you don't mind coming with me to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity, I'll try to explain what has happened.'

Trinket nodded and rose to his feet to go. Having removed the door-bar and opened the door, the Empress Dowager stood politely aside for him to go through; but Trinket knew better than to go first.

'Her Imperial Majesty is about to leave,' he sang out in his best official voice, whereupon the Empress Dowager, murmuring, 'Excuse me!' as she did so, stepped out into the throng of eunuchs and ladies-in-waiting, who followed in a little column behind her

as she made her way, with Trinket at her heels, to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. There she led Trinket into her bedroom, and, having dismissed her attendants, shut and barred the door.

When he was seated, she gave him ginseng tea to drink, waiting on him like a servant. He began to detect something that she and her daughter had in common: they both seemed to feel some need to be humiliated and to wait on people.

While Trinket was sipping his tea, the Empress Dowager got out a small jade bottle containing thirty precious Body-Strengthening Pills, a present to her from the King of Korea, she said. Eight of them were for Trinket, the others he was to give to the Leader and Madame Hong when he next saw them. This brought up the subject of the Leopard Embryo Pills, and she asked him anxiously whether by any chance he had brought her the annual antidote; from which he deduced that she, too, had been made to take the pills and that her dependence on the antidote was the Leader's way of exercising remote control over her.

No, said Trinket, he hadn't brought the antidote, but he was sure that if she continued to be

loyal and obedient, it wouldn't be long coming.

'Those Sutras you mentioned,' said the Empress Dowager, thinking that she had best get a word in about them first, before she was asked anything. 'I sent Deng Bingchun and Swallow with three of them to give the Leader. I hope he got them all right.'

'Not that I know of,' said Trinket. 'In fact, the Leader was complaining that Black Dragon had failed to bring him a single one of them. Black Dragon was very nearly made to kill himself.'

The Empress Dowager's face assumed an expression of astonishment.

'How strange! I gave Deng and Swallow explicit orders to take them to Snake Island. That was before you were obliged to kill Swallow, of course.'

'Deng Bingchun—is that the bald fellow you had here?' Trinket asked innocently.

'Yes/' said the Empress Dowager. 'When you get back to Snake Island, ask to see him. He'll be able to tell you what happened.'

'Clever!' thought Trinket. 'Deng Bingchun gets the blame. She knows dead men tell no tales.' But what he actually said was:

'Well, you've already done very well to get those three. Now

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we've got to find the other five. I'll tell the Leader how well you've done next time I see him and put in a good word for you.'

The Empress Dowager made him a deep curtsy.

That's very good of you. I really am most grateful. In fact, if you will allow me, I'd like to apply for a transfer from the Black Dragon Branch to the White Dragon Branch so that I can be under your command.'

'No problem,' said Trinket. 'But first I'll need a full account of everything you've done since you first joined the Sect. I want to know everything.'

'Certainly,' said the Empress Dowager. 'I promise not to conceal anything from you, Marshal.'

The Bannerman Colonel

Before the Empress Dowager could begin, there was a sound of footsteps and the discreet cough of a lady-in-waiting outside the door.

'Your Majesty, His Majesty the Emperor wants to see Laurie Goong-goong on important business. He says could you send him over right away, please.'

Trinket nodded to her to comply.

'It's all right,' he whispered. 'We can finish our talk later.'

Thank you,' she whispered back; then, loudly, The Emperor wants to see you. You'd better go now.'

'Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you, Your Majesty/' said Trinket in his official Goong-goong voice.

When he got outside he found eight Palace Guards waiting for him. Wondering what on earth could have happened, he almost ran on his way to the Upper Library.

Thank goodness you're all right!' said Kang Xi joyfully when he saw him enter. 'I was really worried when I heard that that vile woman had gone off with you. I was afraid she might try to murder you.'

Thank you for worrying about me, Shifu/' said Trinket. 'Actually the Old Wh—I mean, Her Majesty—only wanted to find out where I'd been all this time. I didn't dare tell her I'd been to the Wutai Mountains in case she suspected something, so I said I'd been to the South to buy some knick-knacks for you.'

Kang Xi laughed.

'Good. That should put her off the scent. She'll think my

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interests are childish still.'

He picked up a large yellow envelope from his desk.

'Before you go to Wutai, I want you to go south to Mount Song, and make your way to the Shaolin Monastery. This is a Secret Edict for the monks there which I want you to deliver for me. You are to pick forty of the Palace Guards and a thousand men of the Valiant Regiment to go with you. The Edict is to be opened and read when you get there. It will tell you what you are to do next. I'm awarding you Manchu nationality and appointing you Second-in-Command of the Valiant Regiment of the Plain Yellow Banner and Deputy-Intendant of the Palace Guards, the two appointments to run concurrently. Your rank will continue to be that of Lieutenant-Colonel.'

Trinket kowtowed.

'So I'm a Manchu now, am I?' he thought. Thanks a lot! I suppose this is my consolation prize for offering to be a monk. I get the sweetie first and the nasty medicine after. It should be the other way round!'

Kang Xi had the Plain Yellow Banner commander, Colonel Chalju, summoned and explained to him that Trinket was now to become his deputy in the Valiants. Chalju understood perfectly well that, as the Emperor's favourite, Trinket would now in effect be the commander, but was perfectly happy to play second fiddle to him: he had suffered greatly under Oboi's regency and was glad to welcome the young hero who had removed his tormentor. Kang Xi handed Trinket the gold token of his command and told him that his marching orders were for that very evening and that there was no need to see him again before he left the city.

Kowtowing once again, Trinket took his leave, mentally noting that the Empress Dowager's story would now have to wait until he got back to the Palace, whenever that might be, and that there would now be no time to find out how Auntie Tao was doing. After seeing his friend Dolong, the Chief Intendant of the Palace Guards, and arranging for two of the latter's trusted lieutenants, his own friends Zhang Kangnian and Zhao Qixian, to select another thirty-eight for the expedition, he slipped off to Hair Lane in the West City, leaving Chalju to decide which of the Valiants should go with him. He told Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu that he had managed to gain an entry into the Palace and that the business of stealing the Sutras was well in hand.

'Better lie low here until you hear from me again,' he told

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them. We don't want anyone to find out what we are up to.'

They were pleased to learn that he had made such a good start and gladly agreed to do as he had said.

He made Doublet dress up as a boy. She was to go with him on the expedition as a sort of junior batman.

Qambling on the March

When he got back to the Palace, accompanied by Doublet, he found that Chalju had thought of everything. As there was no uniform available that would fit him, Chalju had rustled up four highly skilled tailors to whom he had given a spare uniform of his own and whom he

had told to sit in one of the wagons while they were on the march and alter it to fit someone of Trinket's size. If they showed any sign of idling, he told them, they would discover what an army-style flogging was like.

Although it was evening by the time the troops were ready, the Emperor had insisted that they should start immediately, so Trinket had to get them outside the city before nightfall. After leaving by the South Gate, they had in fact only marched seven miles or so before it was necessary to pitch camp.

The Valiants, recruited exclusively from the Manchu aristocracy and fed and housed ten times better than ordinary troops, were the Emperor's own household regiment. Cooped up for long periods in the Capital, they looked on this tour of duty outside, particularly when they learned that no fighting was involved, as a government-paid holiday, and all were in festive mood and looking forward to the trip.

After supper and a drink or two, Trinket, feeling little inclined to sleep, had the forty Palace Guards and the officers of the Valiant Regiment summoned to his capacious headquarters tent. Being still ignorant of the purpose of the expedition, they assumed that he had summoned them for a briefing; but it was something quite different that he had in mind. 'Well, boys,' he said, grinning round at them, 'we've got nothing else to do tonight: why don't we roll the dice? I'll be the banker for you.'

They stared at him open-mouthed, supposing that he must be joking. But when he took four dice out of an inner pocket and rolled them on the table, they responded enthusiastically. The officers among them knew that it was against army regulations to

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gamble while on active service, but as they were not engaged in any sort of action, they saw no reason why they should mention this to their diminutive commander and deprive him of his fun.

Trinket took out a wad of notes and threw them down in front of him. Altogether there must have been five or six thousand taels' worth.

'All right,' he said, 'who's going to have a go at winning this lot?'

Back in Yangzhou he had watched fascinated while the professionals in the gaming-houses plied their trade, and had dreamed of one day doing the job himself. He could remember quite a few bits of their patter:

Silken gown or cotton rags, come, and play!
This could be. your lucky day.'

Or:

The good sport loses with a smile;
The bad'un runs off with his pile.

He sang these out now as he took up the dice from the table, blew on them for luck, and shook them in his hand.

Soon money was being slapped down on the table, some on the Gate of Heaven (the side of the table opposite the banker) and some on the Upper and Lower Gates, and the atmosphere grew more and more lively as the men shouted their calls and money began rapidly changing hands. Some of the gamblers lost all they had and went off to their tents to borrow from those who weren't gambling, so that they could go on betting. At one point Trinket's throw showed all four dice with red spots uppermost, which means that the banker takes all, and a universal groan went up from those present; but just as Zhao Qixian, who was acting as croupier, reached out to take the money, Trinket stopped him.

'This is the first time I've ever been on the march, and it's the first time I've ever been

banker/ he said. This is my present to you all.'
There were cries of admiration:
'Good for the little Colonel!'
'Now there's a real sport!'
'Any of you want to raise your bets?' Trinket asked them.
His generosity had made them all feel lucky and the piles on

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the table quickly grew, as many of them added to what they had already wagered. Suddenly a voice rang out from the rear:
The Gate of Heaven!
Simultaneously a melon-shaped object landed on the table with a thump. The men gazed at it in horror. It was a bloody human head. From the cap which still adhered to it they could see that it was one of the Palace Guards.
'It's Getong!' said Zhao Qixian. 'He was on sentry-duty tonight.'
When the soldiers looked round, they saw a dozen or more men dressed in blue, each of them holding a long-sword, standing in the entrance of the tent. They had all been so intent on their gambling that none of them had seen these intruders arrive. And as none of them were carrying arms, they were at a loss to know what to do.
One of the blue-dressed intruders, a young man of twenty-five or so, stepped up to the table. He was empty-handed and appeared to be unarmed.
'Well, Colonel,' he said, 'do you accept the bet?'
'Seize him!' shouted Zhao Qixian, and instantly four guards moved to lay hands on the young man; but before they could touch him, he had seized two of them by their necks and banged their heads together, so hard that both of them fell down unconscious on the ground. At the same moment, there was a flash of steel and the other two guards uttered cries of pain as two of the blue-clad swordsmen transfixed them from behind. The guards slumped to the ground and the two men in blue, one a man of middle years, the other wearing the long hair and robe of a Taoist, withdrew their swords, which they then hurled like javelins at the table. The swords sank quivering into the wooden surface, one on the left, one on the right-hand side.
'I'm betting on the Upper Gate/ said the middle-aged man.
'And I'm betting on the Lower Gate/ said the Taoist.
At a gesture from the young man, who appeared to be their leader, four more of the blue-dressed swordsmen came forwards and stood on either side of Trinket, pointing their swords at his
body.
'You're crazy, breaking into the middle of an armed camp/ Zhao said to the intruders. 'You don't stand a chance of getting out alive. Aren't you afraid of being killed?'
Somewhat surprisingly, one of the four men in blue who were

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covering Trinket with their swords let out a giggle. 'We aren't afraid. Shouldn't you be?'
It was a high female voice. Trinket looked up into the smiling face of a fifteen-year-old girl. She had large, lustrous eyes and a rather gentle expression. A moment before he had been terrified, but now he felt suddenly heartened.
'If I'm afraid, it's because of you,' he said, smiling back at her. 'I'm only afraid of girls.'

'Why are you smiling, then, if you're afraid?' she said. 'I won't smile if you don't want me to,' he said, and his face instantly assumed a very serious expression, so droll that it provoked another giggle.

The young leader of the group laughed scornfully. 'You can see the Manchus are finished if they appoint little babes like this to command their forces,' he said. 'Come on, little Colonel! Are you going to throw those dice or not?'

'What do I have to pay you if I lose?' said Trinket. 'Need you ask?' said the young leader. 'If you lose to Upper or Lower Gate, you must give them a sword; if you lose to the Gate of Heaven, you pay with your head.'

At this point he expected Trinket to begin begging for mercy; but whatever he might be like in other situations, Trinket at the gaming-table, particularly when there was a pretty girl present to show off in front of, was no coward. In any case, with four sword-points an inch or two away from his body, he calculated that they were probably going to kill him anyway, so he might as well go out in style.

'All right,' he said, 'a head for a head, then. A sword for a sword, a head for a head, and trousers for trousers. You throw first.' The young leader was a bit taken aback by this response, and the middle-aged man muttered something about the need to hurry and not fool about if they wanted to get away before the whole camp was alerted; but the young leader realized that he would lose face if he didn't go through with what he had started, so he picked up the four dice and threw. Six. The Taoist and the middle-aged man threw after him. Each of them got eight.

Trinket picked up the dice and held them out to the girl.

'Will you blow on them for me?'

'What for?' she asked, but blew just the same.

'Thank you,' he said. 'If a girl blows on them, I'm sure to win.'

His throw scored six.

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'Six beats six, and I lose to Upper and Lower Gate,' he said, reaching for Getong's head and placing it in front of him.

'Zhao,' he said, 'go out and get me a couple of swords, please.'

Zhao Qixian made off to do his bidding, but was called to a halt at the entrance of the tent by one of the men in blue, who shouted at him and pointed a sword at his chest.

'All right,' said Trinket. 'If I'm not allowed to get swords, you'll have to take money instead. Let's say each of these is worth a thousand taels.'

He took two thousand taels' worth in banknotes and silver from the pile in front of him and placed half beside each of the swords. Once more the young leader of the intruders gave a scornful laugh.

'Do you really think you can get away with that?' he said. 'Those swords are worth all the money on this table.'

He made a sign to his followers and six or seven of them leapt forward and swept up all the money. Then he took a sword from one of them and pointed it at Trinket's throat.

Tell me, scum,' he said, 'are you a Manchu or a Chinese? What's your name?'

Trinket knew that this was a challenge, and that he must now either fight or surrender. He didn't want to fight, but it seemed silly to surrender after having braved it out so far.

'I'm a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Plain Yellow Banner,' he said cheerfully. 'My name is Trinket Wishy-Washy. If you want to kill me, kill me. If you want to play with me, play with me. But I must say, I don't think it's very sporting of you to take on someone so much

smaller than yourself.'

The young man quite admired his courage. 'You're right. Sister/ he said, turning to the girl, 'you're about this fellow's size. You can take him on for me.'

'Certainly,' said the girl. 'Come on, Colonel Wishy-Washy, let's see what you can do.'

'Outside!' shouted the other three who had been covering Trinket, and gave him a prod.

Then, at a sign from their young leader, they drove their three swords into the table for him to choose from.

Trinket had never in his life fought with a sword and knew that he wouldn't stand a chance.

'I think she's smaller than me,' he said. 'It's still not fair.'

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The young leader seized him by the collar and shook him.

'If you're too scared to fight with my sister, kowtow to her and ask her for mercy!'

'No problem!' said Trinket lightly. 'You know what they said to the man who kept his gold below his knees: As long as there are ladies around, keep kneeling!'

There was a roar of laughter from the blue-clad men as he dropped to his knees at her feet.

In a flash he had twisted around, jumped up, and was standing behind the young leader holding a dagger at his back.

'Surrender?' he said.

He knew that clowning was a good way of putting your opponents off their guard and had used this ploy to get his dagger out of his boot while he was grovelling servilely on the ground.

Seven or eight of the swordsmen pointed their weapons at his breast and shouted to him to release their leader, but they could do no more.

'Release him?' said Trinket. 'I suppose I could. But that wouldn't help very much.'

He made a sudden sweep round with his dagger and there was a series of clangs as it severed their sword-blades in turn and the cut-off parts dropped to the ground. He returned his dagger to the young leader's back as the men stepped back, gazing in amazement at their useless swords.

'Now/ said Trinket, 'just put that money back, will you!

The men who had taken the money put it back on the table without hesitation.

Just then there was a confused medley of sounds outside the tent, shouts of 'Surrender!'

and 'Don't let them get away!', and a surge of fully armed soldiers burst into the tent, some of them carrying extra weapons for the unarmed officers and guards inside.

What had happened was that two officers had slipped out unobserved while the attention of everyone in the tent, including the blue-clad intruders, was focused on Trinket and the young leader, and had managed to call out a sufficient number of infantrymen to surround the headquarters tent with a human ring three or four men deep. All this had been done so silently and expeditiously that the tent was completely encircled before a sound was heard by any of those inside.

'Never mind me!' shouted the young leader. 'Fight your way

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out and get away if you can!'

But already each of the blue-clad intruders was surrounded by five or six armed men.

However skilled or valiant they were, there was nothing they could do but surrender. They had to drop their weapons (damaged or not) and submit to being bound.

Trinket suspected that skilled fighters such as these who considered themselves enemies of the Manchu Court were likely to be connected with the Triads in some way, and wondered if he could find some means of freeing them.

'Look, friend,' he said to the young leader, 'you could have loll'd me when you came in here, but you didn't. If I kill you now without giving you a second chance, I'll be like the unsporting bastard who runs off with his pile the first time he makes a lucky throw. Why don't we have another go at betting for heads, like the game you started just now?'

The young leader now had seven or eight soldiers in front of him pointing their weapons at his chest, so Trinket put his dagger away and sat down at the table again, chuckling at the prospect of some more gambling.

'If you want to kill me, get on with it,' said the young leader. 'Don't play about with me.'

Trinket ignored him and picked up the dice, still chuckling. 'I'll be banker again and we'll play for heads. Each of you throws in turn. If you win, you go free, with a hundred taels to see you on your way. Anyone who loses—Zhao, get a sharp sword, will you, and stand over here!—anyone who loses gets his heads cut off straight away. That will pay them back for killing poor old Getong and the other two.'

He proceeded to count the intruders. There were nineteen of them, so he made nineteen little piles of silver ingots, each to the value of one hundred taels. To the prisoners, who had considered themselves dead men as soon as they surrendered, this was unexpected clemency. The Taoist told Trinket that, for a Manchu, this was very handsome.

Wishy-Washy always believes in fair play,' said Trinket. That young lady saved my life by blowing on the dice for me. Your little head is safe, sweetheart You don't have to throw. You can take the money and go.'

He told one of the officers to see that she had safe conduct through the camp.

The girl's face, which had been deathly pale, turned a deep

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red, and she slowly shook her head.

'I don't want to/ she said, speaking in a very low voice. 'I can't. The nineteen of us have sworn to live and die together.'

That's very noble of you,' said Trinket. 'Well, actually, it makes things much simpler. If you've sworn to live and die together, you can throw for the lot of them. If you win, all nineteen of you take the money and go. If you lose, all nineteen of you get the chop. Pretty straightforward, isn't it?'

The young leader wasn't too sure what the others would think about it and looked round at them inquiringly, but as several of them expressed their approval, he nodded at the girl.

'Have courage, sister!' he said. 'Whatever you throw, it's fated to happen, anyway.'

The girl reached for the dice. Her eyelids with their long lashes were lowered, but as she picked the dice up, she raised her eyes for a moment and darted a pitiful look at Trinket. Her hand was trembling violently. She closed her eyes tightly again as the dice fell from her hand and rattled smartly on their tray. She dared not look; but though she knew nothing of dice or gambling, she could guess that the Manchu soldiers' loud laughter and their shouts of Three! Three! Three! must bode ill for herself and her friends. And when she did at last open her eyes, she saw that the faces of her companions were ashen. In this kind of gambling three is nearly the lowest score it is possible to get. The nineteen of them almost certainly faced death.

Suddenly one of the men began to shout. 'It's my head, why should someone else throw for me? I want to throw for myself.'

'Don't be such a coward!' said the Taoist angrily. 'You are disgracing our Wang Wu Clan.'

'It's my parents who gave me life, not the Clan,' said the man. 'None of you has the right to decide for me.'

'Why didn't you say so before then, instead of waiting until our sister-in-arms had thrown?' said the Taoist, even more angrily.

That commander said we were each of us to have a throw/
said the man. The rest of you may have agreed to let her throw for us, but you didn't hear me, say anything.'

Throw for yourself then, Yuan/ said the young leader icily. 'From now on you are no longer a member of the Clan/ 'So be it/ said the man. 'Does anyone else want to throw for himself?' Trinket asked,

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looking round at the other members of the group.

Two of them moved their lips slightly as if they wanted to say something, but after a little hesitation decided not to.

'Right, then/ said Trinket. The Wang Wu Clan are obviously a very brave bunch. I'm not so sure about this Yuan—but of course he's not a member any more. Pour out some wine, somebody! I'd like to have a drink with these friends first, just to show there are no hard feelings.'

An orderly fetched and filled nineteen cups and, after setting one of them down in front of Trinket, handed one to each of the remaining eighteen members of the Clan.

'No Manchu can be a friend of mine,' said the young leader, 'but since you have behaved to us like a gentleman and spoken well of our Clan, I am willing to drink with you/

Trinket raised his cup. The man called Yuan turned his head away and looked rather green while they were drinking.

'Now/ said Trinket, 'eighteen officers with sharp swords, please! If I throw three or anything higher than three, these eighteen friends of ours here must end up a head shorter!'

With an enthusiastic shout a number of officers leapt forward, and soon there was one of them standing, with sword upraised, behind each of the seventeen men and one girl whose lives depended on the throw.

Trinket was secretly worried that he was too out of practice to control the dice, but after blowing and shaking and prolonging the whole operation as long as he dared, he was delighted to see that what he had thrown was two Twos, a One, and a Five: the 'bent five'. A 'bent five' is equivalent to zero: anything can beat it. The prisoners' joy can be imagined, but the soldiers, though they dared not say anything, looked grumpy and suspicious. Trinket saw, and feigned disappointment.

Tamardy! he swore. 'It's my hand that ought to be cut off!' And he put his right hand on the table and dealt it several hard slaps with his left.

While the blue-clad clansmen were wondering if a Manchu's word could be trusted, Trinket began pushing the piles of silver towards the edge of the table.

'Go on/ he said. 'You've won the money. Aren't you going to take it?'

The young leader at first refused, but when he was given to understand that Colonel Wishy-Washy would regard his refusal as

an insult, he deemed it best not to waste time by arguing and picked up the first little pile with muttered thanks. The others followed his example and began walking from the tent. When it came to the girl's turn, she gave Trinket a little smile as she thanked him and picked up the money. For a brief moment they exchanged glances, then she blushed and turned to go; but when she had gone a few steps she stopped and turned to him again with a smile.

'Do you think I could ask you for those dice?' she said timidly.

'Of course,' said Trinket, handing them to her and giving her fingers a little squeeze. 'Is this so that you can play dice with your friends?'

'No,' she said. To remind me how frightened I was! Thank you.'

And she hurried from the tent.

The man called Yuan showed signs of leaving with the rest.

'Hey!' Trinket shouted. 'What about your throw?'

The man turned pale.

'I thought you wouldn't want me to, now that you've given the dice away/ he stammered.

'You don't need dice to gamble with,' said Trinket. 'You can bet on anything. For example, we could bet on how much money there is on this table. What's your guess?'

'I couldn't possibly say/ said the man.

Trinket banged the table angrily.

This rebel scum thinks he can make a fool of me! Take him outside and cut his head off!'

Yuan, now grey-faced, slumped to his knees.

'No, General, no!' he pleaded. 'Have mercy!'

'General, eh?' thought Trinket. Thanks for the promotion!'

'All right then/ he said. 'We're going to ask you some questions. If you answer them truthfully, I might let you go. But the tiniest little lie, and you get the chop. Understood?'

He had the man manacled and put in leg-irons, then, having first reimbursed the officers and the guards with the money they had lost in gambling, he cleared the tent and ordered Zhang and Zhao to proceed with the interrogation.

From Zhang and Zhao's preliminary grilling it emerged that the Wang Wu Clan were followers of Situ Bolei, a high-ranking officer who, during the last days of the Ming, had commanded one of the detachments guarding the Great Wall under the overall command of Wu Sangui. When Wu Sangui defected to the

Manchus, Situ Bolei had resigned in disgust and withdrawn to the Wang Wu Mountains on the borders of Henan and southern Shanxi provinces, with those of his officers and men who shared his opinions. This group of patriots, continuing to drill and train under their old commander, had evolved a distinctive method of fighting which even Zhang and Zhao had heard of. The young leader of the blue-clad intruders was Situ Bolei's son, Situ He. The girl's name was Zeng Rou. Her father had been one of the old man's staff officers who had died some years previously and entrusted his daughter's care to his old commander. The Clan had recently learned that Wu Sangui's son was visiting Peking and had sent this group of fighters to make their way there and kidnap the son as a means of coercing the father to revolt. Coming upon this large Manchu encampment on their journey north and finding it ill-guarded and with loud sounds of gambling coming from the headquarters tent, their young leader had been unable to resist the temptation to profit from the Manchus' negligence by slipping inside the camp and taking a few Manchu lives before continuing on

his mission.

Conscious that his men must be feeling somewhat aggrieved that he had allowed the murderers of three of their comrades to go free, Trinket had been trying to think of some way of giving them satisfaction. The mention of Wu Sangui now gave him an idea how this might be done.

'How dare you pretend you were going to kidnap Wu's son!' he shouted, angrily thumping the table. 'It's obvious you were in his pay all along and just going to Peking for instructions. Tamardy! This turtle's egg is still holding out on us. Let's have some soldiers in here; I want this man beaten!'

Seven or eight men came running in, threw Yuan face downwards on the ground, and proceeded to administer a military-style flogging, which soon reduced his back and buttocks to a bloody

mess.

'Now,' said Trinket, 'perhaps you're ready to talk. How many of you are there living on Wang Wu Mountain?'

'About four hundred/ Yuan answered faintly.

'Including families?' Trinket asked.

Two thousand, maybe.'

'Granny's twat!' Trinket shouted, banging on the table. There must be more than that. Beat him again!'

'Don't beat me! Don't beat me!' pleaded the wretched Yuan.

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'I think there must be four thousand—no, five thousand.'

'Four thousand, five thousand,' said Trinket. 'If you mean nine thousand, why don't you say so?'

The interrogation, reinforced by further shouts and threats of beating, continued in this fashion, until the final deposition, duly taken down in writing by a regimental clerk, contained the following information:

1. The Wang Wu Clan numbered thirty thousand trained and fully-armed men.
2. Their leader, Situ Bolei, had been to Yunnan from the Wang Wu Mountains to plan a rebellion against the Manchus with his former commander Wu Sangui.
3. The rebellion was to begin with the simultaneous mobilization of Wu Bangui's troops in Yunnan and the invasion of Peking and massacre of the Manchus there by the forces from the Wang Wu base. (Trinket, whose ideas of geography were extremely hazy, was under the impression that the Wang Wu Mountains, which are actually five hundred miles from Peking, were only a few miles from where he was sitting.)

Zhang and Zhao had exchanged uneasy glances during the course of this interrogation, but when they expressed their doubts, Trinket assured them that this whole operation, including the freeing of the prisoners, was part of a deep plan concocted by the Young Emperor. They remembered how, on a previous occasion, Kang Xi had countenanced the deliberate freeing of three members of the Mu Family and were easily persuaded not only that Trinket was acting in a fully approved manner, but also that there would probably be big rewards for those who carried out his orders.

That very night two of Trinket's staff officers were dispatched to Peking with the deposition and a hastily drafted memorial, together with the prisoner, guarded by a detachment of ten Palace Guards and three hundred of the Valiants.

Kang Xi's response was both swift and unexpected. At noon next day, when the troops had struck camp and were proceeding slowly on their southward march, they were overtaken by

two mounted members of the Palace Guards, galloping at a tremendous pace. They were carrying a Secret Edict from the Emperor, which Trinket gathered his staff round him to receive. Though beginning with a full list of Trinket's tides, it was not written in the usual Court language but in wording that he could actually understand when it

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was read out to him:

'... You are supposed to be going to the Shaolin Monastery to carry out my orders. Who told you to meddle with things that don't concern you while you were on your way? You have been listening to the lying gossip of someone who wants to undermine the reputation of a loyal officer. What sort of effect is this going to have on the Satrap when he gets to know about it? If I hear another word of this nonsense, the whole lot of you will be coming back to Peking without your heads. Hear and Obey.'

Trinket kowtowed fearfully, the cold sweat running down his back. Zhang Kangnian and the other officers looked rather pale.

'Silly little bugger!' they thought. 'He's lucky to have got away with a telling-off.' And they slunk away, unwilling to share his embarrassment.

The march proceeded. Towards evening the detachment which had escorted Yuan to Peking caught up with them. There was no further gambling this night, or on any of the nights which followed, after they had pitched camp.

Father Treasure

After some days, Mount Song and the Shaolin Monastery came in sight. Father Wisdom, the Abbot, who had been warned that he was to be the recipient of an Imperial Edict, was waiting at the foot of the mountain with all his monks and escorted them up to the monastery. There Trinket took out the Edict, broke open the seals, and handed it to Zhang Kangnian to read out. This Edict, unlike the last one, was composed in extremely flowery language which Trinket found quite incomprehensible. It was only towards the very end that he began to understand the words that were being read. After announcing the gifts that the Emperor was making to the inmates of the monastery, the Edict went on to say that Trinket (it gave him all his new tides) was to have his head shaved there and then and to be received as a monk in the Shaolin Monastery as the Emperor's proxy.

This came as a thunderbolt. Trinket had agreed to become a monk and go to Wutai in order to look after the Old Emperor; but he had not expected to be leaving the secular world so abruptly, or leaving it in this particular place. He looked on glumly while the officers distributed the Emperor's gifts and while Zhang handed the Certificate of Induction to Father Wisdom, and there were tears in

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his eyes when he knelt on the ground to be shaved.

'This is a great honour for our monastery/ said Father Wisdom as he took up the razor. 'As you are the Emperor's proxy, no one here, including myself, is worthy to be your instructor. I shall put you down as a disciple of my own late Master of blessed memory, so that you will be equal with me in seniority. The name in religion I give you is Treasure, because you will be accumulating spiritual treasure here for His Imperial Majesty. To the Brothers you will

be known as Father Treasure.'

He motioned with the razor three times over Trinket's head, then handed it to a barber monk, who removed from Trinket's pate the frizzled remnants that Princess Ning had left him. While the barber was engaged in this, Father Wisdom filled in the blanks in the Certificate of Induction. Trinket, in addition to being a Palace Eunuch, a Triad Lodge Master, a Mystic Dragon Marshal, a Manchu Colonel (and of course a genuine, authenticated Yangzhou street urchin), was now a monk. He had entered the Holy Gate of the sangha, the monastic community of Buddhist believers. Suddenly a great wave of misery welled up inside him and he burst into tears. But just at that moment the assembled monks began chanting the names of the Buddha, so the sound of his sobs went unheard.

When the chanting finished, Father Wisdom introduced the Brothers to him, one by one. All of them called him 'Father'. When he found himself being called 'Father' by old men with long white beards, he could not contain his amusement and the Brothers smiled kindly to see this little monk laughing loudly while the tears were still wet on his face. Some of them, of course, knew him already, having met him on Wutai.

Their mission having been accomplished, it was time now for the soldiers to leave. After taking his farewell of the officers, Trinket led Zhang Kangnian to one side and handed him three hundred taels with which to arrange board and lodging for Doublet somewhere in the vicinity of the mountain. Women were not allowed in the monastery: and though Doublet was disguised as a boy, the Shaolin monks who belonged to the Eighteen Lohan group had seen her on Wutai and knew that she was a girl, so she had remained behind when Trinket and the senior officers were escorted up the mountain. She had been expecting him to return within a matter of hours; but now he didn't know when he would be returning and the best he could hope for was that, if he kept her

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nearby, he would be able to steal visits to her from the monastery from time to time. The days which followed were for the most part days of idleness. Father Wisdom decided that, provided Trinket observed the Five Major Precepts, it should be left to his own discretion whether or not he joined in chanting the offices and in the various other activities of the Brothers. The Five Major Precepts, he explained, were the prohibitions against taking life, stealing, fornicating, lying, and drinking alcoholic beverages. Trinket asked if gambling was forbidden, a question for which the unworldly Abbot was unprepared. However, after thinking for a bit he smiled amiably and replied that it wasn't among the prohibitions, so he supposed it was all right; though of course the Brothers wouldn't be able to gamble with him. Trinket didn't think he would derive much pleasure from gambling with himself; and since he had no intention of taking part in the offices, foresaw that the time he spent in this monastery was going to be very, very boring.

Yet in the event he found there was some relief. The Shaolin Monastery had for centuries been the Empire's most famous centre for training and research in the arts of self-defence, and most of the monks spent a good deal of their time in practising and training themselves in these arts. At first, when Trinket was wandering idly round the monastery and came upon a group of them practising, they would stop what they were doing and stand respectfully to attention. It was not entirely out of respect that they did this: many of the Shaolin methods were closely-guarded secrets and the trainee monks had had it drummed into them that they were never to allow strangers to see them practising. However, they had been told that Trinket was equal to their Abbot in seniority, so when he begged them to continue and behave as if he wasn't there, they soon got used to his presence and he was able to spend a great deal of his time watching them practise. It occurred to him that the

reason why Kang Xi had arranged for him to begin his life as a monk in the Shaolin Monastery was so that, before he went to Wutai, he might improve his credentials as a protector of the Old Emperor by acquiring some of these skills. While he was stuck there it seemed a waste of opportunity not to do so, and for a day or two he was enthusiastic about the idea; but, needless to say, he was too lazy to persist with any sort of training for long.

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Green Girl and Blue Girl

Spring had come, and one day the weather was so inviting that Trinket was suddenly filled with a longing to escape for a while from the tedious company of the monks. He decided to go down the mountain and visit Doublet. She must be lonely, he thought; and besides, if he were to buy the ingredients, she would be able to cook him the meat and fish dishes for which, after weeks of enforced vegetarianism, he had developed a craving. On his way down, as he approached the halfway pavilion, where visitors were first received before proceeding up to the monastery, he could hear the sounds of a quarrel—men's voices mixed with the higher-pitched voices of women. Anxious not to miss any excitement, he hurried forward and found that it was the four monks who were permanently employed there as receptionists engaged in altercation with a pair of females, one of them a young woman of about twenty entirely dressed in blue, the other a girl of sixteen or so in pale green. Trinket, knowing that these four Brothers were the gentlest of men whose courtesy and tact had recommended them for the job, wondered how they came to be quarrelling. The senior of them, Brother Clarity, ran to meet him and begged him to intervene. Suddenly, as Trinket approached the girls, he was smitten with a sensation the like of which he had never in his life experienced before. It was the girl in green. She was quite simply the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He stood gazing at her, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. 'I'd like to marry that girl,' he thought. 'I will marry her. Even if it means going through fire or flood or boiling oil, I'll have that girl for my wife!' Embarrassed by his stare, the Green Girl blushed and turned away her head. The blue one at first looked indignant; but when she saw the fierce working of his face, one moment grinning, the next moment rolling his eyes and grinding his teeth, she concluded that he was a harmless idiot. With some astonishment she heard the monks calling to him to rouse him from his trance: 'Father Treasure! Father Treasure!' 'Father? she said. 'Is this little monk your superior?' 'He is indeed, young lady/ said Brother Clarity. 'Next to our Lord Abbot, he ranks highest in this monastery.'

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'Don't believe him, sister,' said the younger girl. 'He's pulling your leg.' 'Are you a high-ranking monk?' the Blue Girl asked Trinket. 'I'm certainly am, darling, worse luck,' said Trinket, who had by this time come out of his trance. 'I thought we came here to learn something from the greatest Martial Arts centre in the Empire,' said the Blue Girl. 'But the first four monks we meet can't even fight properly, and this so-called Father of theirs is a little guttersnipe. We're wasting our time. Come on, let's go!' Trinket noticed that Brother Clarity and one of the other Brothers had red marks on their

faces where they had been hit and realized that the girls must have laid into them as soon as they arrived. Brother Clarity for his part was worried that if the girls left now with so bad an impression, they might spread the word outside and the reputation of the monastery would be damaged.

'Please don't go, young ladies!' he begged them. 'We four are only receptionists; we don't pretend to be any good at Martial Arts. I think before you go you ought at least to tell us where you come from and who your teacher is. If you will wait a moment, I will fetch some Brothers from the monastery who are better qualified to help you.'

He turned to run, but before he had gone a few steps, a blue streak appeared behind him and he was sent flying head over heels. There was a cruel laugh and next moment the Blue Girl was over him and—click! clack!—had dislocated his right shoulder and his arm. She then proceeded to deal with the three other monks in the same fashion.

Scared out of his wits, Trinket was still wondering what to do when he felt a tightening of his collar and his whole body went numb. Whoever had grabbed hold of him must simultaneously have done something to a Vital Point on his neck. He could see the Blue Girl standing in front of him, so he knew that it must be the Green Girl who was holding him. The thought of being touched by her, however roughly, gave him pleasure. He could smell the perfume she was wearing.

'Mm!' he murmured. 'I like your scent!'

This seemed to infuriate the Blue Girl.

'What a vile little creature this monk is!' she said. 'I think you'd better cut his nose off.'

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'No, I think I'll poke out his horrible little leering eyes/ said the Green Girl.

'I hope it takes a nice long time/ thought Trinket dreamily; but then he felt excruciating pressure on his left eye and realized that she was serious.

'Ow!' he cried. 'Mother's!'

Wildly fumbling behind him in an effort to push her off, he unthinkingly employed the Hero trick which the Leader had taught him and which he had afterwards practised on the Empress Dowager, squeezing the Green Girl's young breasts so that she was forced to back away. As she stepped back, with a cry of shame and rage, she seized both his arms and gave them a violent twist. There was a sickening crack and both his elbows were disjointed. Then she drew a sheath knife from her waist and went for him. He threw himself to the ground and rolled under a stone picnic-table for cover, but she kicked him out and made a stab at his back.

'Sister, sister/ cried the Blue Girl, 'you mustn't kill him!'

But the Green Girl went on stabbing. Though Trinket was wearing his weapon-proof waistcoat, the blows hurt him badly and he cried out in pain. Believing that she had killed him, the Green Girl completely lost her head. Her virgin purity had been violated and she had loll'd a Shaolin monk. Unable to face the consequences, she turned the blade of the knife towards herself and drew it across her throat. Immediately the blood gushed up from the wound. The Blue Girl caught her as she fell and held her in her arms.

'Oh sister, what have you done?' she said. 'You mustn't die!'

'Holy name! We must save her. There's no time for delay.'

The speaker was a venerable monk with a long white beard who must all this time have been hurrying to the scene.

'I fear she's past saving/ said the Blue Girl; but the old monk, ignoring her, reached down over her shoulder and pressed with his fingers on several points round the bleeding wound.

'Forgive me, young lady, but we have to act quickly.'

There was a rending sound as he tore a strip from his habit which he then bound round the Green Girl's throat. Then he took her in his arms and hurried off with her along the path that led up to the monastery, with the Blue Girl following at his heels. Trinket struggled to his feet and tried to follow too, but his arms were hurting abominably and the effort made great drops of

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sweat stand out and roll down from his forehead. Fortunately he had not gone very far when a number of the monks came running towards him and helped him and the other four injured monks back to the monastery. In the Shaolin Monastery the treatment of injuries was considered a branch of the Martial Arts and there were monks specializing in dealing with fractures and dislocations, who were able, with a minimum of manipulation, to get Trinket's injured limbs back into joint.

As soon as they had finished with him, Trinket wanted to go and see the Green Girl, but he was told that his presence was required by the Abbot. This message was conveyed to him by eight Brothers from the Vinaya Hall, the disciplinary centre of the monastery. At first he refused, and they were obliged to traipse after him to the infirmary. The Blue Girl was standing guard outside, but the aged monk who had rescued her happened to come out at that moment and was able to assure him that the Green Girl had not died—her wound was by no means dangerous and would certainly respond favourably to treatment—so he abandoned his idea of going in to see her, and resolved to come back later.

'It was all that young monk's fault/ the Blue Girl shouted, pointing her finger at Trinket. He stuck out his tongue at her and accompanied his escort to the hall.

An intimidating scene awaited him. Fifty or sixty monks wearing their cassocks were drawn up in two ranks facing each other on either side of the hall. At the head of the hall, below the Buddha image, were two thrones, the left-hand one occupied by the Abbot, Father Wisdom, in full canonicals, the right-hand one by a tall, forbidding figure whom Trinket had not previously encountered. This was Father Perception, the Master of Discipline. The four unfortunate receptionists stood in a row facing them. As Trinket walked with his escort between the ranks of silent monks, he felt he was entering a court of law.

'You must first pay your respects to the Lord Buddha/ said Father Wisdom when Trinket stood before him. Trinket kowtowed to the image.

'Now/ said Father Wisdom, 'will you kindly tell the Master of Discipline exactly what took place this morning at the halfway pavilion?'

'I was on my way down the mountain when I heard the sound of quarrelling, so I went to have a look/ said Trinket, 'but

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'I've no idea what they were quarrelling about. Brother Clarity could tell you that.'

Brother Clarity embarked on a rather long-winded account of the monks' altercation with the two girls, ending with the girls' refusing to say who they were and then striking him and another Brother in the face. The Abbot seemed to think it very important that they should establish what school of Martial Arts the girls had been trained in and summoned the head monk of the Prajna Hall to advise them.

When this venerable individual arrived, he turned out to be none other than the old monk

who had applied first aid to the Green Girl and carried her off to the infirmary. His name was Brother Simple. He had lived in the monastery since he was seven years old and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of every aspect of the Martial Arts but an almost total ignorance of the world outside, so that in practical matters he often seemed half-witted. Questioned about the blows sustained by two of the receptionists, he mentioned several systems of self-defence which might employ this form of attack and gave a number of impressive-sounding technical terms to describe what Trinket thought of as a simple smack in the face. When Trinket mentioned the way in which the Blue Girl had dislocated the monks' shoulders, Brother Simple produced even more possibilities and a great deal more technical terminology from his vast store of knowledge. After some discussion it was concluded that the girls' training was eclectic and that they did not belong to any particular school. The Master of Discipline was more interested in the Blue Girl's charge that Trinket had indecently assaulted her companion. Trinket's flippant answers when pressed about this did little to endear him to this austere individual, but at least they made it clear that when the 'assault' occurred which had driven the Green Girl to try and take her own life, he had been struggling for his survival. This was confirmed when they saw the holes that her knife had made in his habit. The Master of Discipline having first expressed the view that Father Treasure, though he had conducted himself throughout with unseemly levity, was not actually in breach of the rule of chastity, Father Wisdom delivered his own judgement: the four receptionists should be temporarily relieved of their duties in the halfway pavilion so that they could devote more time to training, and the two young women should exceptionally be allowed to reside in the monastery until the younger one's injury was

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healed. As Trinket had been found innocent of unchasteness, he might take a seat beside him.

'How many years' training have you done already?' Trinket asked the receptionists when he had seated himself next to the Abbot. It turned out that all four of them had done more than twelve years.

There's something wrong here,' he said. 'This monastery is supposed to be the great Martial Arts centre of the world; but here are four Brothers who've trained all these years, and yet a couple of girls who haven't had any proper training at all can make monkeys of them.'

'We all have our strengths and weaknesses,' said Father Wisdom. These four Brothers just happen not to be good at Martial Arts; but they are very good at dealing with outsiders, which itself is a work of merit.'

But Brother Simple seemed unconvinced. 'Father Treasure is right,' he said, looking desperately worried. When the session had ended and the Brothers were dispersing to their duties, the old monk was still muttering to himself and worriedly shaking his head.

As soon as he could get away, Trinket slipped round to the infirmary. The Green Girl was lying motionless in one of the beds, whether sleeping or unconscious he couldn't tell. Her face was almost as white as the bandages with which her neck was swathed. An arm lay outside the coverlet, whose dimpled hand he reached out to touch; but just at that moment there was an angry shout which caused him to draw back: 'Don't you dare touch her!' It was the Blue Girl who had just appeared at the other end of the room. He turned and fled. His joints ached at the mere thought of experiencing those 'eclectic' methods of Martial Arts a second time.

He was round again first thing next morning. The old monk who looked after the infirmary came out to greet him. 'Is the young lady any better?' Trinket asked him. 'She's gone, Father. She came to in the middle of the night, and when she saw where she was she said

she wasn't going to stay a moment longer in the same monastery as that little . . . that little Trinket could guess whom she meant. 'Yes, yes.'

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'So, well, she managed to get up on her feet and the other young lady helped her to leave. I've no idea where they were planning to go.'

Trinket nodded miserably. He didn't know where the Green Girl had gone. He didn't even know her name. But then he reflected that a girl who was so beautiful and who had such remarkable accomplishments would surely not be too hard to trace. Sooner or later he would track her down. Meanwhile he went off to tease Brother Simple. Even life in the monastery still had its amusements.

For a whole month after the Green Girl's disappearance, no day went by without his thinking about her two or three times.

Green Girl and Blue Girl again, in Strange Circumstances

The weather was now getting warmer and he miserably reminded himself that it was already three months since he became a monk. It was high time, he decided, for a break. Taking a supply of money with him, he left the monastery and struck out on a path that led down the slopes of Shaoshi Mountain to the market town of Tantoupu. At an outfitter's in the town he bought himself a complete new set of clothing, including hat and shoes, which he carried off to a cave he had passed on his way across the mountain. There he changed into his new purchases, made his monk's clothes into a bundle, and went off to admire his reflection in the still, deep part of a mountain stream. Satisfied with what he saw there, he made his way back to Tantoupu, carrying his bundle with him.

The first thing he did when he was back in the town was to find a good restaurant, where he treated himself to a substantial meal of chicken, duck, fish, and pork. Then, having satisfied his most pressing craving, he set out to look for somewhere where he could hear once more the shouts of gamblers and the merry rattle of dice. After walking the length of seven or eight little back streets, he heard a cry of 'Aces up!' from the depths of a house he was passing. The sound was sweet music to his ears. He knocked at the door. A man of forty or so with a rakish tilt to his hat came out to answer.

'What do you want?'

Trinket took out a silver ingot and juggled it in his palm.

'I've got itchy fingers,' he said. 'I want to lose some of these.'

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This isn't a gaming-house, sonny,' said the man, 'it's a whorehouse. And if it's girls you're after, you'd better come back in two or three years' time.'

Trinket was not to be discouraged.

That's all right,' he said. 'Find me a few of the free girls, enough to make up three tables, and we'll have a party.'

He pressed the ingot, weighing all of two taels, into the man's palm and gave him a wink. To buy yourself a drink, friend.'

At the feel of the money the man's manner underwent an instant transformation.

'Why, thank you, sir. Come inside, sir,' he said affably; and as Trinket entered, he turned and bawled in a great voice to those within:

'Visitor!'

The bawd came hurrying out, all smiles when she saw this fifteen-year-old in his expensive, flashy clothes.

'Here's a young lad who's stolen from his parents and gone on the town to spend the money/ she thought. 'We'll pluck you well, my pigeon, don't you worry!'

She took him by the hand.

'I expect you want to see the girls, my dear. We ask for a little present first, that's the rule. Like a deposit.'

The smile fled from Trinket's face.

'Who are you trying to fool? I'm no innocent babe, lady. I was bom in the trade.' He slapped a wad of notes, three or four hundred taels' worth, on the table. 'One tea-round, five pennyweights a girl; flower-top, three taels; server of the big pot, five pennyweights; and five pennyweights for the auntie. And I'm feeling generous, so make it all double.'

The bawd's jaw dropped. Only someone brought up in a brothel could have so fluent a command of the language.

'How silly of me! I should have seen at once you were a professional. Now just say what you want, my dear, and we'll do our best for you.'

'I suppose in a small place like this you wouldn't have any Suzhou girls or any from Datong?' said Trinket.

The bawd looked embarrassed.

'Well, yes and no. We've got one who passes for a Suzhou girl, but she isn't really. She can fool our ordinary customers, but I wouldn't recommend her for you, dear.'

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'Never mind/ said Trinket cheerfully. 'Call them all in. Tell them three taels each, with my compliments.'

Soon the room was full of twittering, excited young women. No beauties these: most of them were big-footed country girls, crudely made up, and far too gaudily dressed. But Trinket was happy. All his young life he had dreamed of playing the big shot, the seriously rich customer who treats all the girls, and for whom the brothel puts on its smiling best. He sat in their midst, a girl in either arm, on one of whom he planted a big kiss, savouring as he did so a very strong reek of garlic.

There was a movement in the doorway as two more young women came elbowing their way in.

Two more!' he said. 'Welcome, welcome! Come over and let me give you both a smacker!' Next moment he jumped up with a cry of dismay, upsetting the two girls at his sides. The two who had just come in were the Blue Girl and the Green Girl! The Blue Girl laughed mirthlessly at his confusion.

'We've been following you ever since you got to town,' she said, 'wondering what mischief you would get up to next.'

Trinket's back was clammy with cold sweat.

'You—no, not you, the other one—are you ... I mean, is it. . . is your throat better now?' he asked faintly.

The Green Girl ignored him. The Blue Girl continued as if he had said nothing:

'We've been waiting outside the monastery day after day for you to come out. Now our patience has at last been rewarded and we are going to have our revenge. We are going to cut you up into little tiny pieces.'

'When I grabbed you that time,' Trinket said to the Green Girl pleadingly, 'it wasn't... I mean, I didn't... I think . . .'

The Green Girl reddened and her eyes flashed.

'And what about what you said just now when we came in?' said the Blue Girl angrily. 'Don't talk to him, sister, he isn't worth it,' said the Green Girl. 'Let's kill him now and get it over with!'

She drew her sword from its scabbard. There were screams from the girls as the blade flashed out, catching the tip of Trinket's hat as he ducked to avoid it. The hat fell off, revealing his bald head.

'I advise you two to get out of here/ Trinket shouted, crouch-

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ing behind one of the girls. This is a whore-house. Only prostitutes come in here. What about your reputations?'

The Blue Girl and the Green Girl were now both slashing with their swords. In the crowded room they narrowly missed decapitating one of the young whores.

'I told you, this is a whore-house/ Trinket shouted. 'Don't you understand why I came here? I'm going to undress now. I'll be taking my trousers off in a minute.'

He had already begun unbuttoning and tossed a garment out to show that he meant business. The Green Girl turned and fled. The Blue Girl stared angrily for a second, then turned and followed her. The bawd and one of the tapsters were knocked over as she and the Green Girl rushed out of the house.

Trinket knew that he had only gained a momentary respite. The girls would wait outside and cut him down as soon as he emerged. Inside the brothel, meanwhile, it was pandemonium.

'Calm down, everybody!' he shouted There's ten taels for every one of you. That's a promise. Only just calm down!'

At once there was silence. He took out twenty taels and gave it to one of the tapsters. 'Get me a horse from somewhere, and have it waiting for me at the end of the lane.'

The man ran off to do his bidding. Trinket took out another twenty taels and held it out to one of the young whores. 'Here's twenty taels if you'll change clothes with me.' The young woman was only too willing to oblige. Those two who came in just now are my wives/ said Trinket. They shaved my hair off to stop me going out, so that I wouldn't be able to go to places like this. Now they've found out that I escaped, they're trying to kill me.'

The bawd and the young whores were fascinated. They were used to wives following their husbands to the brothel and quarrelling with them outside; but shaving a husband's hair off to keep him at home, and going out sword in hand to kill him—such things were quite outside their experience.

Meanwhile Trinket was changing into the young woman's clothes. The others entered into the spirit of the thing, some of them fetching rouge and eye-black to make up his face for him while others offered advice. Male customers drifted in from other parts of the house to watch the fun. To hide his baldness, Trinket tied a floral kerchief over his head.

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Presently the tapster returned to say that he had got a horse.

'You want to be careful, sir. Your older missus is outside the front door and your Number Two is round the back. They've both got their swords drawn waiting for you.'

'Spiteful bitches!' said the bawd. The likes of them take the food out of our mouths. We should all be starving if they had their way. I'd divorce them, my dear, if I was you. Then you can come here and enjoy yourself whenever you like.'

'Good idea,' said Trinket. 'But right now, could you do me a favour? Could you go to the

front door and give that bitch in the blue dress there a piece of your mind? Keep her occupied. Don't go outside though, or you might get yourself hurt.'

This was a task that the bawd was both willing and well qualified to perform. Soon such a violent stream of abuse was issuing from the front of the house that even Trinket might have learned from it if he had been listening. But he was too busy handing out the promised money to the whores.

'When I give the word, I want you all to rush out of the back door with me,' he said. 'If we go out together, those filthy wives of mine won't be able to catch me.'

Emboldened by the sight of so much silver, the young whores, fairly hopping with excitement, enthusiastically agreed. Just at that moment there was a sudden break in the stream of invective from the front, followed by a cry of pain.

'Ow! Aiyo!'

Trinket concluded that the Blue Girl had finally lost patience with the bawd and stepped inside to strike her.

'Now!' he said, and the twenty-odd whores, with him in their midst, streamed through the back door in a promiscuous mass, while the Green Girl, sword in hand, stood helplessly by, not knowing what to make of this sudden exodus.

The Blue Girl, however, sensing that something was up, abandoned the bawd and rushed round to the back of the house. But Trinket was already astride the horse and galloping away. The whores laughed jeeringly and taunted the 'jealous wives'.

'Run after him! Hurry!' the Blue Girl shouted; but it was obviously too late.

Once out of the town, Trinket began taking off the whore's clothing garment by garment and tossing it away as he rode along. He had left his bundle of monk's clothes behind in the brothel, so when he dismounted on the lower rear slopes of the mountain,

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leaving the horse to make its way back alone, he had to climb up to the monastery in his underwear. He managed somehow to sneak inside unobserved and, hiding his face in his hands, to make his way back to his cell. Once inside his cell, he washed the make-up from his face and put on a fresh habit.

'Now,' he thought, 'if those two wives of mine come back here to make trouble, I'll just deny the whole thing.'

CHAPTER 16

In which Father Treasure is further involved with the Green Girl; a Mongol Prince and a Tibetan Lama visit the Shaolin Monastery; Father Treasure is made Abbot of Pure Coolness Monastery; Kang Xi visits the Wutai Mountains; and a White, varition tries to assassinate the Emperor



Trinket, Brother Simple, and the Queen Girl

About noon next day, as Trinket lay sprawled on his bed thinking dreamily of the Green Girl, a nervous-looking Brother Clarity slipped into his cell.

'Father Treasure,' he said, 'I think you'd better not go outside the monastery for a day or two.'

'Oh?' said Trinket. 'Why?'

'One of the brothers from the kitchen was outside gathering sticks this morning when he ran into two young women with swords in their hands. They asked him if he knew you, and when he said he did, they started asking questions about you.'

'What did they want to know?' said Trinket.

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They asked what times you generally go outside and where you generally go to. It was pretty clear they meant you no good and were lying in wait for you. As long as you stay in the monastery though, I shouldn't think they'd dare come inside.'

'But this is the famous Shaolin Monastery,' said Trinket. 'What are people going to think when they hear that a big shot Shaolin monk is too scared to go outside his own monastery because of a couple of girls?'

'I know,' said Brother Clarity. To tell the truth, though, I've already spoken to the Abbot about this. It's on his instructions that I've come. He said to tell you that as long as you don't go out, he thinks they're bound to give up after a day or two; and he's sure no one will think any the worse of us for ignoring them.'

Well, I still think it looks bad,' said Trinket. 'Brother Simple said they don't belong to any particular school of Martial Arts. Girls with no special training getting the better of Shaolin monks! It makes us look ridiculous.'

'I agree,' said Brother Clarity, thinking ruefully of the things they had done to his joints. 'I'm

only passing on the Abbot's orders. He's determined that this matter should be dealt with peaceably.'

When Brother Clarity had gone, Trinket continued his musings about the Green Girl. He didn't want to avoid her, he wanted to be near her. In fact, he wanted to marry her. The trouble was that the Green Girl had made it abundantly clear that she wanted him dead, and if he got near enough for her to do so, she would undoubtedly kill him. Somehow or other he must acquire the ability to disarm her—and, of course, her companion—so that he could have her in his power. What he would do then to convert her from an unwilling captive to an affectionate wife he didn't yet know; but he could only take one step at a time. He decided he would go to Brother Simple and see if that great authority on the Martial Arts could come up with some brilliant method for disarming enraged young swordswomen and getting them into one's power.

He found Brother Simple striding up and down the Prajna Hall clutching his head in both hands, his eyes upturned to the ceiling. The poor man had taken to heart what Trinket had said after his interrogation in the Vinaya Hall a month earlier about Shaolin monks with years of training being no match for untrained girls. He had been puzzling about it ever since, wondering if there could in fact have been some secret system in what he had taken to be the

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girls' eclectic methods and convinced that among all the dozens of systems of self-defence and thousands of figures, positions, throws, feints, holds, attacks, and counter-attacks he had committed to memory there must be something which could have neutralized them. The hours he spent each day in contemplating this problem had only made his mind the more confused, so that when Trinket came to call on him, he was close to mental breakdown.

Trinket coughed a few times, but the old man appeared not to have heard him and continued to pace up and down.

'Brother Simple,' said Trinket; but Brother Simple had still not heard.

Trinket walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. Almost as he did so a shock ran through his body and he found himself being hurled across the room against the wall. He opened his mouth to cry out, but no sound came. At once Brother Simple was on his knees beside him apologizing.

'Oh dear! Oh, Father Treasure! Oh, I am so sorry, I have hurt you! I must beg you to punish me, very, very severely!'

It took Trinket a while to get his breath back.

That's all right/ he gasped. 'Please get up. It was my fault.'

But Brother Simple remained kneeling and continued to apologize. Trinket managed to struggle to his feet by holding on to the wall and then helped the old monk to get up off his knees.

'What was that bit of kungfu you used on me just now?' he asked curiously.

'It's one of the forms of defence taught in Prajna Hand karate,' said Brother Simple.

'Is it something you could teach me fairly quickly?' Trinket asked him.

Brother Simple shook his head doubtfully.

'Prajna Hand karate would certainly be effective against the young ladies, but, er . . .'

'But it would take twenty or thirty years to learn properly, is that what you were going to say?'

Twenty or thirty years? Let me see. Perhaps . . .'

'Perhaps twenty or thirty years wouldn't be long enough.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Look,' said Trinket, 'couldn't you just teach me those parts of Prajna Hand that I would need to use if I was going to take on those girls?'

Brother Simple looked startled. Evidently such a possibility

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had never occurred to him and he was somewhat overwhelmed by the boldness of the concept. His face brightened, but after a moment or two of reflection he began to look worried and glum again.

'Oh dear, oh dear!'

'Why the "oh dears"?' said Trinket.

'I shall need to know all the forms of attack these young ladies are capable of and match each of them with a Prajna Hand defence before I can begin instructing you. You and the four brothers who were with you that day will have to have another encounter with them. That could be dangerous.'

Trinket laughed.

'I don't think that will be necessary. If you want to know more about their method of fighting, why don't you go and find out for yourself?'

'You mean fight them?' said Brother Simple. 'Oh dear me, no! Our vows forbid us to seek conflict with anyone.'

'All right, then,' said Trinket. 'Just come outside with me and the two of us will walk around together. Perhaps we shall find that the girls have already gone, in which case we shan't need to bother.'

He seized the old monk by the hand and hauled him off after him.

Brother Simple had seldom been outside the monastery walls since he was a lad and found much to marvel at as they walked around. He was just making an inane remark about some pine trees when there was a shrill cry and a blade flashed out from behind one of them.

'Here he is!' screamed the voice.

The blade was aimed at Trinket, but Brother Simple effortlessly stretched out his arm and grasped the wrist of the person wielding it before it could do any damage. As he did so, he called out the names of the movements:

That was a Wild Tiger attack. This defence is a Flower-Picker's Catch-Can.' But he quickly released the wrist. 'Oh dear! I shouldn't have used that defence. You'd find that one too difficult.'

The wielder of the sword was the Blue Girl. As soon as her wrist was released, she drew the sword back and aimed it in a wide sweep at the old monk's waist. Meanwhile, however, the Green Girl had also run out of the trees with sword upraised to cut down Trinket; but as Trinket had at once dodged behind Brother Simple's

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back, her blade was descending on the old monk's shoulder at the same time as the Blue Girl's sword was sweeping towards his waist. He had little difficulty in fending off this double assault, but it cost him considerable effort to name the two forms of attack and the way in which he had countered them. He appeared to be under the impression not that he was fighting for his life but that he was giving a lesson in unarmed combat; but the girls mistook his muttering for taunts and in their anger began hacking at him wildly.

'Father Treasure,' he called out between gasps as he ward off their blows, 'tell the young ladies to go a little slower. My old brain isn't fast enough to identify all these attacks!'

But Trinket, nearly helpless with laughter, had slipped off to lean against a pine tree, from which vantage point he could devour the Green Girl with his eyes. The Green Girl, not

seeing Trinket, thought he must have run away and stopped for a moment to look round. When she caught sight of him leaning against the tree and gazing at her she reddened and, abandoning the combat with Brother Simple, turned to run at him with her sword. But even as she did so, the old monk aimed the middle finger of his right hand against a Vital Point under her ribs. The effect of this was almost instantaneous. Halfway to the tree she twisted about, dropped her sword, and fell down, paralysed from the neck downwards, upon the ground. Trinket ran up and knelt beside her.

'How beautiful you are!' he said. 'Just to look at you almost makes me want to die!' And he touched her cheek.

Speechless with shock and anger, she fainted away.

Trinket got up.

'Brother Simple/ he called, 'why don't you do that to the other girl as well? Fighting isn't a very good way of finding out their methods. If they're both immobilized you can find out what you want by just asking them.'

'You're right, Father,' said Brother Simple. 'We should always avoid violence if we can.'

The Blue Girl paused and stepped back. She knew she was no match for the old monk and that, if there was to be any hope of rescuing her companion, it was essential for her to remain free. She darted towards the trees, just pausing a moment to look back.

'If either of you harms a hair of her head,' she shouted, 'I'll burn your monastery to the ground.'

And with that she plunged into the trees and disappeared.

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'Why should we want to harm her hair?' Brother Simple asked, naively. 'Do you think she will burn the monastery if one of the young lady's hairs should just chance to drop out?' Trinket ignored his dumb question. He was gazing down at the green-clad figure on the grass, wondering how he could take advantage of this heaven-sent opportunity to have her in his power. Somehow or other the old monk must be persuaded to let him keep her. He placed his palms together and raised his eyes heavenwards in what he hoped was a convincingly pious attitude.

The Lord Buddha's holy name be praised, Brother Simple!' he said. 'He has delivered this girl into our hands for the greater glory of the monastery.'

'Oh?' said Brother Simple. 'How do you make that out?'

'Don't you see? We can take her back with us. Then you will have plenty of time to find out all you need to know about her combat methods and work out the appropriate ways of countering them. Once we know that, no one will be able to say that the Shaolin monks are no match for a couple of half-trained girls.'

He took off his monk's habit and wrapped it round the recumbent figure, then, gathering her up in his arms, began marching off with her.

'Come on!'

Brother Simple felt that there was something not quite right about this, though he couldn't have said exactly what it was; nevertheless, Trinket was his superior and he was enjoined by his vows always to obey his superiors in religion, so he simply picked up the Green Girl's sword from the grass and trailed along, somewhat unhappily, behind.

Just outside the side gate of the monastery Trinket drew a flap of the monk's habit over the Green Girl's face, so that none of her was visible. Even so, his heart beat faster as they entered, for he knew that if any of the monks saw him like this, their suspicions would be aroused and there would be serious trouble. Fortunately he got to the Prajna Hall without an encounter, and once he was inside, the monks on duty there, seeing him followed by

their own superior, made way for him with meekly downcast eyes and did not venture to question what he was doing. Trinket made straight for Brother Simple's cell and laid the still-unconscious Green Girl on the bed.

'I think I'd better be with her on my own when she comes to,' he told Brother Simple.

'You've seen how stubborn and violent

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she is. I shall try to talk her into a better frame of mind so that she is more willing to help you with your investigation.'

Obediently Brother Simple went outside his own cell and allowed Trinket to close the door on him.

When, some minutes later, the Green Girl came to her senses, she saw Trinket standing over her holding his dagger an inch or two from her nose. She was on the point of calling out when he stopped her.

'Don't make a noise! If you call out, I shall cut your nose off. Just listen to me and answer my questions and I promise not to harm you.'

The Green Girl turned pale with anger.

'Will you do as I say?'

She looked even angrier.

'Kill me!' she said in a scarcely audible voice.

'Oh no/ said Trinket. 'You're so beautiful, I can't stop thinking about you. I can't kill you and I can't let you go. Either way I should die of longing.'

The Green Girl's face turned very red, then, almost immediately, very pale again.

'I think I'll just have to cut your nose off,' said Trinket. Then you won't look so beautiful.'

She closed her eyes tight, but a big tear escaped from the corner of each of them and ran down towards her ears.

'Don't cry, don't cry!' said Trinket in a panic, laying down the dagger. 'Of course I won't cut your nose off. I'd sooner cut off my own. Just tell me what your name is.'

The Green Girl shook her head.

'Look,' said Trinket, 'I have things to say to you. How can you talk to someone when you don't even know what their name is. Can't you just tell me your name?'

Again she shook her head. Her eyes remained tightly closed.

'Well, I shall have to call you something,' said Trinket. 'I think I'll call you "No Way". "No" because you keep shaking your head, and "Way" because that's my surname (get it?), and I'm quite determined to marry you, so you might as well get used to the idea of being Mrs Wei.'

'I shouldn't think there could be another monk in the world who speaks such rubbish as you do,' said the Green Girl. 'You know that monks can't marry. Probably you'll burn in hell for just thinking of such a thing.'

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Trinket fell down on his knees, so heavily that the Green Girl opened her eyes to see what he was doing. She saw that he was kneeling, his face towards the window and his palms together, in an attitude of prayer.

'I call on the Rulai Buddha, the Amida Buddha, Guanyin the Bodhisattva of Mercy, Manjusri the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, the Puxian Bodhisattva, the Jade Emperor, and all the host of Heaven to bear witness. I, Trinket Wei, whatever the price, even if it means suffering all the tortures of hell for a thousand, thousand years, vow that I will in this life or

a life to come have this girl here for my wife.'

She thought that he was fooling, but when he got up again and she saw the strange look in his eyes, she knew he was deadly serious.

'But I hate you,' she said. 'I detest you. You can kill me if you like or you can beat me every day until I die, but I shall never, never consent to be—what you said. After the way you've shamed and humiliated me, my only wish is that I might one day have you in my power so that I could kill you and afterwards kill myself.'

'I don't want to kill you,' said Trinket. 'I'd rather kill myself. Look, just do one thing for me. Just tell me what your name is and I'll let you go. I swear I will.'

'I don't want you to let me go/ she said. 'You've dishonoured me so much that I don't want to go out of here alive. Why don't you just cut my throat and have done with it?'

As she was saying this, he caught sight of the red line round her neck where the self-inflicted wound had only recently healed. A pang of remorse went through him and a strangled cry, halfway between a sob and a groan, rose up in his throat, so strange that the Green Girl felt quite frightened.

'I know I've done you wrong/ he said, falling once more on his knees beside the bed. 'I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I really didn't mean to.'

He held his arms out on either side of his face and began bringing them together, dealing himself heavy slaps on both his cheeks at once.

'You mustn't mind me/ he cried between slaps. 'I'm a stupid, silly idiot. I deserve to be beaten/

After dealing himself a dozen or more of these double slaps, he got to his feet again and walked over to the door. He opened it

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to find Brother Simple patiently standing in exactly the same spot as before. The old monk had heard every word spoken inside the cell, but was far too unworldly or too simple to understand their meaning. He assumed from the earnestness of the tone that what Trinket was urging on the girl was a message of salvation. His admiration for Trinket's saintliness had grown even stronger when he became aware from the sounds inside that Trinket was striking his own face. The Buddhism of the Shaolin Monastery was of the Zen variety, and Brother Simple had heard many stories of Zen Masters shouting at novices or striking them to bring about a spiritual awakening; but striking one's own face for this purpose was rare indeed and worthy of the Holy One himself.

'Brother,' said Trinket, interrupting the old man's rapt meditation on his saintliness, 'I want to release her Vital Points. How do I go about it?'

The point I closed is the Big Bag on the tract that connects the Greater Yin of the foot with the spleen. To release it, you have to reverse the flow of blood temporarily by applying pressure to the Basket Door and Sea of Blood points on the young lady's legs.'

'Whereabouts on her legs?' said Trinket.

The old monk bared his own legs one after the other and showed Trinket where the points were, behind the bend of the knee. When he had shown him several times exactly how the pressure was to be applied, Trinket went inside the cell again and closed the door. But the Green Girl had been listening to their exchange and wasn't having any.

'I don't want my points opened,' she said. 'I don't want you to touch me.'

Trinket went outside again to ask if a point could be opened without bodily contact being made. Brother Simple knew of at least one way it could be done, with a flick of the sleeve, but the art required many years of inner cultivation. It seemed not to occur to either of them that the easiest way of resolving the problem was for Brother Simple to go inside and

do the job himself.

Trinket went back inside and looked around. On a table beside the bed there were some books and one of those instruments called 'wooden fish' which monks beat as an aid to their chanting. He picked up the little hammer which lay beside it, gently uncovered one of the Green Girl's legs, and began delicately poking in the prescribed manner at the point on it which Brother Simple had indicated.

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'You see,' he said. 'I'm not touching you.'

He had in fact found the correct position, but he was being too gentle to do any good.

'Can you feel anything?' he asked her.

'Useless creature!' said the Green Girl scornfully. 'Making disgusting, guttersnipe remarks is all you're any good at.'

This was too much. He struck her angrily, this time quite hard, provoking an 'Ow!' which made him instantly concerned.

'Did that hurt?' But she was too cross to reply.

He struck her again, in the crook of the other leg, but not quite so hard. This time a slight tremor ran through her whole body.

'It worked!' he cried joyfully. 'It worked!'

But just as he was congratulating himself on his new skill, he felt a sudden sharp pain. The Green Girl had sat up, seized his dagger, and stuck it, with all the force she could muster, into his chest.

'Aiyo!' he cried. 'You've murdered your own husband!'

As he slid down to a sitting position on the floor, she picked up her sword and ran to the door, planning to make a getaway. But instead of escaping, she ran straight into the arms of Brother Simple.

'Young lady, what have you done?' cried the old monk in distress.

She slashed at him with her sword, but her legs were still weak and he had little difficulty in immobilizing her once again with a single skilled flick of his long sleeve. He left her lying helpless on the floor and rushed into the cell where Trinket was sitting, his back against the bed and his legs stretched out in front of him, with a dagger sticking out of his chest. With the middle finger of his right hand Brother Simple flicked the Vital Points round the place where the dagger had entered, then he took hold of the dagger and, muttering 'Amitabha, Merciful Buddha!', gently drew it out. A rush of blood followed, but not nearly as much as might have been expected. The wound, though very painful, was quite a shallow one, for Trinket had been wearing his protective waistcoat and it was only because he had been struck with his own almost irresistible dagger that it had pierced through the fabric at all. An ordinary dagger might have bruised him severely but would not have broken the skin. The Green Girl, lying outside, immobilized but still fully conscious, assumed that she had killed him and tearfully

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begged the old monk to dispatch her quickly, convinced that, sooner or later, she must pay with her own life.

Ignoring the Green Girl's cries, Brother Simple rushed off to get wound-powder to apply to the cut in Trinket's chest. Later, as he was applying it, he told Trinket that his wound was by no means serious. He had been providentially saved: a reward, no doubt, for the saintly way in which he had attempted the Green Girl's conversion.

Now that he knew he was out of danger, Trinket's chief concern was that Brother Simple should not let the Green Girl get away.

'Oh, I'm dying, I'm dying,' he groaned, sufficiently loudly for the Green Girl to hear him. Then, beckoning to Brother Simple to come closer, he whispered in the old man's ear, 'You can open her Vital Points now. Only, when you've done it, don't let her go. Don't forget you've still got to find out about her methods. Go on, go on!'

Somewhat puzzled by these instructions, the old monk went outside to do his bidding. Through the open door the Green Girl had witnessed the conspiratorial whispering from where she lay, but had been unable to hear what was said. She concluded that the evil little monk, knowing that he was dying, must be plotting for some horrible vengeance to be executed on her after his death, or, worse still—since he had more than once vowed that he would one day make her his wife—that he was planning for her to be forced into marrying him before he died. As soon, therefore, as she was released from her immobility, she reached for her sword and once more attempted to take her own life. But before she could do herself any harm, the old monk's sleeve shot out and the sword dropped out of her hand. She leapt up and tried to claw at his eyes, but Brother Simple effortlessly knocked her wrist back with his arm.

The Eye Hazer,' he said in his classroom voice, 'favoured by the Jiang Family of Jiangnan.' She kicked out at his lower belly, but he merely swayed a little to one side so that she was kicking at thin air.

'Footfall in the Empty Valley,' he chanted, 'used by the Shato tribesmen of Turkestan, though I suppose they must have their own Turkish name for it. Such is my ignorance, I am afraid I have never been able to discover what it is. Do you know, by any chance, young lady?'

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Ignoring his question, she followed up with several punches and kicks, all of which he blocked or evaded with the greatest of ease. At first he tried naming them, but when, with her increasing exasperation, her attacks grew wilder and more agitated, he was unable to keep up his commentary and had to content himself with identifying them mentally and trying to remember what she had done.

The Green Girl was growing tired and dizzy, and since every single attack she made was frustrated and there was not the slightest chance of her overcoming the old man, whose skill in combat was clearly a hundred times greater than her own, she presently broke away from him, retreated a few steps, and plumped herself down on one of the benches which had been placed at intervals along the wall of the cloister.

'Oh, aren't you going to fight any more?' asked the old monk, surprised.

'What's the point?' she said. 'You will always beat me.'

'But I am all the time studying how to beat you,' he said. 'How can I finish my research when I haven't seen all your methods of attack? My dear young lady, if you won't fight me, could you perhaps give me a demonstration and I will sit and watch. Do, please, go on.'

'So that's your game!' thought the Green Girl. 'You have provoked me to fight you so that you can study my methods and think of ways to beat them. I'll take very good care that you don't learn any more from me!'

She rose from the bench and began punching the air with her fists and kicking and stamping with her feet like a little child in a rage. Brother Simple, who had taken her place on the bench to watch this 'demonstration', gazed at her in astonishment.

'Good heavens! Extraordinary! Remarkable! Oh dear, I don't understand!'

The forms of attack were so unfamiliar and followed each other in such rapid succession

that he suspected some mysterious, half-magical form of combat which had escaped him throughout all his years of study. His brain was whirling, a dreadful spiritual blackness possessed his soul as he reflected that the vast corpus of learning it had taken him a lifetime to acquire was perhaps invalid, and by the time the Green Girl ended her wild dance and sat down, exhausted, on the floor, the poor man was so dizzy and his mental faculties in such confusion that he fainted.

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The Green Girl, scarcely believing her eyes, watched him keel over, then, when it became clear that he really was unconscious, she seized the opportunity to pick her sword up and run away. As she sped through the Prajna Hall, the monks there looked at this fleeting female vision in astonishment, but, lacking the authorization of their superior, dared not do anything to stop her, so that she actually succeeded in getting out of the monastery unchallenged.

It took some time for Brother Simple to regain consciousness. When he finally came to and saw that the Green Girl had gone, he felt that he had been defeated by superior knowledge and went in to see Trinket, full of shame and confusion, to confess his failure.

'Father Treasure/ he said, 'I am very ashamed. In the demonstration just given by that remarkable young woman, I was unable to identify a single movement. I am unworthy to teach Martial Arts in this monastery any longer.'

Trinket had witnessed some of the Green Girl's performance through the open doorway and, when he saw the old monk's tragic expression, could not refrain from laughing.

Unfortunately, laughter proved so painful that the sweat stood out on his forehead and he had to press his hands against the place on his chest where he had been stabbed before he was able to answer.

That wasn't kungfu you were watching, Brother,' he said. 'She was just throwing her arms and legs about to fool you, like a little brat having a tantrum.'

The old monk looked surprised.

'Do you really think so, Father? Well, well. Bless my soul!'

Trinket was obliged to hold his chest again for fear of laughing.

Matters of the Heart

The by no means dangerous stab-wound on Trinket's chest responded rapidly to the Shaolin Monastery's excellent wound-dressings and by the end of a fortnight it had very nearly healed. As to the circumstances in which he had been wounded: the three or four monks of the Prajna Hall who had seen the girl kept their own counsel, and the rest, because Trinket was the Emperor's proxy and a very senior monk, were not inclined to ask questions, so the episode passed without comment.

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While Trinket was recovering, Brother Simple wrote down as many of the forms of attack used by the two young women as he could remember and worked out appropriate ways of countering them, with a view to demonstrating them to Trinket when he was better.

As soon as he was sufficiently recovered, Trinket agreed willingly enough to undergo some training, but after only a few days his enthusiasm was waning, and Brother Simple, for his part, although he had tried to accommodate his pupil by taking short cuts, was coming to the conclusion that it was only by going back to the very beginning of the course normally prescribed for Shaolin novices and training systematically that Trinket would ever get

anywhere.

'What we are doing at present/ he said, 'would only serve against the two young women. It would be useless against anyone who had received a proper training.'

'But I only want the moves for using against the two girls/ said Trinket.

'You may never see them again/ said Brother Simple. 'In that case, isn't this rather a waste?'

'But I must see them again/ said Trinket. 'I mean I must see the Green Girl again.'

Brother Simple was puzzled. But then a thought struck him.

'Did she poison you, by any chance? Do you mean she has poisoned you and you need to see her to get the antidote?'

Trinket saw that it would be useless to try explaining matters of the heart to someone as unworldly as Brother Simple and decided to go along with his suggestion.

That's exactly the trouble/ he said. 'I've got her poison in my bones, in every part of me. I've got to see her again if I want to get better.'

'Brother Radiant knows a lot about poisons/ said Brother Simple. 'Shall I ask him to come over and examine you?'

'No, no/ said Trinket. 'He couldn't do anything about it. It's got to be that girl.'

A Mongol Prince and a Grand Lama from Tibet

A few days after this exchange, Trinket and Brother Simple were in the latter's cell discussing some fine points concerning the swordsmanship practised by the two girls when one of the Prajna Hall

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monks came in to say that they were wanted by the Abbot in the monastery's main hall. When they arrived, they found thirty or forty visitors there, three of them sitting with the Abbot, the rest standing. Of the three sitting with the Abbot, the first was a young man in his early twenties who, to judge from his dress, appeared to be a Mongol nobleman; the second was a tall, thin, red-robed lama of middle years; and the third was a fortyish military man wearing the uniform of a high-ranking officer. Of the thirty or forty men standing behind them, some were army officers, some were lamas, while a dozen or so of them were dressed in civilian clothes but looked as if they might have had some sort of military training and knew how to fight.

'Ah, Father,' said Father Wisdom as Trinket entered, 'our monastery has some distinguished guests today. This gentleman is His Highness the Mongol Prince Galdan; this is the Grand Lama sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho from Tibet—in China he is known as Father Sangge; and this is Brigadier Ma Bao, who is on the staff of His Highness the Satrap of Yunnan.'

'And this,' he said, turning to the three men he had just introduced and pointing to Trinket, 'is my Brother in the Truth, Father Treasure.'

All those present were more than a little surprised at hearing this disreputable-looking juvenile introduced as an equal-ranking colleague of the Abbot. The Mongol Galdan laughed out loud.

'Such a little Father! Very amusing.'

Trinket pressed his palms together and bowed.

'Such a big Prince! Very funny.'

'What is funny about me, please? I should like to know,' Prince Galdan said angrily.

'What's amusing about me, then?' said Trinket. And he sat down unconcernedly in the chair next to the Abbot.

It was clear from the looks of the others present that they didn't know what to make of him.

'Well, gentlemen,' said Father Wisdom, 'to what do we owe the honour of this visit?' The three of us all happened to be passing through this area,' said the Grand Lama Sangge. 'We have heard of the famous Shaolin Monastery and we all come from obscure and backward places, so we decided to call on you in the hope that we might have the benefit of your instruction.'

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Unlike the lesser lama Brother Bayen, whom Trinket had run into on an earlier occasion on Wutai, this one spoke like an educated Chinese and with a passable Peking accent.

'You are too polite,' said Father Wisdom. 'Mongolia, Tibet, and Yunnan all have distinguished traditions of Buddhist teaching. I cannot believe that we in this monastery can have anything to teach you.'

Sangge had, of course, been referring to the Martial Arts for which the Shaolin Monastery was famous. Whether the Abbot had misunderstood him or was only pretending to do so it would be hard to say.

'All the world has heard of the seventy-two incomparable fighting skills of the Shaolin Monastery,' said Prince Galdan. 'Could you not get your monks together to give us a little demonstration?'

'You mustn't believe all the things that people say about us,' said Father Wisdom. 'All our monks here, without exception, devote their lives to the pursuit of Zen as a means of obtaining enlightenment. Although it is true that a number of them devote some of their time to training in kungfu, they do so only as a means of keeping their bodies fit and their minds alert. We attach no special importance to such exercises.'

'Are you not being a little devious, Abbot?' said Prince Galdan. 'We would like only to see a demonstration of the seventy-two skills. We do not intend to steal them from you. Why be so grudging?'

'If you gentlemen wish to discuss the Buddhist dharma with us, I will gladly summon the Brothers/ said Father Wisdom, 'but not for a demonstration of martial skills. That is something expressly forbidden by the rules of our Order.'

Prince Galdan's eyebrows went up.

'It seems that the reputation of this monastery is a hollow sham. It is—how do you Chinese say?—not worth a fart.'

'We are indeed taught that this world we live in is a hollow sham,' said Father Wisdom smiling gently. 'Not worth a fart, as you put it. What you say about the reputation of this monastery is of course correct.'

Prince Galdan had not expected so mild a response. He pointed, laughing, at Trinket.

'So. And this little monk, too, he is not worth a fart?'

Trinket smiled cheerfully back at him.

'I'm certainly not worth as much as you, Your Highness,' he

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said. 'So, if I'm not worth a fart, it's safe to say that Your Highness is worth a fart. A big fart.' Prince Galdan leapt up in a rage and was on the point of striking him. But then he reflected that the only reason this little monk had such high standing in the monastery must be that he was exceptionally skilled in Martial Arts. With some difficulty he restrained himself and sat down again.

There are much worse things than not being worth a fart,' said Trinket. 'Owing hundreds and thousands of taels and not being able to pay them back, for instance—that's much

worse.'

'How true!' said Father Wisdom. 'My brother has stated a profound truth. It is the law of karma that evil actions incur a debt of evil and good ones a good reward. Not to be worth a fart, that is to have incurred neither good nor evil karma. How much better to be owing neither good nor evil than to have incurred an infinite debt of evil karma! The parable is an excellent one.'

Brother Simple was glad to hear the Abbot praising his saintly young companion.

'I have learned much from Father Treasure since I have been working with him,' he said.

'Although he is so young, he has advanced far along the path towards enlightenment.'

The two older men's praise of this impertinent little monk struck Galdan as a deliberate provocation. He leapt up once more, determined this time to do him an injury. Before he could hurt him, however, Father Wisdom's long sleeve shot out and he stepped back and sat down heavily in his seat. How this had happened he did not understand. It felt as if he had been blown back by a small but powerful wind.

All this time Trinket had not even moved. This was partly from fright and partly because he was not expecting the attack and had not had time to respond. To Father Wisdom and Brother Simple, however, he appeared to have shown remarkable restraint. Father Wisdom now launched into a short homily, interlarded with quotations from the Buddhist scriptures, on the virtues of impassivity, ending with further commendation, in which Brother Simple joined, of Trinket's spiritual advancement. This so enraged Galdan that he suddenly interrupted with a barked-out order that none of the Chinese present could understand.

'Hanisbal nimahong kanubidigar!'

A number of the Mongol henchmen behind him raised their arms and there was a rapid succession of little flashes as nine metal

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darts sped one after the other through the air, three towards the Abbot, three towards Brother Simple, and three towards Trinket. Despite the lack of warning, neither Father Wisdom nor Brother Simple was hurt. Father Wisdom disposed of the three aimed at him by flicking his long sleeve; Brother Simple caught the three aimed at him by slapping his hands on them as if he was catching flies; but Trinket, once again taken unawares, sat motionless as the darts hit his chest and fell—link link link—on the floor. Once more the wonderful waistcoat had saved him, though one of the darts had landed near the newly healed stab-wound on his chest and hurt so intensely that it cost him a great effort not to cry out.

There were gasps of amazement from the visitors. Most of them had heard of the 'adamantine body', the temporary immunity to weapons said to be attained by a very few Martial Arts practitioners after years of 'internal' training involving breath control, meditation, and various secret exercises, but none had ever seen it, and seeing it now (apparently) demonstrated by one so young struck them as doubly miraculous. The Grand Lama Sangge was the only one who affected to be unimpressed.

'Our young friend has made remarkable progress in the cultivation of the "adamantine body"/' he said with a sort of sneering smile, 'but I believe the ultimate aim of people who undertake this training is the creation of a protective aura round the body which prevents weapons or missiles from even touching it. I think our young friend still has quite a long way to go before he attains that level of immunity.'

Trinket, still struggling not to cry out in pain, was incapable of answering and could only manage a rather twisted smile; but his silence merely added to the admiration of those

present, for it seemed to them that only a person who had reached so high a level of inner training could afford to treat pettiness like the Grand Lama's with contempt. 'How would you manage if we threw a few darts at you? They felt like saying, but were too polite to do so. 'After what we have just witnessed,' Sangge continued, 'I would agree that the Shaolin Monastery's reputation as an incomparable centre for training in the Martial Arts is fully justified. Certainly it could not be said that it is, as the Abbot here earlier suggested, "not worth a fart". The same cannot, I fear, be said about the moral reputation of a monastery which conceals females on its premises.'

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Father Wisdom looked grave.

'Your Reverence is mistaken. We do not even allow female visitors to our monastery. The idea that we are hiding women here is absurd.'

'Yet such is the current rumour we have encountered on our travels/ said Sangge.

Father Wisdom smiled.

'As a man of religion, Your Reverence must know better than to be moved by current rumours. Father Treasure here teaches us all a lesson in how to remain unmoved.'

'But it is precisely this young Father who is said to be concealing a beautiful young woman in his cell/ said Sangge. 'According to what we have heard, he tied her up and brought her in here a prisoner—kidnapped her, in fact.'

Trinket was startled. First he wondered how the Grand Lama knew all this. Then he wondered how it was that he knew so much yet didn't know that the Green Girl had got away. After thinking for a moment it dawned on him. He must have got it from the Blue Girl. And the Green Girl had not yet made contact with her. That at least was good news. There aren't any young women in my cell/ he said, 'but if you want to, you are very welcome to look.'

We will/ said Galdan. He turned to the men behind him. 'Search the monastery!'

The men began to move.

'Just a moment!' said Father Wisdom. 'Do you have a warrant to search?'

7 give the order/ said Galdan. 7 give warrant. I do not need warrant.'

There I am afraid Your Highness is mistaken/ said Father Wisdom. 'In Mongolia you can give all the orders you like, but you have no right to do so here.'

Galdan pointed to Brigadier Ma.

'He is Chinese officer, commission of Chinese Court. He gives the order to search. You disobey us? That is rebellion.'

The Shaolin Monastery will not defy the Chinese Court/ said Father Wisdom. 'But the Brigadier is on the Satrap of Yunnan's staff. The Satrap's jurisdiction does not, as far as I am aware, extend to the province of Henan.'

The little Father has already agreed that we should look in his cell/ said Sangge with a crafty smile. Why are you so

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unwilling that we should search the monastery? She couldn't by any chance be hidden in your cell, I suppose?'

Father Wisdom was deeply shocked.

'Amida Buddha! I trust Your Reverence is only joking?'

Suddenly a bearded figure spoke out from among the crowd of men standing at the back.

'With my own eyes I saw my sister being carried off by this little monk, Your Highness.'

Please do carry out this search. If she's not found here, we should burn down the monastery.'

It was a high female voice. Behind the layer of yellow grease and the copious whiskers Trinket had no difficulty in recognizing his old enemy the Blue Girl. Father Wisdom also recognized her.

'Are you not the young woman who came to this monastery and injured several of our Brothers? There was another young woman with you whom we allowed to stay here until she had recovered from a self-inflicted wound. Is she not with you now?'

To Trinket it now seemed evident that the game was up.

'Confess!' said the Blue Girl, addressing herself to Brother Simple in a strident voice. 'What I am saying is true, isn't it?'

'Young lady, I beg you/ the old monk said earnestly, 'do please tell us where she is. She has poisoned Father Treasure and only she can cure him. Be merciful. Entreat her to come here and save him. Father Treasure knows that life on this earth is an illusion, but we should like to keep him with us a little longer. Please, please—'

No one had the faintest idea what he was talking about, but at least it was clear from what he said that the girl they were supposed to be looking for could not be in the monastery.

'I know you kidnapped her/ said the Blue Girl. 'Probably you've killed her and disposed of the body. We shall never find her.' And she began to weep.

'You are right/ said Prince Galdan. 'It is certain. The little Father is very, very bad.'

'You're evil,' cried the Blue Girl, pointing her finger at Trinket. 'You saw my sister when you were in the brothel with those bad women. You must have taken a fancy to her then and afterwards killed her because she wouldn't submit to you. A monk who goes to brothels—there's no wickedness you wouldn't be capable of!'

Father Wisdom smiled incredulously and shook his head. But Trinket was growing really worried. It would not be long now

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before all his guilty secrets came to light. Providentially it was just at that moment that one of the group of officers standing behind Brigadier Ma's chair put in a good word for him.

'Excuse me, Miss, but I'm sure this young Father wouldn't do anything wrong like going to brothels and that. It looks as if someone has been misleading you.'

Trinket looked at the speaker and wondered why he had not noticed him before. It was Yang Yizhi, who had come to Peking with the Little Traitor and whom he had befriended at the party given by Prince Rang.

'How do you know?' the Blue Girl said scornfully. 'You're not going to tell me that you've met him before?'

'With respect, Miss, I have,' said Yang Yizhi. 'He did me a very great kindness once at Prince Kang's place in Peking. Before he entered holy orders, he used to be a eunuch in the Palace. That's why I can't believe he has been visiting brothels or doing any of those other things you accuse him of.'

There was a clearly audible 'Ah!' from the assembled company.

The Blue Girl could see that none of those present any longer believed her. Anger made her voice shrill.

'How do you know he is a eunuch? He said he wanted to make my sister his wife. He is a liar and a seducer. And this old monk is no better.'

The eyes of those present turned to Brother Simple, more than eighty years old, with a vague, slightly half-witted expression on his face, and they remembered the all but incoherent statement he had made a little earlier. Clearly the young woman was deranged.

They began to regret that they had ever listened to her wild story or agreed to come to this monastery, only to make fools of themselves.

'Before he became a monk, this young Father was quite famous,' said Yang Yizhi. 'He is the Laurie Goong-goong who executed the traitor Oboi. When my master was slandered by bad men in Peking, it was thanks to this young Father here speaking up for him to the Emperor that his good name was cleared. My master still feels very much indebted to him.'

Everyone present had heard of the famous Laurie. There was another 'Ah!', and expressions of admiration were appearing on every face.

'How are you, Yang my friend?' Trinket asked Yang Yizhi.

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'And how is His Grace? You really shouldn't have said all that stuff about me. It was nothing.'

It was obvious to all present that they really knew each other. Apart from the other officers who had accompanied Brigadier Ma from Yunnan, none of them had known Yang Yizhi by name.

The Blue Girl was by now looking somewhat chastened.

'Brother Yang,' she said (confirming Trinket's growing suspicion that she and the Green Girl were in some way connected with the Satrap), 'is this . . . this person really a eunuch? Did he really speak up for the Satrap?'

'He did indeed, Miss,' said Yang Yizhi. 'And there are many people in Peking who would tell you the same thing.'

The Grand Lama rose to his feet. The Blue Girl's charge was now quite discredited. It seemed there was nothing more to be said.

'Father Wisdom,' he said, pressing his palms together and inclining his head to the Abbot, 'I trust you will forgive us for what has turned out to be a somewhat unmannerly intrusion. We had better take our leave.'

'Won't you just stay for a simple meal with us?' said Father Wisdom. The, er, young lady—' He wasn't going to invite a young female who had smuggled herself into the monastery in disguise to sit with them at table. Sangge laughed.

Thank you all the same, but I think we will forego that pleasure. We don't want to embarrass you.'

The rest of the visitors followed him in making their farewells, and Father Wisdom, Brother Simple, and Trinket escorted them to the main gate of the monastery.

Just as they arrived at the gate, there was a sound of galloping hooves, and presently a party of sixteen Palace Guards dismounted twenty yards from where they stood and, arranging themselves in formation, advanced towards them on foot. The two officers leading them were Trinket's friends Zhang and Zhao.

As the senior officer among them, Zhang greeted Trinket by name, a trifle confusedly because he was not quite sure whether to call him 'Colonel' or 'Father'. All sixteen guards saluted him Manchu style, dropping on one knee and touching the ground with the knuckles of their right hands.

'Please get up, everybody!' said Trinket, delightedly. 'You can't imagine how glad I am to see you.'

Galdan knew that the Palace Guards ranked higher than most

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civilian officials, so Trinket must evidently be a very important person. All the same, the

fuss they were making of this young monk, while according only the curtest of nods to the Brigadier, so disgusted him that he was in a hurry to get away. Turning only to clasp hands in a brief gesture of farewell to the Abbot, he and his company set off at once on a rapid descent of the mountain.

Inviting the guards to accompany him into the monastery, Trinket walked in at the head of them with Zhang Kangnian at his side.

A Secret Edict

'I've got a Secret Edict for you/ said Zhang, speaking in a low voice so that the others couldn't hear. Trinket nodded.

There was, of course, a more formal Edict which Zhang read out when they were all assembled in the monastery's main hall. The Emperor was donating five thousand silver taels to be spent on refurbishing the monks' dormitories and re-gilding the image of the Buddha. There was also a fancy religious title which he was bestowing on Trinket in recognition of his spiritual services to the Empire. Trinket and Father Wisdom both kowtowed. Then followed what, for Trinket, was the most important part of the Edict. He was to leave the monastery not later than noon next day and proceed to the Wutai Mountains. He bowed down low. This was what he had been waiting for.

'I hear and obey.'

After they had taken tea, Trinket invited Zhang and Zhao to his cell, where they could be more private. As soon as they were inside, Zhang took out the Secret Edict and Trinket kowtowed and received it in both hands. It was fastened together with seals of sealing-wax. 'Fat lot of good this is, when I can't read,' he thought.

He couldn't get Zhang to read a Secret Edict; but then it occurred to him that Father Wisdom could be trusted to keep a secret, so he excused himself and went off to see the Abbot. Father Wisdom expressed his willingness to explain the contents, but when the seals were broken, it appeared that his help wouldn't be needed after all. The Secret Edict turned out to be a large folded-up sheet of drawing paper divided into four sections, in each of which was a picture.

The first one showed a mountain range with five peaks, which

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Trinket could see was meant to be Wutai. On the north side of the southernmost peak there was a little building, above which were written the characters for 'Pure Coolness Monastery'. Because he had stayed in the monastery and seen the characters many times before, they had a familiar look. Seeing them in this context, he could easily guess what they were.

The second showed a little monk entering the gate of a monastery over which were written the same characters: 'Pure Coolness Monastery'. A small procession of bigger monks were following him. Over them were written the words 'Monks from Shaolin Monastery'. Trinket could read the characters for 'Shaolin'. The other ones he could guess.

The third picture was of a big hall in which a grinning little monk sat in the middle wearing the cope and crown of an abbot, with larger monks standing on either side of him. Trinket burst out laughing when he identified the little abbot as himself. It was some time before he could take his eyes off this picture and go on to the next.

In the fourth picture the little Abbot was kneeling down in front of a monk of middle years. From the thinness of his face Trinket guessed that this was Brother Wayward, as the Old

Emperor Shun Zhi was called when he entered holy orders.

Apart from these pictures there was nothing else in the Edict. Kang Xi knew that Trinket could not read and had used his considerable skill as a draftsman to convey his message. 'Congratulations!' said Father Wisdom. The Pure Coolness Monastery is an even older foundation than the Shaolin and very greatly respected. You will be able to do great things there for the Truth.'

'How can I possibly be an Abbot!' said Trinket ruefully. 'I'll be sure to make a mess of things.'

'Don't forget that according to these drawings you are to take some of the monks from here with you,' said Father Wisdom. 'If you pick Brothers you know and can trust, they will surely do their best to help you and see that you don't make mistakes.'

After a moment or two of reflection Trinket began to appreciate what a lot of thought Kang Xi had given to his plan. He couldn't have sent soldiers to guard his father because, apart from the fact that his father would in any case refuse to have them, their presence would attract too much attention. There might even be some of them who recognized him as the ex-Emperor. And he

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couldn't have sent Trinket there from the Palace because that, too, would have been likely to excite suspicion. But the present Abbot of Pure Coolness Monastery, Father Aureole, was a former Shaolin monk, and what could be more natural than that he should be replaced by a monk from the same monastery? Moreover, this stay at the Shaolin Monastery had given Trinket time to get to know which monks would be most congenial to take with him and best able to help him guard the Old Emperor. The Young Emperor had thought of everything.

Trinket hurried back to his cell, where Zhang and Zhao were still waiting. He took out six thousand taels' worth of banknotes from his monk's chest to divide between them. This was a surprise. They had not expected the fabulous generosity of his Palace days to survive his transplantation to a religious environment. Was something expected of them? They still did not know why Kang Xi had sent him to the Shaolin Monastery to be a monk and, in view of Kang Xi's known interest in the Martial Arts, wondered if it had something to do with the monastery's incomparable collection of texts relating to this subject. Perhaps Kang Xi coveted them and had planted Trinket there to 'acquire' them for him.

'If you've got something big in mind,' said Zhang, 'you can count on us to help you. For example, if you want to get hold of their books, we could start a fire and get them away for you while we were "rescuing" them. You've only got to say the word.'

'No, that's all right,' said Trinket, somewhat alarmed by this offer. 'But there is something else I'd like you to do for me.'

'Anything. It'll be a pleasure.'

Those men who left as you arrived—they're up to no good. Treason, probably. Keep an eye on them, will you, and find out what they're up to?'

'Easy. They can't have got very far.'

'Oh, and one other thing/ said Trinket, trying his hardest to sound nonchalant. There's a young woman dressed up as a man with them and she says she's looking for a friend, a girl of sixteen or so. Find out both of their names, will you, and anything else you can about them?'

'We will. You can count on it.'

They took their leave in haste, wanting to go about their business straight away. Sniffing out rebellion meant rapid promotion and generous rewards. The sixteen guards were soon galloping on their way.

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Trinket selects His Companions

As soon as they had gone, Trinket went to see the Abbot to discuss the arrangements for his departure on the following day. It was agreed that he should take the Eighteen Lohans with him, an obvious choice because of their special fighting skills and because they had been to the Pure Coolness Monastery before; and he particularly wanted Brother Simple to accompany him. In addition to these, he chose seventeen other monks whom he had grown familiar with during his stay, making a total of thirty-six in all. Father Wisdom raised no objection to his choice. He had the thirty-six summoned into his presence straight away and gave them a little address in which he explained that they were being transferred to this other monastery and that they must henceforth obey Father Treasure as their new Abbot. After taking leave of Father Wisdom, they set off early next day. Their first stop was in a little village near the foot of the mountain where Doublet had all this time been lodging and where Trinket left his companions for a while to go and see her. He found her much thinner and felt guilty that in all the six months she had been there he had never once visited her. This was the first time she had seen him shaven-headed and wearing his monk's clothes. The sight made her burst into tears.

'Why are you crying?' he asked her. 'Are you upset because I haven't been to see you all this time?'

'It isn't that,' said Doublet, 'it's just that you're . . . you're a monk now.'

She feared that he would have to stop seeing her and that their life together was now permanently ended.

'Oh, that' he said. 'It's only pretend.'

Doublet brightened.

'Come on!' said Trinket. 'Get into your boy's clothes again. You're coming with me.'

When he rejoined his thirty-six companions, he had a little serving-lad with him.

Father Treasure, Abbot of Pure Coolness Monastery

On their arrival, after several days of travelling, at the foot of the Wutai Mountains, they were met by four monks from the Pure Coolness Monastery, who had been waiting there for some time to welcome them and conduct them up the mountain. The Abbot,

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Father Aureole, had received his own Secret Edict at about the same time as Trinket got his, informing him that he was being elevated to the abbacy of the Cloud of Compassion

Monastery in Chang'an, a larger and more ancient foundation than Pure Coolness, and that his replacement was to be Father Treasure from the Shaolin Monastery, previously known to him as Deputy Intendant Trinket Wei of the Palace Guards. He had therefore had ample time to prepare for the take-over and to arrange for the little welcoming party to be lodged at the foot of the mountain in readiness to meet his successor.

As soon as the hand-over ceremony was completed and Father Treasure installed, Father Aureole called the Pure Coolness monks up one by one and introduced them to their new Abbot. Trinket noticed that Brother Wayward and his two companions were missing from their number. The only indication of their continued presence was a written note from the Venerable Yulin offering his respects. The day after the installation Father Aureole left for Chang'an.

Trinket was now in sole charge of the monastery. Though he lacked both dignity and experience, his Shaolin friends were able to guide him through the various rites and ceremonies over which he had to preside, while the Pure Coolness monks, though at first finding it a little strange that they had been given so juvenile an Abbot, remembered how less than a year before he had saved their lives and were well-disposed towards their little benefactor. With so much help and goodwill, he was able to discharge the duties of his office without any serious hitch.

The chief of these duties was, of course, to watch over the safety of the Old Emperor. In answer to an enquiry, the Camerarius told him that Brother Wayward and his companions, Brother Headlong and the Venerable Yulin, were still living in the little temple where he had left them the previous year. He knew that there was little point in going there to discuss security with the Old Emperor, so, after talking the matter over with Brother Cordial, he gave orders for four thatched huts to be built, one to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west of the little temple at a distance of about three hundred yards from it, and for eight of the Shaolin Brothers to take turns in doing sentry duty in them all the time.

Now that these essentials had been taken care of, there was nothing much left for him to do but wait for the arrival of Zhang

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and Zhao with information about the Green Girl; but as the months went by and not so much as a word from that quarter was forthcoming, the time weighed heavy on his hands. His only diversions were practice bouts with Brother Simple, in which he would pretend that the adversary against whom he was contending was the 'young lady', as the old monk continued to call her, and visits to Doublet, whom he had settled in a little hermitage outside the monastery walls.

One day when he was feeling particularly bored and frustrated, he had gone off walking on his own. His walk had led him to a pretty spot in the mountains where there was a young willow tree swaying gracefully beside a brook. Suddenly the greenness of the tree made him think of his beloved.

'Ha!' he said. 'If you were really the Green Girl, I'd want to give you a hug. But you wouldn't like that, would you? I expect you'd try to knock me out with one of those Kunlun-style Thousand Cliff actions that Brother Simple told me about. Then I'd have to parry with a Holding the Bowl. Then you'd—oh, I don't care! Just kill me, if you like. I can't resist it!' And he wrapped his arms round the tree in a passionate embrace.

He was interrupted by a rude laugh.

Whipping round, he saw two red-robed lamas, barely twenty yards from him, laughing and pointing.

The Abbot of Pure Coolness Monastery making love to a tree! It was too shaming! Blushing to the tips of his ears he hurried away.

A turn in the mountain track brought him in sight of three or four more red-robed lamas.

He hurried past them, head averted, pretending to be admiring the view.

He was not particularly surprised at seeing the lamas. There were several lamaseries on the Wutai Mountains and hundreds of lamas. It wasn't until after he had got back and been met at the gate of the monastery by a worried-looking Brother Cordial that the significance of these encounters became apparent.

Things don't look too good, Father,' said Brother Cordial.

'Oh?' said Trinket. 'What's the matter?'

Beckoning to him to follow, Brother Cordial began climbing the stone steps that led up to a vantage point on the peak beside the monastery. When they were both there, he pointed from one side to the little valley below. Scattered everywhere among the

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rocks and trees there were yellow blobs which, on looking harder, Trinket identified as little groups of four or five yellow-robed lamas.

'What—?' he gasped.

'Look!' said Brother Cordial, going over to the other side, 'there are more of them over here.'

Trinket looked down towards the west. There were at least as many lamas there as well.

From time to time, as the sunlight caught them, there were little winking flashes. They were carrying weapons.

'What do they want?' said Trinket. 'You don't think—?'

Brother Cordial nodded. 'Brother Wayward. The same as last time.'

They walked all round the peak, looking down on every side. The monastery was completely surrounded. Brother Cordial said he had calculated that altogether there must be something like three thousand of them.

They're waiting for darkness/ he said. We've only got a few hours. No time to get help from outside.'

They descended and went inside the monastery.

'So,' said Brother Cordial. 'What are we going to do?'

Trinket hadn't the faintest idea.

Tamardy!' he said. 'I know what /'// do. I'll go and have a nap.'

Brother Cordial's jaw fell and he stared at his little Abbot uncomprehendingly. But Trinket ignored him and strode off to his cell to lie down and think. Within less than half an hour a little deputation consisting of Brother Cordial, Brother Simple, and two other of the Eighteen Lohans were knocking at his door and asking to speak with him. Trinket sat up, gave a big yawn, and asked them what they wanted.

Lamas at the Gate

'Father Abbot,' said Brother Cordial, speaking for the others, 'those lamas who have gathered down below obviously intend no good to our monastery. The Brothers want to know what you are planning to do about it.'

'I thought about it a lot, but I couldn't come up with any plan,' said Trinket, 'so I decided to have a bit of a nap. "The calamity from which there is no escape has come upon us. We must except reversity with meekness and remit our throats to the knife."' (He

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was trying, not altogether successfully, to remember some words from a Sutra.)

Even Brother Simple was not convinced that this was the best answer to their predicament. Trinket eyed Brother Cordial and asked him if he had a better idea.

'We could try to break out with Brother Wayward and the other two when it's dark and smuggle them through their lines somehow under cover of darkness,' said Brother Cordial.

'I don't think they intend any harm to the other monks.'

'All right,' said Trinket. 'Let's see if we can sell this to the Venerable.'

The five of them made their way to the little temple. A young novice who attended to the needs of the three senior monks ran inside to announce them.

The Venerable Yulin had been told only that the new Abbot was a young monk from the Shaolin Monastery but had no idea of his identity. Seeing now, for the first time, that it was Trinket, he and the other two at once guessed that his presence in the monastery must be part of some plan of the Young Emperor's to protect his father. After exchanging greetings, Yulin made Trinket sit on the central prayer-mat while he and Brother Wayward stood respectfully on either side of him. Reflecting that he was being waited on by an ex-Emperor and that even Kang Xi could not be seated in the presence of his own father, Trinket had some difficulty in suppressing a smirk of satisfaction as he invited them both to sit down.

'Father Abbot,' said Yulin when they had done so, 'I should have called on you after your installation. It seems wrong that you should now feel obliged to call on me.'

That's all right,' said Trinket cheerfully. 'I know you don't like being disturbed. I wouldn't have come now if there hadn't been an emergency.'

Yulin didn't ask him what the emergency was. 'Brother Cordial,' said Trinket, 'will you explain the situation to these reverend Brothers?'

Brother Cordial proceeded to explain, in grave and respectful terms, that they were being besieged by a couple of thousand lamas, whose object, he believed, and the Father Abbot had seemed at first to agree with him, was the kidnapping of Brother Wayward.

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Yulin closed his eyes and appeared to be meditating. After a minute or two he opened them again and spoke.

'And what are you proposing to do about this, Father Abbot?'

'Our Lord Buddha said: "If / don't go to hell, who will?"' Trinket replied, ransacking his memory for a few more scraps of sutra. 'We should prepare to offer our necks to the sword. In other words, if we don't have our heads cut off, who will? If there was no life there'd be no death, and if there was no dust there'd be no spick and span. And vicey versy. The sword is a void. And the void is a sword. Let us offer our necks to thdr swords in that spirit. Therein lies wisdom. In the beginning was the Void. I mean, the Word. I mean, the Sword. Here endeth the first lesson.'

The Venerable Yulin said nothing. Brother Simple was impressed. The other three Shaolin monks, though decidedly ^impressed, were beginning to suspect that Trinket was up to something. Brother Headlong, old warrior and former Captain of the Guard, was very nearly exploding. After some moments of silence he could restrain himself no longer.

'Father Abbot,' he blurted out, 'you've said yourself that you think these lamas have come here to kidnap Brother Wayward. And you know as well as I do that if the Tibetans and their friends can get hold of Brother Wayward they will use him to oppress our people. Maybe our lives are unimportant, but what about the millions of Chinese who will be

oppressed? What about their lives?'

'You're right,' said Trinket. 'But there are thousands of these lamas. There's nothing much we can do to stop them.'

'We could try a break-out,' said Brother Headlong. 'If we put Brother Wayward and the Venerable in the middle of us so they didn't get hurt, we might be able to get through their lines to a place of safety.'

'Wouldn't that mean killing a lot of lamas?' said Trinket. 'Amida Buddha! We're supposed to save life, not take it. The Lord Buddha says, "It is better to save one life than to build a seven-storey pagoda." I don't know how many pagodas we'd be pulling down by fighting our way out!'

Just then there was a sound of running and one of the Shaolin monks burst in on them.

'Father Abbot, during this past half-hour the lamas have been moving up on us. They've stopped about three hundred yards below. We're completely surrounded.'

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'Did you say they've stopped?' said Trinket. 'A miracle! They must have repented of their wickedness. Praised be His Holy Name!'

'No, you little—no, Father!' Brother Headlong bellowed. 'They're waiting for the darkness. As soon as it's dark, they'll move in for the kill.'

'All right,' said Trinket. 'You all seem to think that breaking out is our only hope. Let's try to break out, then.'

'No!' It was the first time Brother Wayward had spoken. 'I can't allow any more lives to be lost on my account. Many were lost last time, when they made their first attempt. Even if we could get out now, there would be more attempts later. These people will not give up. I have decided what to do. When the lamas come, I shall set fire to myself. Whatever plans they may have for using my person in order to oppress others will have to be abandoned when they see me burned to ashes before their eyes. Besides, in fighting and massacres and the sacking of cities, my people have done untold evil in this land. Perhaps today, by burning myself, I can atone for some of it.'

'Oh blessed words! Shanzail Shanzail' said the Venerable Yulin. 'Our brother has seen the light. That is what our Lord Buddha meant when he said, "If / go not into hell for them, who will go?"' (This time the Sutra was quoted correctly.) 'In a little while, when the lamas arrive, Brother Wayward and I will burn ourselves together. You and the Brothers, Father Abbot, must not do anything to stop us.'

'Silly old bugger!' thought Trinket, but managed to remain silent.

Brother Wayward rose to his feet and addressed Trinket and the five Shaolin monks entreatingly.

'I am quite resolved. This is a work of merit, you understand. You must all of you help me to carry it out successfully,'

He joined his palms and bowed.

It was obvious that nothing they could say would make him change his mind, so they took their leave and went back to the monastery.

Entering the Manjusri Hall with the five brothers, Trinket found Doublet waiting for him, half-hidden in a corner. From her little hermitage she had witnessed the warlike movements on the mountainside and sensed that her master might soon have need of her. He summoned the rest of the Shaolin monks to the hall and

explained the situation to them. All of them agreed that it was quite out of the question that Brother Wayward should be allowed to carry out his resolve, but none could think of a way of stopping him.

'I've thought of a way,' said Trinket, 'but it will only work if you all do exactly as I say. First of all I want all thirty-six of you to pretend you're attempting a break-out. I want you to take the east track as if you're going down the mountain, fight for a bit when the lamas try to stop you, then pretend you've decided that it's hopeless and retreat back to the monastery. Make sure they know that you're doing this. Lots of shouting. But—and this is the important bit—while you're doing it, I want you to take some prisoners. If possible I'd like about forty prisoners. Any lamas will do: they don't have to be leaders or anything.'

The thirty-six had no idea what the point of this could be, but, with that unquestioning obedience that a monk owes his superiors, they set about carrying out his orders straight away. Trinket went up to the drum-tower to watch them skirmishing. After a few minutes he heard Brother Cordial shouting above the din:

'It's hopeless, we'll never get through this lot. Fall back to the monastery, everybody!'

His cry was taken up and passed on by the others. The convincing ring of despair in these shouted orders seemed to have fooled the lamas, for they did not bother to pursue the retreating monks as far as the monastery gate, confident, no doubt, that if they waited a bit, the whole community would soon be in their hands. Trinket hurried down to the gate to let the monks in. Incredibly, they had taken a total of forty-seven prisoners.

Trinket had the captive lamas brought into the Manjusri Hall, deprived of their clothes, and immobilized by expert handling of their points. Then the forty-seven naked men, unable to move head or hand, were herded into the fuel store and padlocked in.

'Now, this is where Zen monks transform themselves into lamas/ said Trinket.

He made the thirty-six Shaolin monks strip off and change into the robes that had been discarded by their captives. He picked the smallest robe for himself and got Doublet to help him into it, but it was still much too big for him and he had to cut several inches off the sleeves and the bottom of the skirt with his dagger. 'You've got to be a lama too,' he told Doublet.

The robe she put on needed more of the same rough tailoring.

'Now this is the plan,' he said, when all of them had finished dressing up and found hats that would fit their heads. 'We're going to raid the little temple and capture Yulin and Wayward and Headlong ourselves. We'll close their points, dress them up as lamas with these spare outfits, then, as soon as the real lamas start running about, get them down the mountain and out of danger.'

'Brilliant!' said Brother Cordial. This way there needn't be any killing.'

'Wrap your monk's clothes up in a bundle and carry them with you,' said Trinket. 'You'll be needing them again later.'

While they were doing this, he got Doublet to go to his cell and make up a little parcel of his money and a few valuables that he could keep about him. The next thing he asked the Shaolin monks to do was to provide themselves, each one of them, with a bucket of water and to smear ash over their faces. Then they had to sit down and wait for it to get dark. As soon as Trinket judged that it was dark enough, he and his party of pseudo-lamas left the monastery and, keeping to the foot of the walls as much as possible, stealthily made their

way to the little temple.

In the temple's tiny courtyard the Venerable Yulin, Brother Wayward, and Brother Headlong were sitting side by side on a hastily constructed pyre of straw and faggots, impassively waiting for the kidnappers to arrive. They had previously drenched their clothes and the faggots with cooking-oil and placed the means of igniting themselves within easy reach. As soon as the lamas came, the Venerable Yulin planned to make a brief address explaining the purpose of what they were doing, then the flames would leap up and a load of evil karma would vanish in smoke.

Unfortunately for this plan, the pseudo-lamas' assault was too sudden for even a short address to be possible. They had not dared to risk making a noise as they approached the temple for fear of alerting the real lamas below. It was only when these robed and hatted figures were actually entering the courtyard that they began, in a language which, by a stretch of the imagination, might conceivably have been Tibetan, to shout and jabber. Whether or not the pyre was ignited in those few seconds could have made little difference, since just at that moment thirty-eight buckets of water were simultaneously discharged on the seated figures. Dependable

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Doublet at once darted up to the biggest of them, Brother Headlong, and immobilized him with a few expert jabs. The other two offered no resistance: Brother Wayward because he was incapable of doing so, the Venerable Yulin because he elected not to. Many hands drew off the monks' dripping habits and replaced them with lama habiliments. Then, stopping only to collect Brother Head-long's cudgels and set a light to the pyre, they hustled the three new-made lamas out of the temple and into the darkness outside. Despite the water that had been thrown on it, the oil-drenched fuel caught rapidly, and by the time they had gone no more than a hundred paces, the flames and smoke could be seen rising, high above the walls of the temple.

The lamas too had seen the fire, to judge from the hubbub below, and presently a large body of them came rushing uphill, torches in hand, presumably to put it out. Trinket and his party were clearly visible to them in the light of the flaming torches, but because of their lama costume, went unremarked.

They'll never put that out/ said Brother Cordial, 'and when they don't find Brother Wayward, they'll think he's burned himself. They shouldn't give us any more trouble after this.'

Thanks to the disarray which the fire appeared to have created, they had little difficulty in getting down the mountain. Once they had left the lamas well behind, Trinket asked Brother Simple to open the points of their three captors and apologized to them for the rough and unmannerly treatment to which they had been subjected.

Brother Headlong would have burned himself out of loyalty, but had not really wanted to die; moreover, as an old soldier, he was impressed by the ingenuity of Trinket's plan of rescue. His response was therefore a warm one. The Old Emperor had been determined to die, but generously praised Trinket for rescuing him in a way which had involved no loss of life. The Venerable Yulin said nothing. Probably he regarded being burned and being rescued with equal equanimity.

Just at that moment there was another hubbub ahead of them and they became aware of a large body of people hurrying in their direction.

'Another lot of lamas, I'm afraid/ said Brother Cordial. 'We mustn't run away, we must run towards them/ said Trinket. 'Look as if we're glad to see them. Smile. Jibber-jabber a bit and point back up the mountain.'

It was good advice, but fortunately not needed. The party ahead turned out to be a party of pilgrims, all wearing yellow cloth bags round their necks with the words ON PILGRIMAGE printed or embroidered on them in large characters.

The leader of the pilgrims, a big fellow, stepped forward.

'What are you lot up to?' he shouted, in a far from friendly manner.

Under the pilgrim disguise Trinket had no difficulty in recognizing Dolong, Colonel of the Palace Guards. The unfriendliness, he realized, was due to the fact that he was himself disguised.

'Dolong, my friend/ he cried, 'don't you recognize me?'

Dolong grabbed a torch from a nearby pilgrim and held it in Trinket's face. He burst out laughing.

'Well I'm damned! It's young Wei. What are you doing here? And why are you dressed up like a lama?'

Trinket couldn't tell him much, but Dolong didn't press him. The 'pilgrims' gathered round, laughing and chattering. Soon Trinket was surrounded by what appeared to be, as far as he could make out, an entire company of Palace Guards in disguise. There were many of them that he recognized: Zhao Qixian, for example, who was supposed to be getting news of the Green Girl for him.

'So has the Emperor sent you?' he asked Dolong.

The Emperor's here,' said Dolong. 'Both Their Majesties, the Emperor and the Empress Dowager. They've come to Wutai to make offerings at all the main shrines. Right now they're at the Holy Precinct Monastery. It's not only us, by the way. The Valiants are here as well, and the Vanguards. Altogether there must be well over thirty thousand men.'

'So the Emperor's here/ said Trinket. That's great!'

'But what's the Old Whore doing here?' he wondered.

Just at that moment Colonel Chalju of the Valiants arrived, also disguised, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the young lama talking to Dolong was Lieutenant-Colonel Wei, who for a while had been his Second-in-Command. Trinket took the opportunity of explaining the situation to the two officers, though taking care to say nothing about the Old Emperor, of whose very existence they were, of course, like everyone else, unaware.

There are about three thousand Tibetan lamas up there/ he said, pointing to the mountain. They must have heard about the Emperor's arrival and be planning some mischief against him. They seem to be under the impression that it's the Pure Coolness

Monastery he's visiting, because they've got it completely surrounded. With all these forces you've got with you, do you think it would be possible to take care of them without too many casualties? Best of all would be if you could take them all prisoner. The Emperor doesn't like to hear about people being killed.' This last was spoken loudly for the benefit of Brother Wayward, who was standing near enough to hear what they were saying.

'Shouldn't be difficult,' said Dolong. 'We'd have to clear it with the C.I.C. first, of course.'

'Who's that?'

'Prince Kang.'

'Good,' said Trinket. 'He's a friend of mine.'

He called Zhao over and instructed him to tell Prince Kang that an emergency had arisen

which threatened the Emperor's safety. They needed to use troops immediately, there was no time to consult him. They would report to him as soon as possible.

Zhao hurried away to look for the Commander-in-Chief, while Dolong and Chalju went off to organize their forces, glad of a chance to gain military distinction. When the safety of the Emperor's person was involved, a successful operation was sure to bring special honours.

Trinket moved over to where Brother Wayward and his two companions were standing. 'Reverend Brothers,' he said, 'the Golden Pavilion Monastery is not very far from here. Shall we go there and change into something more suitable? We ought to be able to find a quiet place there where you can rest and meditate without being disturbed.'

Brother Wayward nodded.

It was in fact a good two miles' walk to the Golden Pavilion. Trinket went in ahead of the others to arrange things with the Abbot. His way of doing this was to hand him a thousand-tael banknote.

'My Brothers and I would like to rest for a while in your monastery, Father Abbot. All of this money is for you if you don't ask any questions. For every question you ask, I'll charge you ten taels. If you ask a hundred, I'll want the whole lot back.'

'Certainly,' said the Abbot, 'certainly. You are very welcome. Would you—?'

He was about to say 'like some tea?', but suppressed the question in case it cost him ten taels.

As soon as a quiet room and three sets of monk's clothing

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had been found for Brother Wayward and his companions, Trinket and the Shaolin monks changed back into the monk's habits they had brought with them and settled down to take a much-needed rest.

Kang Xi meets Brother Wayward

They had not been sitting long when distant sounds of fighting could be heard and they knew that the Imperial forces had begun the task of rounding up the lamas. The sounds continued for an hour and then grew fainter. After another half-hour had gone by, there was, quite suddenly, total silence. This was broken, some minutes later, by the sound of marching feet approaching from a distance. The sound grew louder and stopped outside the monastery; then they heard talking and the sound of a smaller group entering the forecourt. The Emperor!' said Trinket, and, rushing to the door of the room in which Brother Wayward and the two others were resting, he took out his dagger and struck an impressively warlike pose: Trinket Guarding His Master against All Comers.

A dozen guards approached, armed with swords, though still in civilian clothes, and challenged him to lay down his weapon. Trinket maintained his pose, but dropped it hurriedly and put away his dagger when, seconds later, the guards were followed by a slight, youthful figure wearing the blue cloth gown of a commoner. At once he fell to his knees and kowtowed.

'Good news, Your Majesty! His . . . His Reverence is in here.'

Kang Xi waved away the guards.

'Go, all of you!'

As soon as the guards had gone, Trinket rapped a couple of times on the door.

'It's Father Treasure,' he said. 'Could I please see you for a moment?'

There was no reply. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, Kang Xi became so

impatient that he stepped forward and gave the door a couple of raps himself. He would have called out, too, had not Trinket frantically signalled to him not to say anything. After another silence they heard Brother Headlong's voice speaking from the other side of the door.

'Our Brother is feeling very tired, Father Abbot. He begs you to excuse him. And he says that he severed all earthly ties when he

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became a monk, so will you please tell your visitor to leave him in peace?'

'Yes/ said Trinket, 'but would you mind opening the door, please? I only want to see him for a moment.'

After some murmuring inside, Brother Headlong spoke again.

'He says, he hopes you won't be offended, but as this is the Golden Pavilion Monastery and you are only a guest here the same as us, he no longer owes you obedience.'

When Trinket looked back and saw the sheer misery on Kang Xi's face, he felt quite angry.

'We'll see about that/ he thought. 'Just wait till I fetch the Abbot. He'll soon have that door open!'

But just at that moment Kang Xi burst into tears. Trinket, who had perfected the art of producing tears to order at—or rather across—his mother's knee, was soon weeping noisily to keep him company.

'I wish / had a father/ he blubbered. 'I've got no one to look after me. Nobody loves me. I wish I hadn't been born.'

The door suddenly creaked open and there stood Brother Headlong, nearly filling the doorway. He looked only at Kang Xi.

'Come in, please!'

At once Kang Xi dashed in, threw himself, sobbing, at his father's feet and embraced his legs. Trinket heard the Old Emperor murmuring 'Silly boy!' and got a brief glimpse of him bending over and stroking his son's head; but before he could see more, the Venerable Yulin and Brother Headlong walked out of the room, shutting the door after them. They swept past him, eyes downcast and hands crossed on their breasts, without a look or a word.

Brother Headlong must have thought this a poor way to treat someone who had not long since saved his life, for after a few steps he looked back, with what might have been a wink. Trinket tried hard to hear what was being said inside. Once he thought he heard the Empress Donggo mentioned, but mostly it was murmuring too indistinct for him to make out. After a long time there was a sound of footsteps, the door opened, and for a while father and son stood hand in hand outside.

'You are a good boy/ said Brother Wayward, 'a better person than I ever was. I don't need to worry about you. And you mustn't worry about me.'

Then, gently withdrawing his hand, he went inside and closed the door. After a few moments they could hear him fastening the

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door-bar. Kang Xi threw himself against the door and for a while sobbed uncontrollably. And this time the tears that Trinket shed to keep him company were not entirely forced.

'Laurie/ said Kang Xi when he had somewhat recovered, 'my father thinks very highly of you, but he doesn't want you here looking after him any more. He says that if we try to do too much for him, he can no longer feel that he has left the world behind.'

This was good news to Trinket, but he tried to look disappointed.

The conversation with his father, now that the worst of the shock of parting from him was over, had left Kang Xi in a talkative mood. And since Trinket was the only human soul to whom he could ever unburden his true feelings, he entered now on a wide-ranging discussion of matters of state and policy, though much of what he said went well over Trinket's head.

One thing he did understand was that the Old Emperor was deeply concerned about the sufferings inflicted by his own people on the Chinese during the time of the conquest and was anxious that his son should make amends. The Ten Day Massacre of Yangzhou by the Manchus was mentioned, and Kang Xi said that one thing he was planning to do was to grant freedom from taxes to that city for several years. Trinket was appreciative, thinking how good this would be for his mother's business.

He grew apprehensive, however, when Kang Xi got on to the subject of Wu Sangui.

Remembering the wiggling he had earned on the journey to Shaolin for attempting to inculcate the Satrap in a non-existent rebellion involving the Wang Wu Clan, he feared that Kang Xi might still be feeling angry about it. He was relieved to find that the Emperor, far from being angry, was himself deeply suspicious of Wu Sangui's intentions; and though he had realized that the 'evidence' that Trinket had sent him on that occasion was probably spurious, his only reason for responding to it with a public reprimand was in order to put the Satrap off his guard; for the Satrap, he knew full well, had many agents and might well have a spy or two in the Imperial armies.

They were sitting side by side on the plinth that ran along the side of the courtyard. In order to explain his strategy for dealing with Wu Sangui, Kang Xi got up and found four stones to represent the Four Satraps—the collaborationist Chinese generals whom the Manchus had rewarded with semi-autonomous fiefdoms, each stationed with his own army in one of the outer provinces of the

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Empire. Wu Sangui, Satrap of the West, was by far the most powerful, most ambitious, and potentially the most dangerous of them. Kang Xi had learned quite a few new profanities since Trinket saw him last—presumably the Princess had picked them up from the Palace Guards and passed them on to him—and he was using quite a few of them in discussing the threat that Wu Sangui posed to the stability of the Empire. Trinket mischievously suggested that they should commence operations against the Satrap by pissing on his stone. And Kang Xi, who, for all the Imperial gravity of his everyday demeanour, was still at heart a boy, gleefully took up the suggestion, hitched up his gown, and began untrussing his trousers.

'You too,' he said.

And so the two friends, Laurie and Misty, stood there, one on each side, solemnly watering Wu Sangui with their piss. Their eyes met as they were trussing themselves up again and they burst out laughing.

Kang Xi sat down again on the plinth, but Trinket remained standing and inclined his ear to listen. There seemed to be a lot of activity all of a sudden: no shouted orders, but the sound of large numbers of men assembling outside the monastery.

'It sounds as if the troops have arrived with their prisoners,' he said. They must have finished rounding up the lamas. Congratulations! What a bit of luck that you turned up when you did with all those forces!'

'Not entirely' said Kang Xi. Thanks to you, I had warning that the lamas were going to make this attempt.'

Thanks to me?' said Trinket, puzzled.

'Don't you remember? That time I sent Zhang Kangnian to the Shaolin Monastery with that

Picture Edict I took so much trouble to draw, there was a large party of people leaving just as he arrived. You told Zhang, when you were seeing him off, to find out who they were and keep an eye on them because you thought they were up to something. Well, he managed to find out who they were. There were three groups in that party. One of them was led by a Mongol prince called Galdan. One was commanded by a staff-officer of Wu Sangui's called Ma Bao, and the rest were a party of lamas. It looks very much as if Wu Sangui was involved in the plot to kidnap my father.'

'So he is plotting rebellion,' said Trinket.

'Perhaps,' said Kang Xi. 'But I'm not ready for him yet. I need a few more years before I can take him on. Anyway, to get back to

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the story. When the three groups split up, Zhang followed the lamas and was able to find out that they were planning this attempt. Unfortunately I didn't receive the information in time to stop them getting here.'

Trinket thought he had better tell him about his father's decision to burn himself rather than allow himself to be made use of as a hostage. Kang Xi was horrified—and all the more grateful to his young friend for acting so resolutely.

But it was time to end this private interlude and return to public business. Kang Xi went up to the door and put a hand on it. He seemed to be struggling with his tears. Then he knelt down and kowtowed.

'Look after yourself, father!' he said in a low voice. 'I'm going now.'

Trinket kowtowed beside him.

Tantric Confabulations

When Kang Xi, with Trinket following him, entered the great Buddha Hall of the monastery, Prince Kang, Chalju, Dolong, Song-gotu, and a number of other officers and courtiers were already gathered there waiting for his arrival. Several of them noticed—with surprise, for he was normally so grave and mature in public and never showed any sign of emotion—that his eyes were red and swollen with weeping. When they saw Trinket's tear-stained face as well, they assumed that he was responsible and wondered exactly what the nature of the boy-Emperor's relationship with his young favourite might be.

As soon as Kang Xi was seated, Prince Kang came forward and announced that the Imperial forces had captured and disarmed several thousand lamas found making a disturbance in the precincts of the Pure Coolness Monastery and were now awaiting the Emperor's instructions.

Kang Xi nodded.

'Bring in the ringleaders.'

Three elderly lamas were brought in and led before him. In spite of the manacles and leg-irons, their attitude was defiant. They had no idea that the stripling confronting them was the Emperor and continued to jabber to each other in their own language, completely ignoring his presence. Great was their surprise, therefore, when Kang Xi began jabbering at them himself in their own lan-

guage. The surprise of the courtiers was almost as great, since none of them was aware that he had any knowledge of Tibetan. As a matter of fact he hadn't: the lamas were not Tibetans but Mongols and the language they were speaking was Mongolian, in which Kang Xi was reasonably proficient. After he had spoken to them for a bit, they hung their heads and were silent. Whatever it was, he seemed to have made his point.

'Take them into a private room,' said Kang Xi. 'I want to interrogate them in camera.'

The three lamas were led off to the monastery's scriptorium. Shortly after they had gone, Kang Xi left the hall himself, signalling to Trinket to follow.

When they were alone with the lamas in the scriptorium, Kang Xi made Trinket shut and bar the door. As soon as he had done so, Trinket took out his dagger and waved it meaningfully in the region of the lamas' eyes, noses, ears, and throats, rolling his eyes and intimating, by a series of blood-curdling gestures, that if they did not comply with what was required of them, these parts would be at risk. Thereafter, throughout the interrogation, he frowned and waved his dagger at them when Kang Xi sounded angry, and nodded and smiled at them when he spoke more gently.

After about half an hour the interrogation ended, the door was unbarred, and Kang Xi ordered the waiting guards to take the lamas away. Then the door was closed and barred again. 'Strange!' said Kang Xi.

Trinket didn't ask him what was strange, but waited for him to say in his own good time.

'Laurie,' said Kang Xi after a bit, 'how many people know that my father is here as a monk?'

'Apart from you and me, only Yulin and Brother Headlong,' said Trinket. 'The old eunuch Hai Dafu knew, but he died some time ago. That only leaves the Old—Her Majesty.' Kang Xi nodded.

That's right. Only five people know. Yet these Mongol lamas told me just now that they had orders from the Dalai Lama in Tibet, the Living Buddha, to kidnap my father. I kept asking them who this monk was that they'd been ordered to kidnap, but they didn't seem to know. In the end all they could say was that they thought he knew a lot of dharanis—that's what they call the magic spells they go in for in their kind of Buddhism—and the Dalai Lama

wanted to learn them from him. That's all nonsense, of course, but they really seemed to believe it.'

'Maybe the Living Buddha doesn't know who your father is either,' said Trinket. 'Maybe he does think he's just a Pure Coolness monk who knows a lot of thingumajigs. But the person who put him up to it must have known all right. And that could only be the—'

Kang Xi nodded.

The Empress Dowager. She killed the Empress Donggo and my mother, the Empress Kang. She hates my father. We know that she'll stop at nothing. She won't rest until she's killed him. And probably you and me as well.'

Trinket suddenly recalled his other identity as White Dragon Marshal of the Mystic Dragon Sect, and remembered that the Empress Dowager was a member of the Sect too. When she learned from the old eunuch Hai Dafu that Shun Zhi was alive and living as a monk on Wutai, she would almost certainly have passed on that information to the Sect's evil Leader. But Trinket couldn't possibly tell all this to Kang Xi. He must have been looking worried, because Kang Xi asked him what was the matter.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I was just thinking that it really must be her and remembering how

dangerous she is.'

'I hate her,' said Kang Xi. 'I hate her. I'd like to have her cut into little pieces; but I've promised my father not to harm her.'

'But I haven't,' thought Trinket.

'I shouldn't worry, Your Majesty,' he said. 'A person as wicked as her is bound to come to a bad end sooner or later. You only have to wait.'

Kang Xi was sharp enough to see what he was getting at and shot him a meaningful look.

'Yes/ he said, 'you're right. Someone who has done so many bad things is sure to come to a bad end.'

He paced to and fro a while, pondering.

'I must think of some way of making sure that my father is safe from any more of these attempts.' He was speaking more to himself than to Trinket. 'All lamas everywhere owe obedience to the Living Buddha in Lhasa. What we really need is a Living Buddha in Lhasa who would take his orders from us.'

Trinket was growing nervous. He was prepared to become a pseudo-lama for several hours but didn't want to become a real one permanently.

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'Please don't send me away to be a lama, Your Majesty!' he begged. 'I'd much rather just be one of the Palace Guards, so that I can stay near you.'

'Come to think of it, it wouldn't work anyway/ said Kang Xi. The Living Buddha has to be born there. No, I've thought of another way.'

He made Trinket unbar the door and follow him back into the hall. He called to Chalju and Dolong to come over to him.

'You have both done excellently today,' he said. 'I intend to reward you.'

They knelt down and kowtowed.

'I'm becoming very much attached to the teachings of the Lord Buddha,' Kang Xi went on.

'So far my reign has been greatly blessed, and I attribute this to His protection. Father Treasure has been earning merit for me as my proxy during the past year, but his time here has now expired and I am taking him back with me to Peking. He will become a full Colonel in the Valiants and will continue to be Second-in-Command of the Palace Guards.'

Trinket knelt beside the other two and kowtowed.

'You, Chalju: I want you to be my proxy for the next two years—not as a monk, though, but as a lama. I am making you a Grand Lama with authority over all the lamas here on the Wutai Mountains. You are to select a thousand men of the Valiant Regiment to be lamas here with you in your own lamasery. This is all to be secret, you understand. If you play your part well, I shall make you a Military Governor at the end of the two years.'

Chalju had been somewhat dismayed at the prospect of becoming a lama, but the comparative autonomy and rich pickings that went with a Military Governorship would more than compensate. He cheered up immediately.

'Now you, Dolong, are to take care of these captured lamas,' Kang Xi continued. 'I want you to take them back with you to Peking and get them settled there somewhere where they can be kept under strict surveillance. You are then to inform His Holiness the Dalai Lama that I long for our Empire to enjoy the benefits of the Tantric doctrine, which I acknowledge to be the most perfect vehicle of Buddhist truth, and have therefore invited these lamas to Peking, where they will be able to worship after their fashion and promote their doctrine among my people. When, after seventy or eighty years, the Truth expounded by them has penetrated throughout our Empire, I shall send them back to Tibet.'

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A White Apparition

At dawn next day, Kang Xi having announced that he wanted to worship at the Pure Coolness Monastery, they proceeded there without delay. As they drew near the monastery, they saw discarded weapons lying about everywhere in the trampled grass and there were patches of still-wet blood on the grass and smears of blood on the rocks and stones. Evidently the 'disarming' of the lamas had been a rather more sanguinary business than they had been led to suppose.

After offering incense at the altars of the Buddha and the Bod-dhisattva Manjusri, Kang Xi wanted to see the little temple where his father and his father's two companions had lived and meditated. Nothing remained of it now but charred beams and a pile of blackened rubble. The Young Emperor reflected with a shudder that, but for the previous night's timely rescue, his father's remains would have been underneath the debris. He turned to Songgotu and gave orders for two thousand taels to be donated to the monastery immediately for the rebuilding of the temple.

Returning to the main hall inside the monastery, he asked to see and speak for a while with the thirty-six Shaolin monks who had taken part in his father's rescue. They had no idea, of course, that the distinguished youth talking to them was their Sovereign, much less that the monk they had rescued was his father the Old Emperor, whom, like everyone else, they believed dead; but it was obvious to them that this young man was a person of great consequence, an Imperial Prince, perhaps, or a beileh—one of the lesser princes. When he formally requested permission to stay in the monastery for a few days (being reluctant to leave so soon the place where his father had so recently been), they were glad when their little Abbot welcomed him on their behalf.

It was actually just when Trinket was in the middle of extending this welcome to Kang Xi that a shower of dust and plaster descended on them from the ceiling. Looking up they saw a large hole that had been made in it and a white shape moving above the hole. Moments later legs appeared through the hole and a creature came hurtling downwards. It was a monk dressed in a white habit and carrying a long sword.

'Vengeance for the Ming Emperor!' cried the monk, in a high, reedy voice, and made a lunge at the Emperor. Fortunately Kang Xi stepped back in time and escaped being hurt. Court protocol pro-

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hibited the carrying of arms in the Emperor's presence, so Dolong, Chalju, Prince Kang, and the others were all of them unarmed; nevertheless a number of them sought to lay hands on the intruder. To counter them he merely flapped his enormously long left sleeve like someone cracking a whip and sent them staggering backwards. They said afterwards that it felt like encountering a hurricane.

As the monk continued to advance on the Emperor, several of the Shaolin monks made a rush at him, but, for all their skill, were disposed of in the same way. Meanwhile, Kang Xi had retreated so far that his back was against the altar and he could go no further. Just when the monk apparently had him at his mercy, Trinket, not stopping to think what he was doing, jumped in front of him and received full in his own chest the thrust that was intended for the Emperor. It hurt abominably, but the sword appeared to bend slightly and did not wound him.

After staring for a moment in astonishment, the monk seemed to make a sudden change of plan. He threw away his sword, wrapped his right arm round Trinket's body, tipped him off

his balance, and rushed off, at what seemed in the circumstances like superhuman speed, out of the hall and out of the monastery, carrying him like a parcel under his arm. In no time at all they were on the mountainside and climbing higher. In spite of the uphill slope and the substantial weight he was carrying, the monk easily outstripped the thirty-six Shaolin monks who were in hue and cry behind him, and before long he had rounded a bend in the mountain and was out of sight.

CHAPTER 17

In which Trinket becomes acquainted with the White Nun: they make some Startling Discoveries; and have a lot of Trouble with Lamas



Adamantine Body

A jumble of trees and clouds passed before his eyes. As they mounted higher and higher, Trinket's fear increased.

This crazy monk doesn't give up easily,' he thought. 'He couldn't kill me with his sword, so now he's decided to drop me off a mountain.'

He shut his eyes tight when the monk at last stopped and let go of him, then gave a great cry as he landed on his back with a thump. It took him some moments to realize that he had

fallen to the ground from a height of approximately three feet. When he opened his eyes he saw that the eyes of the White Monk were studying him coldly.

'I have heard it said that some Shaolin monks can make themselves impermeable to weapons,' the monk was saying,

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'but I wouldn't have expected so young a monk as you to be able to.'

Trinket listened in amazement. It was a woman's voice. This wasn't a monk, it was a woman in her thirties, a distinguished-looking woman with a pale, refined face and a pair of very beautiful but very sad-looking eyes. From her shaved head and the two rows of little scars where the incense had burned into her scalp at the time of her initiation it was evident that she was in holy orders. The White Monk was in fact a White Nun. He felt relieved. A nun, he thought, should be much easier to deal with than a monk. But just at that moment he became once more conscious of the searing pain in his chest.

'Aiyo!'

The White Nun smiled scornfully.

'So the wonderful Shaolin secret is not so wonderful after all!'

'Reverend Mother,' said Trinket, 'I don't mind telling you: there were thirty-six of the most highly trained Shaolin monks, including the famous Eighteen Lohans, in that monastery just now, and the whole lot of them, acting together, couldn't lay a finger on you. If I'd known what I know now, I'd never have entered the Shaolin Monastery in the first place, I'd have gone to study with you.'

A faint smile passed over the White Nun's glacial features.

'What's your name? How long did you train in the Shaolin Monastery?'

Trinket wasn't quite sure in which of his many guises to present himself. The White Nun was obviously anti-Manchu and in favour of a Ming Restoration, but was she a friend of the Triads? He had better not take any chances.

'I'm the orphan boy of poor Yangzhou people,' he said. 'My father was killed by the Tartars. I was sent to the Palace when I was little to be a eunuch. My name is Laurie.'

The White Nun looked thoughtful.

'Laurie. A little eunuch called Laurie. Where have I heard that before? Wasn't there a wicked minister at the Tartar Court called Oboi who was killed by a little eunuch? What was the name of the little eunuch who killed Oboi?'

'Laurie,' said Trinket. 'It was me.'

The White Nun was not sure whether to believe him or not.

'But surely Oboi was the Champion of Manchuria? How could you kill him?'

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Trinket sat up now and gave a somewhat embroidered but on the whole truthful account of the part he had played in Oboi's arrest and assassination.

The White Nun listened in silence. When he had done, she gave a little sigh, of relief, perhaps, or satisfaction.

'If this is true,' she said, 'those Zhuang ladies owe you a debt of gratitude.'

'Do you mean Widow Zhuang and those ladies?' said Trinket. 'Widow Zhuang has already thanked me. And she's given me a maid called Doublet. Right now Doublet will be worried sick about me.' 'How did you come to know them?' said the White Nun. This episode, too, Trinket gave a fairly truthful account of. 'If you don't believe me, Reverend Mother,' he concluded, 'you could easily send for Doublet and ask her yourself.'

That's not necessary,' said the White Nun. 'If you know Widow Zhuang and Doublet, that is enough for me. But tell me, how did you come to be a monk?'

Trinket knew he had better not tell her anything about the Old Emperor, so he merely said: The Young Emperor wanted me to be his Proxy Novice. He sent me to the Shaolin Monastery first, to be made a monk, then after that he had me transferred to the Pure Coolness Monastery. I wasn't at the Shaolin Monastery very long and I didn't have time to learn much. But even if I'd been there for years and years, I'd have been no good against someone like you.'

The White Nun's face suddenly assumed a stern expression. 'You are a Chinese. Aren't you ashamed to be treating the enemy like your own kin? You risked your life just now to save their Emperor. Only the lowest slave would behave like that.'

Trinket didn't know how to answer. He had thrown himself in front of Kang Xi instinctively, without thinking. It wasn't to curry favour or win an award. It was because Kang Xi was the only person who was really close to him, like a brother. How could he have stood by and let someone kill him? But he couldn't explain this to the White Nun.

The worst people are not the Tartars who stole our Ming Empire from us/ said the White Nun. The worst people of all are Chinese collaborators like you who do their dirty work for them in return for rank and riches.' She paused a moment and stared hard at him. 'If I throw you now from the top of this mountain, your "adamantine body" isn't going to be much use to you, is it?'

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'Of course it isn't/ said Trinket. 'But you don't need to go to all that trouble anyway. A simple blow from your hand would smash my skull in.'

'So what did you hope to gain by currying the Emperor's favour?'

'You don't understand. I wasn't greasing/ said Trinket. The Young Emperor really is my friend. He's good. He says he'll never ; raise taxes. He wants to protect the common people—isn't that what River and Lake is all about?'

The White Nun looked doubtful.

'Did he really say those things—about not raising taxes and protecting the common people?'

'Loads of times/ said Trinket. 'He's often told me that all the killing that the Tartars did when they entered the Passes was bad, very bad. He says that in the Ten Day Massacre of Yangzhou they behaved like wild animals. He's very unhappy about it. That's why he came to Wutai, to visit the temples and pray to the Buddha for forgiveness. And he says he's going to give Yangzhou three years' freedom from taxes.'

The White Nun nodded thoughtfully.

'Oboi killed a lot of the good men at Court/ said Trinket. The Young Emperor tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. That made the Young Emperor very angry, so he told me to kill Oboi. If you kill the Young Emperor, all the important stuff at Court will be taken care of by the Empress Dowager. Now she's really bad news. She's an Old Whore. If she gets control of things, it'll be the Ten Day Massacre all over again, only more of it. If you want to kill Tartars, the one you ought to kill is the Old Whore.'

The White Nun stared at him coldly.

'You are not to use language like that in my presence!'

However, she ignored his apologies and appeared to be contemplating the sky.

'So what is so bad about this Empress Dowager?' she asked presently.

This was a tricky question. Trinket couldn't possibly tell her the truth, because almost all the Empress's misdeeds were connected in some way with the Old Emperor. He decided that he would have to make something up.

'Well, for one thing she says that as this is now the Qing Empire, they ought to open up all the Ming Emperors' tombs and take out the treasure that was buried with them. Then she says that

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all Chinese with the Ming Imperial surname Zhu should be executed, along with all their families, so that there's no risk of their getting the Empire back again.'

'Wicked woman!' cried the White Nun. She hit a rock in her rage with a force that would have broken a normal person's hand.

'I know/ said Trinket. 'I told the Young Emperor he couldn't possibly do that.'

'How could an uneducated boy like you persuade an Emperor to change his mind?' said the White Nun.

'I said to him, "Your Majesty, everyone has got to die some day: even Your Majesty will die sooner or later. Now," I said, "where did King Yama and all the Officers of the Dead and the devils who serve them come from? They're all Chinese," I said. "If you treat the Chinese badly in this life, what's going to happen to you in the next, after you're dead?" "You're right, Laurie," he said. "I'm glad you reminded me." Then he gave orders for a lot of money to be spent on repairing the tombs of the Ming Emperors, even the tombs of Prince Fu and Prince Lu and those other ones—I can't remember all their names now/

The White Nun's eyes were red and she began to cry. Trinket could see the tears rolling down her cheeks and some of them even falling on to the grass.

'If what you say is true/ she said, 'you are not at all to blame for serving the Tartar Emperor; in fact, you have done your country a great service. Oh!'—she began to sob again—'if that evil woman had had her way . . . /

Trinket watched with alarm as she stepped to the edge of the cliff and began looking down. Fearing that she was going to make away with herself, he shouted to try and stop her.

'Reverend Mother, Reverend Mother, you mustn't give up! Don't do anything silly, please!' For some reason it had become important to him that this refined and beautiful woman, so dignified and austere in her manner and so unlike any female he had ever in his life met before, should remain alive. He struggled over to where she stood and reached out for her left arm, intending to pull her back. He found himself holding on to an empty sleeve. She had no left arm.

'What nonsense!' she said, as he stood there goggling in surprise. 'I have no intention of taking my own life.'

'You looked so sad/ said Trinket. 'I was afraid you might be thinking about it.'

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'And what if I had committed suicide?' said the White Nun. 'You could have gone back to your Emperor and enjoyed a prosperous and happy life.'

'No,' said Trinket. 'I didn't choose to be a eunuch. Anyway, the Tartars killed my father. I don't really want to treat the enemy as, you know, what you said before.'

'Kin' was not a word he was familiar with.

The White Nun nodded sympathetically.

'Well, you are a good boy at heart,' she said.

She took some money from an inside pocket and held it out to him.

'Here, take this. It should be enough to get you back to Yangzhou.'

The amount she was offering him appeared to be ten or twelve taels. He thought amusedly of the gratuities he regularly dispensed himself—two hundred or more taels at a time and

never less than a hundred.

'Still,' he thought, 'she has a kind heart. That's what I must work on.'

Instead of taking the money, he threw himself on his knees, clung to her legs, and broke into noisy sobbing.

'Get up, get up!' she said. 'Whatever is the matter with you?'

'I don't want the money,' he sobbed.

Then why are you crying?'

'I haven't got a father or a mother,' he sobbed. 'I've always wanted a mother to love me and take care of me. I think my dead mother must have been like you.'

The White Nun reddened.

'What nonsense!' she said, though not unkindly. 'People in holy orders can have no family.'

'I know,' said Trinket.

He got up again, his face all wet with tears.

'I'm planning to go to Peking,' she said reflectively. 'I suppose I could take you with me. But you're in holy orders too, aren't you?'

'No, no,' said Trinket hurriedly. 'I'm not really a monk. I'll buy some new clothes in the first town we come to and dress up as an ordinary boy.'

The White Nun nodded and they set off at once on the north descent of the mountain. She was used to travelling in silence and ignored several of Trinket's attempts at starting a conversation. There was something he said, however, about his 'adamantine

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body', which obviously still puzzled her. When he assured her that there was really nothing 'adamantine' about it at all and opened up his habit to show her the weapon-resistant waistcoat that he wore underneath, she seemed really pleased.

'No wonder,' she said. 'I thought it was strange that one so young should have attained so high a level of skill. Well, I must say, you are a very honest boy.'

Trinket had been called many things in his young life, but this was certainly the first time that anyone had called him honest. He was puzzled, though, when he glanced up at her to see that her eyes were full of tears. He could not know that someone in the past who had been very dear to her had possessed just such a protective waistcoat as the one he was wearing.

Coal Hill

At the foot of the north face they turned towards the east, and after walking for a few miles in that direction, came to a small market town. Trinket found a shop there where he was able to shed his monkish persona and once more indulge his taste for expensive clothes; for he still had with him the packet of money and valuables made up for him by faithful Doublet when they left the Pure Coolness Monastery in disguise. Soon he was dressed up as a young swell, able to pose as the son of a rich patron and in that capacity devote himself to caring for the material needs of the unworldly nun.

She seemed to take little interest in such mundane matters as the food she ate, yet she had a natural fastidiousness, and Trinket found that if he took trouble to buy the choicest materials— ginseng, bird's-nest, fating (China-root fungus), Wood Ear mushrooms, and the like—and insist that they were properly cooked (even on occasion going into the kitchen of the inn or restaurant where they were eating to give instructions to the bewildered chef), she could be coaxed into eating a few mouthfuls more. As a devout Buddhist she could eat only vegetarian food; but Trinket had been head of the Imperial Catering Department, and

the Emperor and Empress Dowager both ate vegetarian dishes on the Buddha's birthday and the Rogation Days, and other feasts and fasts of the Buddhist Church, so he knew plenty of excellent vegetarian recipes. She liked to travel in silence, and whole days went by without her saying a word. Yet Trinket had developed so profound a respect

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for her that, far from finding this irksome, he made a conscious effort to avoid foul language and not speak his usual nonsense in her presence.

Eventually they arrived in Peking and Trinket found a large, high-class hostelry for them to stay in. It was unusual for a nun to stay in such a place, but Trinket had pressed ten taels into the proprietor's hand almost as soon as they entered the door and, seeing that the nun was in the company of this well-dressed and obviously rich young gentleman, the man did his very best to please. For her part the White Nun treated their staying there as the most natural thing in the world and, indeed, seemed quite unaware of her surroundings. After they had eaten, she expressed a desire to go and visit Coal Hill.

That's where the Emperor Chong Zhen died,' said Trinket. 'We must kowtow there and say a prayer for him.'

Coal Hill (which is really five hills) is just north of the Forbidden City, across the road from it. It did not take them long to get there. Trinket pointed out the tree on the central hill on which the last Ming Emperor hanged himself. The White Nun stroked its bark with a trembling hand. He could see the tears rolling down her cheeks. Presently her silent weeping turned into loud wailing and she sank to her knees at the foot of the tree.

'She must have known him,' thought Trinket. 'She can't have been his concubine, she's not old enough. Perhaps she was a maid-of-honour, like Auntie Tao.'

After a while the wailing ceased and the White Nun recovered herself sufficiently to make several formal kowtows. Then she stood up, her tears still falling, and enfolded the tree in a half-embrace with her right arm. Suddenly a trembling seized her whole body and she fainted. Trinket rushed forward to catch her as she slipped to the ground.

'Reverend Mother, Reverend Mother!' he cried. 'Open your eyes!'

It was some time before she did so. Then, when she had recovered her composure, she said: 'Now I want to go to the Palace.'

Trinket suggested that she should go back with him to the hostelry. They could both dress up as eunuchs and he could smuggle her in quite easily. But she wouldn't hear of it.

'I shall break in/ she said. 'Who will stop me?'

'Well, yes,' said Trinket, not at all happy about the idea. 'I'm

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sure there's no one there who could stand up to you, but you'd have to kill an awful lot of guards. Isn't it against your vows to kill for no good reason?'

She nodded.

'You are quite right. I shall wait until it is dark. You can stay behind in the inn, in case I run into trouble.'

'No, no,' said Trinket. 'I'll go with you. I'd be too worried if you went in on your own. I know everything inside there so well, the buildings and the people. It'll be much easier if I'm with you. You only have to say where you want to go and I can take you there.'

The White Nun looked thoughtful but said nothing.

The Burning-Ground Revisited

About ten o'clock that evening Trinket and the White Nun left the hostelry and made their way to the foot of the Palace wall.

'We should get in from the north-east side,' said Trinket. The wall's a bit lower there. It's where the sula live—you know, the people who do the dirty work for the eunuchs. There won't be any guards patrolling that part.'

The White Nun followed his advice. When they reached the section of wall which Trinket judged the best place to go over, she helped him up on to it, then floated down ahead of him not far from the barrack-like quarters of the sula.

'Well/,' said Trinket when they were both inside, 'that building there is the Hall of Joyful Old Age and that one there is the Nurturing Nature Hall. What is it you want to see?'

'Everything/' said the White Nun, and after walking swiftly in a westerly direction between the two buildings he had indicated, she hurried round the two sides of a covered gallery, through two more Palace halls, and out into the Palace gardens. Trinket noticed that, although it was dark and the buildings were all unlit, she continued to walk at the same swift pace, turning corners without hesitation and only stopping momentarily to conceal herself behind a wall or a tree when there were signs of a watchman or a patrolling guard in the near vicinity. It was obvious that she knew her way around and must at one time have had her home in the Palace.

He followed her through the gardens and through the Gate of Female Repose. Outside the Palace of Female Repose she waited for him to catch up.

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'Is this still where the Empress lives?' she asked him.

'No one lives here,' said Trinket. 'There isn't an Empress. The Young Emperor hasn't married yet.'

'We'll go in and have a look,' she said.

At a touch of her hand a window-catch was broken, the casement opened, and she sailed in. Trinket scrambled in after her. Inside it was musty and there was a smell of damp. He couldn't see anything at first, but presently, in the moonlight that filtered faintly through the windows, he could make out her shape, sitting motionless on the edge of the great bed of state. It was so silent that he could hear, or thought he could hear, the falling of a tear. 'Yes, definitely/' he told himself. 'She must have been a maid-of-honour, like Auntie Tao. One of the Ming Empress's maids-of-honour.'

The White Nun had raised her head and was staring at one of the beams.

'This is where the Empress Zhou hanged herself/' she said.

'Reverend Mother/' said Trinket, 'would you like to meet my auntie?'

Who is your aunt/' the White Nun asked curiously. What sort of person is she?'

'I call her my Auntie Tao/' said Trinket. 'Her real name is Tao Hongying.'

'Hongying?' said the White Nun, startled.

'I thought you might know her/' said Trinket. 'She used to work for the Emperor Chong Zhen's eldest daughter, the Princess Royal.'

'Yes, yes/' said the White Nun. Where is she? Fetch her here!'

Normally she was so stately and unruffled. He had never before heard her speak with urgency in her voice.

'I shan't be able to get her for you tonight/' he said.

Why not?'

'She tried to assassinate the Empress Dowager, but she didn't succeed in killing her. Since men she's had to move about all the time hiding herself in different parts of the Palace. If I want to see her, I have to leave a secret sign somewhere and go there to see her next day. The earliest we could see her would be tomorrow night.'

'What is the sign?' the White Nun asked him.

'I have to make a little pile of stones somewhere in the burning-ground and stick a big twig in the top of it.'

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'Very well/ she said. 'Let's do that now.'

This time it was Trinket who led the way.

The burning-ground was the area in which the Palace rubbish was burned. The first thing he did when they got there was to look for an odd piece of board and a bit of charred wood. He used the charred wood to draw a crude picture of a bird. Then he made a little pile of stones, stuck a bit of wood in the top of it, and propped the bird picture up against the stones.

There's someone coming!' said the White Nun as he was finishing.

He took her hand and the two of them crouched down behind a large earthenware water-jar. There was a hurried patter of footsteps. Someone ran into the middle of the burning-ground, stopped, looked round in each direction, caught sight of the stone-heap with a visible start, then ran over to it and picked up the picture of the bird. Just at that moment the moon came out from behind a cloud and Trinket could see that it was Aunt Tao. He rose and stepped out from behind the jar.

'Auntie!' he called softly. 'Here I am. I'm over here.'

She ran to him and enfolded him in her arms.

'Dear boy! You're back at last! I've been coming here every night, hoping to see the sign/

'Auntie/ said Trinket, 'I've got someone here who wants to meet you.'

'Oh?' she said releasing him, a trifle suspiciously. 'Who is it?'

The White Nun stood up to her full height.

'Hongying,' she said. 'Can you still recognize me?'

Startled, for she had not realized that there was another person behind the jar, Aunt Tao retreated a few steps and drew her sword.

Who are you?' she said.

The White Nun sighed.

'You don't recognize me, do you?'

'I can't see your face/ said Aunt Tao. She sounded shaken. 'Are you . . . is it. . .?'

The White Nun turned her face into the moonlight.

'You have changed too, Hongying/ she said sadly. 'I hardly knew you.'

'You aren't. . .?' Aunt Tao's voice was shaking. Suddenly she threw down her sword, rushed forwards, flung herself to her knees, and embraced the White Nun's legs.

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'Princess/ she sobbed, 'Princess! To see you again! Oh, I could die happy this very moment!' So was this the Princess Royal? Trinket was at first startled, but a moment later felt a fool for not having realized it sooner. Aunt Tao had told him more than once how, when the

rebel general Bash-em Li captured Peking, the Ming Emperor had tried to kill his favourite daughter before taking his own life, but had only succeeded in cutting off her arm. Aunt Tao was there at the time and had seen it with her own eyes, but then she had fainted, and when she came to, the Princess and the Emperor had both disappeared. Of course the White Nun was a Princess! How could a person of such dignified aloofness have been a mere maid-of-honour? And she only had one arm.

'So you never left the Palace?' he heard the White Nun ask Aunt Tao.

'No, I never left.'

The boy tells me that you tried to kill the Tartar Dowager,' said the White Nun. 'You have kept faith all these years.' She was weeping now herself.

'Princess, your life is precious. You mustn't stay here a moment longer. I'll see you out.'

'I stopped being a Princess long ago,' said the White Nun. 'Oh no,' said Aunt Tao. 'In my heart you will always be a Princess, always. My Princess.'

'Is anyone now living in the Longevity Rooms?' 'The Tartar Princess,' said Aunt Tao. 'But at the moment she and her brother the Emperor and the Empress Dowager are all away somewhere. There are only a few eunuchs and Palace ladies left behind there. I'll go there and kill them for you.'

'No, no,' said the White Nun. There's no need to kill anyone. I only want to have a look.'

From the burning-ground to the Longevity Rooms was a maze-like walk through several gates and courtyards and past several buildings, the last of which was the repository in which tea was stored. As the three of them stood outside the building which more than twenty years earlier had been the White Nun's home, Aunt Tao, knowing nothing yet of her former mistress's almost supernatural skill in the Martial Arts, once more offered to go in first, not to kill, but at least to drive out, the women and eunuchs inside.

That won't be necessary,' said the White Nun, stretching out

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her hand and giving the doors a push. Aunt Tao watched in astonishment as the bar on the inside broke with a slight snapping sound and the doors flew open.

The White Nun, remembering the layout of the building, knew where the sleeping women and eunuchs were to be found. Gliding into their quarters, she swiftly, with unerring touch, pressed the points on each one of them that would render them unconscious till the morning. Then she went into the main bedroom and sat down on the bed while Aunt Tao and Trinket stood to one side and waited.

'Light the candles!' she said, after sitting for a while in silence.

When they were lit, it could be seen that the tables, chairs, and walls were covered with whips and every kind of weapon. The room was more like an armoury than the boudoir of a princess.

What became of my paintings and calligraphic scrolls?' the White Nun asked. 'And what happened to all my books? Were they all thrown away?'

'I am afraid so,' said Aunt Tao. 'I doubt whether the Tartar Princess can read more than a few words, and I'm sure she knows nothing about painting.'

'It seems that she is fond of Martial Arts,' said the White Nun. 'Yes,' said Trinket, 'but she's pretty hopeless. Even I could beat her. She's very weird. She doesn't just like beating other people, she likes being beaten herself.'

The White Nun flicked out her left sleeve and put out the candles.

'Princess,' said Aunt Tao, 'with your wonderful skill you should be able to seize the Empress Dowager and force her to hand over her Sutras. That would enable us to sever the Tartars'

Dragon Line and break their power.'

'What Sutras?' said the White Nun. 'What is this Dragon Line you are talking about?'

Aunt Tao explained about the eight copies of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections containing some secret which would enable the person possessing it to dig into the ground somewhere along the invisible Dragon Line on which the Manchus' power depended, thereby undermining their rule. After listening in silence, the White Nun agreed that it was important to get hold of these as soon as possible and proposed that they should return to the Palace the moment the Empress Dowager was once more in residence. Meanwhile

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Hongying should stay with them in their lodging. Trinket had five of the copies himself and knew that the Empress Dowager had only one. With a bit of luck the White Nun would kill her for refusing to come up with all eight of them and he and Kang Xi would be free at last from her wiles.

They climbed out of the Forbidden City by the way they had got in, accompanied this time by Aunt Tao. Back in the hostelry, the White Nun insisted that Aunt Tao should share her own room. The two of them lay awake all that night talking, not sleeping until it was dawn.

Tartar Empress and Tartar Princess

From that day on neither of them set foot outside the hostelry, but Trinket slipped out each day to see if the Emperor had returned yet. On the morning of the seventh day he saw several large palanquins being carried into the Palace, escorted by Prince Kang, Songgotu, Dolong, and a large contingent of the Palace Guards, and knew that the Emperor must be in one of them. This was confirmed when not long afterwards he watched a continuous stream of Princes, Beilehs, and Ministers of State going in to pay their respects. He hurried back to tell the White Nun.

'Excellent!' she said. 'I shall go in tonight. But now that the Tartar Emperor is back, the guards will be much more on the alert. You two had better stay here.'

Needless to say, neither Trinket nor Aunt Tao was willing to be left behind and in the end she consented to let them come with her.

They entered by the same way as before and arrived at the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity without mishap. Trinket made signs to the White Nun to show which part of the building the Empress Dowager's bedroom was in. They stole round to a courtyard at the back where the maids-in-waiting had their quarters. Only three of the windows at the rear there were faintly lit. The White Nun looked in through one of them and saw a row of ten or more maids sitting side by side on a long bench, their heads bowed down with fatigue and obviously dead to the world. Entering silently by one of these windows, it was fairly easy to step through the door-curtain into the Empress Dowager's bedroom without disturbing the maids. Four large red candles were burning on a table, but the room was empty.

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'I went through all the drawers in here,' Aunt Tao whispered, 'but I couldn't find the Sutras. Aiyo! There's someone coming.'

Trinket tugged at her sleeve and slipped behind the bed-hangings. Aunt Tao and the White Nun followed his example. They heard a girl's voice speaking outside.

'Mum, I did what you told me to do. What are you going to give me?'

It was Trinket's bugbear, the Princess Ning, speaking to the Empress Dowager.

'Do you expect a reward for a little thing like that?' said the Empress Dowager. 'I never heard of such a thing!'

'Little thing?' said the Princess. 'I bet Emperor-brother would be furious if he knew about it.'

'What's so important about a sutra?' said the Empress Dowager. 'Since we've got back from Wutai, I want to go on reading the scriptures and praying for the Emperor's safety.'

'Oh, in that case I'll tell him,' said the Princess. 'Ma's taken your Sutra so that she can pray for your health. Long life to Your Majesty! A long, long life!'

'Tell him!' said the Empress Dowager. 'I shall simply say that I know nothing about it. No one believes the nonsense that you young people talk.'

'Mum!' said the Princess. 'How can you have the nerve? The Sutra is with you here, for all to see.'

'I shall burn it, then,' said the Empress Dowager with a laugh.

'How mean you are!' said the Princess. 'It's one thing not to reward me for the favour I've done you, but I don't see why you have to be so nasty to me as well.'

'You've got everything,' said the Empress Dowager. 'What could I possibly give you that you haven't got already?'

There's one thing I haven't got,' said the Princess.

'Oh, what's that?'

'A little eunuch to play with.'

The Palace is full of them/ said the Empress Dowager. 'You can take your pick.'

They're all useless,' said the Princess. The one I want is Laurie, but he spends all his time with my brother.'

'Your brother has sent him off on business,' said the Empress Dowager. 'I don't know where, or what it is he has to do.'

'I do,' said the Princess. The guards told me. He's on Wutai.'

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'Oh?' said the Empress Dowager. She was obviously startled. 'How is it we didn't see him while we were there?'

'I don't know,' said the Princess. 'I didn't find out myself until we got back.'

The Empress Dowager appeared to be thinking.

'All right/ she said finally, 'when he gets back, I'll speak to the Emperor about it.' From the way she spoke it sounded as if her mind was on other things. 'You'd better go to bed now. It's getting late.'

'Mum,' said the Princess, 'can't I stay here and sleep with you?'

'You're not a child any more,' said the Empress Dowager. 'Why can't you sleep in your own bed?'

'I'm afraid,' said the Princess. 'My room is haunted.'

'Rubbish!' said the Empress Dowager. 'How can it be haunted?'

'No really, Mum. The maids and eunuchs told me. The other night some spirits came and put them all under a spell. They didn't wake up until midday next day and they had the most terrible nightmares.'

'Worthless slaves!' said the Empress Dowager. 'When we're away they make these things up just to frighten themselves with. Now go back to your own room this minute!'

White Nun meets Old Whore

When the Princess had gone, the Empress Dowager sat down at her table, on which lay the stolen copy of the Sutra. She appeared to be lost in thought. After a while she turned her head, catching sight, as she did so, of a human shadow on the wall. Her first reaction was to look away in terror as she thought of the victims she had murdered; but then she remembered that ghosts are said to cast no shadows and looked again. She held her breath and listened. There was no sound of breathing and her terror returned. Then, a few moments later, she heard breathing quite close to her, from the other side of the table. A white-robed nun was sitting there, her large and lustrous eyes staring at her unwaveringly from a beautiful but expressionless face—whether a living person or a spirit she could not tell.

'Who are you?' she said. 'What are you doing here?'

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The White Nun at first ignored her question, then, very coldly, she said:

Who are you>. What are you doing here?'

'How dare you!' said the Empress Dowager. This is the Imperial Palace.'

'Quite so,' said the White Nun. This is the Imperial Palace.

What is a creature like you doing in it?'

'I am the Empress Dowager,' said the Empress angrily. 'What are you—a witch?'

The White Nun stretched out her right hand and calmly removed the copy of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections from the table.

'Put that down!' shouted the Empress Dowager and aimed a blow at her face. But the White Nun had already slipped the Sutra into her bosom and parried the blow easily with her hand.

'A professional, are you?' said the Empress Dowager. 'Very well.'

She rose from her chair and proceeded to aim a succession of four or five blows at the nun. But the nun remained seated in her chair and effortlessly brushed them aside. When seven or eight more of her attacks were similarly frustrated, the Empress Dowager reached down and extracted a gleaming stiletto from her stocking. Trinket recognized the gold-inlaid stiletto of Emei steel with which she had stabbed Old Hai. He wanted to shout out, but Aunt Tao whispered to him not to.

The scene that now followed was quite extraordinary. The Empress Dowager sprang up and down like a cat, stabbing and thrusting at the White Nun, while the White Nun, sitting bolt upright in her chair and using no more than the index finger of her right hand, remained unscathed. The violent movements of the Empress Dowager caused the candles to flicker, until one by one all four of them went out. Trinket and Aunt Tao could no longer see what was happening, but they could hear the Empress Dowager panting and a moment later they heard the White Nun speaking. 'You say you are the Empress Dowager. Where did you learn to fight like this?'

The Empress Dowager made no reply, though from the continued panting and other noises they could tell that she was endeavouring to keep up the attack. Suddenly there came the

sound of four sharp slaps, then a great cry of rage and surprise, and then silence. A spark flashed out in the darkness followed by a little spurt

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of flame, and there was the White Nun with a lighted spill in her hand. She flicked it in the direction of the candles and, by manipulating her sleeve in a way that a conjuror might have envied, caused it to light all four candles in succession and then to return to her hand, whereupon she blew it out and put it back in an inside pocket. They could see now that the Empress Dowager was kneeling down in front of her. The White Nun must have immobilized her by pressing on a point, for she seemed unable to move. To judge from her face, which was rapidly changing colour, from red to white and from white to red again, she must have been in pain.

'Kill me quickly!' she said in a low voice. 'It's not right to torture people like this.'

'I don't understand it,' said the White Nun. 'Every move you make reeks of Snake Island. How does someone living in the seclusion of the Palace come to have contact with the Mystic Dragon Sect?'

Trinket gasped. This Reverend Mother of his seemed to know everything. He had better be careful in future what lies he told in her presence. But for the moment it was the Empress Dowager who was telling all the lies: she knew nothing at all about the Mystic Dragon Sect. All she knew of Martial Arts had been taught her by an old eunuch called Hai Dafu. She had never used these methods to harm anyone. Pressed about the significance of the Sutra she set so much store by, she insisted that she wanted it only for sentimental reasons, because of its connection with her late husband.

'You are a foolish woman/' said the White Nun. 'Since you refuse to tell me the truth, you have only yourself to blame for the consequences.'

She flicked her with the tip of her long sleeve, releasing the locked point so that she could move again.

Thank you, Your Reverence,' said the Empress Dowager. 'You are very kind.'

'Not kind at all,' said the White Nun. 'What effect does Soft Crush have on a person?'

The eunuch who taught me wouldn't say exactly,' said the Empress Dowager. 'All he would say was that the effects were terrible and that very few people could survive them.'

Those last seven Soft Crush blows you aimed at me I turned back on you,' said the White Nun. 'Each will have the effect on your own body that it would have had on mine. Whatever you suffer as a consequence will be self-inflicted.'

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The Empress Dowager looked as if she might faint. She had seen the effects of Soft Crush on the Donggo sisters and the baby prince. The last seven blows she had aimed at the White Nun had been delivered with all the force she could muster. Any one of them would have been enough to guarantee an agonizing death. She sank to her knees again.

'Reverend Mother, have mercy!'

The White Nun sighed.

The damage you have done yourself is irreversible. No one else can save you.'

The Empress Dowager knocked her head on the floor.

Tell me what I can do. There must be something. Have pity on me!'

'I could have helped you, but you have only told me lies,' said the White Nun. 'In any case, you are a Tartar. You are my mortal enemy. I have shown you enough mercy already by not

killing you.'

She got up from her chair.

The Empress Dowager was trembling violently. A vision of the Donggo sisters writhing in agony on their beds was swimming before her eyes.

'I am not a Tartar,' she said. 'I'm a Chinese.'

'Don't be absurd!' said the White Nun, and began to move away.

'But I am!' said the Empress Dowager. 'I really am a Chinese.'

I hate the Tartars.'

The White Nun halted.

'Oh?' she said. 'Why?'

'It's . . . it's a secret. I'm not allowed to tell anyone.'

'In that case you'd better keep it to yourself.'

The Empress Dowager's terror of a cruel death now drove out all her other fears.

'I'm an impostor,' she said. 'I'm not the Empress Dowager.' The White Nun went back to her chair and sat down again. Trinket was beginning to think that the Empress Dowager was an even better liar than himself; but presently, as her story unfolded, it appeared that she was telling the truth.

She was the daughter of Mao Wenlong, a Ming general who had fought against the Manchus on the frontier for several years. Her real name was Mao Dongzhu. When both her parents were killed, she was taken into the Palace and entered the service of the Empress, the Princess of the Borjigit clan who had become the

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Emperor Shun Zhi's wife. There, after years of service, she had learned to imitate the voice and gestures of her mistress so well that in the end she was able to impersonate her.

'My face is false, too,' she said, and sitting down at her dressing-table, she soaked a tissue in some sort of liquid preparation she got from a gilded jar and rubbed it vigorously on her cheeks. After waiting a few moments, she peeled off two skin-covered pads, one from each side of her face. Even the White Nun gasped. The round, fat face of the Empress Dowager had turned into that of a gaunt-faced, hollow-eyed woman.

'It certainly is a remarkable transformation,' said the White Nun. 'But when you supplanted the Empress, couldn't her other attendants spot the difference? And what about the Emperor?'

The Emperor was infatuated with Lady Donggo, he never went near the Empress,' said this woman who called herself Mao Dongzhu. 'As for her women and her eunuchs: when I first gained control over her, before I began impersonating her, I made her dismiss them and replace them with others, so that when I took over, the ones around me were all new. I avoided going out of my apartments as much as possible; but even when I had to, Court etiquette forbids Palace staff to look members of the Imperial family in the face when they are addressing them, so that if they ever did get to look at me, it would have been from a distance, too far away for them to tell the difference.'

So far the White Nun had seemed convinced; but now, suddenly, she thought of something.

'Just a minute. You said the Emperor didn't go near you; yet you have a daughter.'

'She isn't the Emperor's,' said Mao Dongzhu. 'Her father was a Chinese. He used to stay with me sometimes in the Palace disguised as one of my women. He ... he ... not long ago he fell ill and died.'

Trinket and Aunt Tao gave each other a nudge. This at least they knew to be untrue.

The White Nun shook her head.

'I don't think you're telling me all the truth.'

'When I've just told you a shameful 'secret like that, Your Reverence?' said Mao Dongzhu.

'How can you doubt me?'

'What about the real Empress Dowager?' said the White Nun. 'You say you have never killed anyone. Surely you have her blood on your hands?'

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'She is alive and well,' said Mao Dongzhu.

This was a great surprise.

'But in that case, aren't you afraid of being found out?' said the White Nun.

By way of an answer, Mao Dongzhu went up to a carpet that covered part of the wall and pulled on a tasselled cord that hung beside it. The carpet rolled up revealing the doors of a large closet, to which she applied a little golden key. She opened the doors and there, lying down inside under a bed-cover of silk brocade, was the body of a woman. The White Nun gave a little gasp.

'Is this the Empress Dowager?'

'Have a look!' said Mao Dongzhu, bringing a candle over so that the White Nun could get a better view.

The woman's face looked ill and completely bloodless. Apart from that, though, it bore a striking resemblance to what the false Empress Dowager had looked like before she removed the skin-pads from her cheeks. The woman opened her eyes slightly, then quickly closed them again.

'I shall never tell you,' she said faintly. 'Why don't you kill' me?'

'I've never killed anyone,' lied Mao Dongzhu. 'You know I wouldn't kill you.'

She closed and locked the closet and let down the carpet.

'I take it you've been keeping her shut up in here for several years,' said the White Nun.

'Yes.'

'So what is the information you want to get out of her? It can only be for the sake of what she knows that you have kept her alive so long. As soon as you have it, presumably, you will kill her.'

'I am a Buddhist,' said Mao Dongzhu. The Lord Buddha forbids us to take life.'

'Do you take me for a three-year-old?' said the White Nun contemptuously. 'It is extremely dangerous for you to keep her here. She has only to cry out and you would be lost.'

'I tell her that if she does so I shall kill the Emperor. She is very loyal to him.'

'Why don't you use that threat to obtain the information you want?'

'She says if I do so she will stop eating and starve herself to death.'

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'Come now,' said the White Nun, 'you still haven't told me what this information is that you want to get from her.'

The answer was still some time coming, and when it did it was only partly true. It did, however, to some extent, tally with what the White Nun had already learned from Aunt Tao. The Aisingioro clan, to which the Manchu Imperial family belonged, had started out in the Long White Mountains of Liaodong. Geomancers claimed to have demonstrated that their rise to power and eventual occupation of the whole of China was thanks to the favourable feng-shui of their old home. Anyone who dug up the Dragon Line in this area would be able to overthrow the Manchu power. The exact position of this Dragon Line was a secret that the Old Emperor had confided to his Empress—the woman locked in the closet—as he lay

dying. This was the information that Mao had all these years been trying to extract from her.

'Geomancy is a superstition,' said the White Nun. 'It was mis-government that brought down the Ming Empire. Oppression drove the people to rebel. This much I have learned during my travels. It had nothing to do with Dragon Lines.'

'I'm sure you are much cleverer than I am/ said Mao. 'Perhaps there is nothing in this Dragon Line business. On the other hand, suppose there is? Isn't it worth a try?'

'You are right/ said the White Nun. 'Even if there is nothing in it, the Tartars themselves seem to believe it. If we could get hold of the secret, it would certainly weaken their morale. So this is what you have been trying to find out from the Empress Dowager?'

'Yes/ said Mao, 'but no matter what I say or do, I can't get the wretched woman to tell me.'

The White Nun took out the copy of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections from her bosom.

'You should try asking her where the rest of these are/

Mao Dongzhu was visibly shaken.

'So you know about that too?' she stammered.

The secret is in the Sutras, isn't it?' said the White Nun. 'How many more of them have you got?'

Mao was by now convinced that the White Nun must be clairvoyant and that it was useless to dissimulate any longer. Fal-teringly she told her, quite truthfully, that she had had three copies, one given by the Old Emperor to Lady Donggo which came into her possession when Lady Donggo died, and two that had formerly belonged to Oboi.

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'But an assassin got into the Palace one night/ she said. 'He stabbed me and got away with all three of them. Look!'

To prove that she was speaking the truth, she unbuttoned her upper garments, tore off her breast-binder, and pointed to an ugly scar on her breast.

'I know who stabbed you/ said the White Nun, 'but the person who stabbed you didn't take the Sutras/

'Really?' said Mao. 'Well, who can have taken them, then? It's very odd/

She was genuinely startled and confused, but the White Nun thought she was play-acting.

'I don't know what game you're playing at/ she said coldly, 'and I can't really be bothered to guess. If you are a daughter of Mao Wenlong, you must almost certainly have some connection with the Mystic Dragon Sect.'

'I... I... I've never even heard of it.' The White Nun stared hard at her for some moments. 'I am going to tell you a way of neutralizing the effects of the Soft Crush on your system/ she said. Three times every day, in the morning, at noon, and again in the evening, you must stand in front of a tree and strike it eighty-one times, and while you are doing that you must recite this mantra/ (She whispered some words into her ear.)

Mao Dongzhu delightedly kowtowed her thanks. 'From now on/ said the White Nun, 'if you ever use your Inner Force to inflict Soft Crush on anyone again, your bones will instantly begin crumbling and nothing on earth then can save you. Do you understand?'

'Yes/ said Mao Dongzhu in a barely audible voice and looking very much less cheerful.

The White Nun flicked her long sleeve, touching her on the Point of Consciousness.

Instantly her eyes rolled up so that only the whites of them were visible, and she fell down in a faint. Trinket and Aunt Tao came out from behind the bed. 'Now we must go/ said the

White Nun. 'Let me first have a look for those Sutras/ said Trinket. 'You can't believe half of what that woman says/

He made a pretence of searching, then, after looking almost everywhere else, he pulled the

bedclothes off the bed, revealing, in the base of the bed, the little board with the inset ring in it. Under it was the secret compartment from which he had taken the Sutras.

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'Look!' he said, triumphantly. The Sutras will be in here.'

He removed the lid with a flourish. Of course they weren't; but, to his surprise, the cubby-hole was full of jewels, silver, and banknotes.

'This stuff isn't much use to us,' he said.

Take it/ said the White Nun. 'When the day of Restoration dawns, we shall need all the money we can get.'

Trinket wrapped up the little hoard of treasure in a piece of brocade and handed it to her.

That woman is full of guile,' the White Nun told Aunt Tao. 'From now on you will have to watch her very carefully. Fortunately she'll no longer be able to do you any harm.'

Aunt Tao realized sadly that she was expected to stay in the Palace and was soon to be parted once more from her beloved mistress.

After painful farewells, the White Nun led Trinket over the wall once more and back to their hostelry. There she was able to give the Sutra she had taken a careful examination. It was the copy which the Old Emperor had given to Kang Xi and which the Princess had stolen from Kang Xi at her mother's behest. On the flyleaf, in large characters, the Old Emperor had written the words Never Raise Taxes. She showed them to Trinket and read them out to him.

'You see. You were right about that.'

Then she read through the text, which she already knew more or less by heart, from beginning to end; but she could find nothing in it out of the ordinary. Next she exposed the pages one by one to heat, in case there should be writing in invisible ink between the lines. When this yielded no result, she laid the book down on the table and stared at it for some minutes. Suddenly a thought struck her. The thickness of the book bore no proportion to its contents, which only consisted of a few pages. She tried soaking the front cover with water. After a while she was able to peel off the outer layer of yellow silk in which it had been bound. Underneath was a double thickness of parchment sewn together on all sides with thread. When she cut the thread, she found that the two layers of parchment made a sort of envelope containing about a hundred little cut-up pieces of thinner parchment which she removed and spread out on the table. The pieces were of all shapes and sizes, but all of them had markings on them, either red-ink lines or, in black ink, bits of Manchu script.

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This is it!' said Trinket excitedly. This is the secret! It's a map. But this will only be part of it. You have to have all the eight copies in order to make the whole map.'

'I think you are right,' said the White Nun. She put the pieces back into their parchment envelope, wrapped it in a cloth, and put it inside her

Green Girl Again

They left the city next day and set out westwards for Changping. The tomb of the last Ming Emperor, which they were making for, was in the hills outside the town. The White Nun was silent throughout the journey. They found the tomb neglected, in a wilderness of grass and weeds. The nun's restraint finally gave way. Throwing herself down on the ground, she broke into noisy weeping. Trinket, too, knelt down on the ground and kowtowed. While he

was doing so, he became aware of a shimmer of greenness at his side. Turning his head he saw, with a pounding heart, that it was a green skirt. As if in a dream he heard the gentlest, most enchanting of voices murmuring something.

'I'm so glad you're here,' said the voice. 'I've been waiting here three whole days.' This was followed by a sigh, then: 'Don't be so sad!'

It was the Green Girl!

'Oh, thank you for waiting,' said Trinket, scrambling to his feet and still half in a dream. 'I don't feel sad any more when I hear your voice.'

He gazed longingly at the lovely face with its expression of gentle concern, but only for a second. Its expression changed suddenly, first to confusion and surprise, and then to a look of anger and intense hatred.

'I've been longing so much to see you . . .' he was beginning to say, when a painful kick in the belly sent him sprawling and she was on him in an instant with her little sword. She would have sliced his head off if he had not rolled over in time. In fact the sword-point only pierced the ground.

'Stop it at once!' cried the White Nun, before she could strike again.

The Green Girl dropped her sword and threw herself, weeping, upon the White Nun's bosom.

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'He's a wicked boy, Shifu/ she sobbed. 'He does nothing but humiliate me. You ought to kill him.'

Trinket was glad to discover that the Green Girl was the White Nun's disciple.

'Perhaps if I keep in Reverend Mother's good books, she'll help me to marry her,' he thought.

He got up and began to apologize, humbling himself and saying that he was sorry, he hadn't intended to wrong her and would she please try to forgive him. His answer was a hefty kick, delivered backwards, like the kick of a horse, which had him once more lying on his back, panting and unable for some moments to move.

'Ah Kor,' said the White Nun reprovingly, 'don't be so unreasonable! You can't just go kicking people the moment you set eyes on them!'

At last Trinket knew the girl's name.

'He's humiliated me many, many times,' she protested.

Trinket agreed that she had good reason to be angry with him.

That time in the Shaolin Monastery . . . ' he began.

The White Nun pricked up her ears.

'You were in the Shaolin Monastery, Ah Kor? What on earth were you doing there? You know that women aren't allowed.'

Trinket said he was sure she had been dragged there, much against her better judgement, by the Blue Girl, and that the monks she had injured were very much to blame. The news that her protegee had not only made an unauthorized visit to the Shaolin Monastery but had actually fought and injured monks there was making the White Nun seriously incensed; but just as she was about to give expression to her displeasure, she noticed the newly healed knife-wound across the girl's neck.

'Was that done in the fighting?' she asked.

The Green Girl had to admit that it was self-inflicted, an attempt to erase the dishonour inflicted on her by this hateful young monk. Once more Trinket admitted his guilt. He was hopeless at Martial Arts, he protested, and had been so scared of getting hurt when she

attacked him that he had flailed his arms about in a panic and in doing so had inadvertently touched her in an improper manner.

The Green Girl blushed scarlet, but there was anger in her eyes.

'You see, it was not intended,' said the White Nun, patting

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her gently on the shoulder. 'I don't think you should have taken it so seriously. He's only a boy, after all. And a eunuch,' she added shyly.

Trinket pursued his advantage by saying that, to compensate the Green Girl for having been refused entry to the monastery by the discourteous monks, he had invited her in and consigned her to the care of a respectable elderly monk to instruct and entertain her.

'Children, children!' said the White Nun, shaking her head.

'Who was this old monk?'

Trinket explained that Brother Simple was the monk in charge of the Prajna Hall. The White Nun nodded. The Green Girl tried to protest against this monstrous distortion of the true facts, but the White Nun ignored her and, turning her back, began silently contemplating the tomb. Trinket pulled a face and stuck his tongue out triumphantly at the fuming girl.

The three of them sat there until sundown, the White Nun contemplating her father's tomb in mournful silence; Trinket contemplating the Green Girl, feeling he would be happy to do nothing but gaze on that ethereal countenance for the rest of his life; the Green Girl in a misery of rage, embarrassment, and shame, trying, unsuccessfully, to ignore him but conscious that she was being stared at. After sitting for well over an hour, the White Nun rose to her feet.

'It's time to go now,' she said.

That evening the three of them lodged with a family of peasants. Trinket, knowing how fastidious the White Nun was, took great pains to see that there was no grime or grease to offend her, washing the bowls and chopsticks beforehand in hot water, wiping down the tables and benches, and sweeping and dusting in the room where she and the Green Girl were to sleep until everything there was spotless. Though such a lazy boy as a rule, to the White Nun he appeared industrious and thoughtful. Until the age of fifteen she had been brought up delicately as a princess, and although consciously she no longer set store by such things, unconsciously she was flattered and pleased by his attentions.

After the evening meal, the White Nun began asking about her other disciple, the Blue Girl, or Ah Ki, as Trinket heard them call her. The Green Girl had last seen her outside the Shaolin Monastery and unkindly suggested that Trinket might have killed her. When Trinket indignantly protested that he had seen her since

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then in the entourage of Brigadier Ma when the latter had visited the monastery in the company of Prince Galdan and the Grand Lama Sangge and their followers (he said nothing about the beard), the White Nun was not at all pleased to learn that a disciple of hers had been associating with a staff-officer of the detestable Wu Sangui. No doubt Ah Ki had at the time only just met these people, Trinket told her. However, if they could pick up the trail of any of the three personages just mentioned, it should eventually lead them to her. And since he was the only one who knew these people by sight, he would be happy to lead the search. The White Nun thankfully accepted his offer, much to the disgust of the Green Girl, who knew that his concern for the Blue Girl was a sham and only an excuse to be near her. She resolved to rid herself of his company at the earliest opportunity.

The search for the Blue Girl began next morning. They started off in a southerly direction, as if they were returning to the Pure Coolness Monastery. Although Sangge was not among the lamas captured or killed in the abortive attempt to kidnap the Old Emperor, it was obvious that he must have been the brains behind it and was therefore likely to be, if not still in that area, at least not very far from it.

Lamas at the Inn

In the days that followed, Trinket continued to concern himself with the welfare of his two charges. He loved the Green Girl dearly, but dared not show it in the White Nun's presence. He never got a kind word out of her, and often when the White Nun wasn't looking, she would slip a sly punch or a kick in his direction; but he did not seem to mind. In spite of the kicks and punches, it was happiness enough just to be near her.

One day in Cangzhou, where, the evening before, they had put up at a little inn, he had gone out in the early morning to buy food for a breakfast which he intended to ask the servant in the inn to cook for them. Returning in high spirits after making his purchases—two pounds of cabbage, half a pound of bean curd 'skin', and two ounces of koumo mushrooms—he found the Green Girl standing in the doorway. He felt in his bosom for a little packet and held it out to her, smiling broadly.

'Here, I bought these for you,' he said. 'Sugared pine nuts.'

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They were selling them on the street. They're really tasty. I didn't think you could get anything so good in a little town like this.'

The Green Girl tossed her head.

'Anything you bought would be horrible. Anyway, I don't fancy them.'

This was a lie. He knew she loved sweet things but wasn't given enough pocket money by the White Nun to buy any. In the end she did accept the packet.

'Shifu is meditating,' she said. 'I'm feeling bored. Is there anywhere nice round here we could go to—anywhere quiet where there aren't any people about?'

Trinket could hardly believe that he was hearing this. Had she really relented at last? The blood was pounding in his ears.

'Aren't you still angry with me?' he asked.

'Why should I be? Are you coming for a walk, or do I have to go off on my own?'

She began walking away as she said this.

'Of course I am,' said Trinket, putting his purchases down inside the doorway and hurrying after her.

When they reached the edge of the town, she paused to look around.

'What about making for that hill?' she said, pointing in the direction of a low, tree-covered hill a mile or so south-east of the town.

'Yes, let's go there,' he said eagerly.

There was no conversation on the way, and when they got there, there wasn't really very much to look at. Just a lot of trees. But Trinket was anxious to please her.

'It's a beautiful spot,' he said.

'It isn't,' she said. 'Just a few rocks and trees. I think it's hideous.'

'Yes, I agree,' he said.

'Then why did you say it was beautiful?'

'I suppose it's because, for me, you make anywhere seem beautiful.'

The Green Girl sniffed.

'I didn't bring you here to listen to you talking a lot of drivel. It was to get rid of you. I want you to go away. Just go away. I don't ever want to see you again.'

His face crumpled, but he showed no sign of going. When

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she began threatening him and he still didn't go, she took out the short-sword that she always carried with her and began slashing at him angrily. Though a very unsatisfactory pupil, Trinket had at least learned enough from Brother Simple to be able to stand up to her swordsmanship without getting hurt; but he could not go on dodging her sword indefinitely. In the end he took out the dagger from his boot and simply sheared off two-thirds of the blade. When she went for him with what remained of it, he could not retaliate with the dagger because he knew that the lightest blow from it might kill her, so he turned and took to his heels.

'Just clear off!' she shouted, as she pursued him down the hill. 'Go away, and I won't try to kill you any more.'

But then she saw, with dismay, that he was making back for the town. She wanted to head him off, but her inner training, like Trinket's, was non-existent. The White Nun had taught her some swordsmanship, but not how to cultivate her Inner Force. In a trial of strength, long-distance running for example, she could not hope to beat him. With tears of vexation, after running and running, she saw him enter the inn doorway ahead of her. As she came panting in after him, still clutching her truncated sword, some invisible force from inside the inn caused her to stumble and fall. Her fall was broken by something soft. She turned her head and saw that she was sitting on top of Trinket.

'Help me up!' she said crossly.

'I can't,' he said. 'I can't get up any more than you can.'

'You tripped me up deliberately,' she said.

Pressing a hand down heavily on his body to raise herself, the Green Girl got slowly to her feet and peeped in at the open door. She saw the White Nun sitting on the floor, defending herself with her one hand and her long left sleeve against a group of red-robed lamas— five, as far as she could make out—ranged opposite her with their backs against the wooden partition-wall. Although five against one, they seemed afraid of her. Each time one of them darted forward to strike her, some mysterious force which seemed to radiate from her would drive him back against the wall. It was this same force which had caused Trinket to lose his balance. It now caused the Green Girl to step quickly back from the doorway. She gave Trinket a kick.

'Aren't you going to get up? Shifu is being attacked.'

Trinket pulled himself up by holding onto the door and peeped inside. He could see that the lama nearest the doorway was

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holding a short cutlass—the kind they call a 'monk's knife'; but much as he wanted to help, he knew it would be useless for him to go inside. In desperation he picked up a broom that was resting against the wall and poked it sideways through the doorway, hoping to put the lama with the cutlass off his stroke, or, with a bit of luck, knock him over. The instant result was that there was a little jolt, and the head of the broom came flying out through the doorway, scratching his face in its passage and leaving him clutching the broomstick without the broom.

'You're useless!' said the Green Girl. 'Is that the best you can do?'

The wooden partition on either side of the doorway consisted of solid panels in the lower half but open lattice-work in the upper half. Whether from poverty, parsimony, or neglect, the openwork panels of the upper half had been left unpapered, so that it was possible to get a partial view of the lamas as they moved back and forth inside. Trinket got out his dagger and, crouching down so that he would be invisible from the room, waited until the lama with the cutlass had his back against the partition, then drove the dagger swiftly into the woodwork behind his back. The wood of the partition was less than an inch thick and the dagger, which could cut metal with ease, went through it like bean curd and drove several inches into the man's body. There was a sort of gurgling grunt and he slid downwards onto the floor. Surprised and delighted by his success, Trinket crept along a little farther, still keeping his head down, and shortly found an opportunity to deal in the same way with a second lama. At his third success the two remaining lamas were so terrified by what they believed to be the White Nun's magic powers that they made a run for the door. The White Nun leapt up and dealt the nearer of them a blow from behind. Instantly he began vomiting blood and sank dying to the floor. The second one, whom she could not reach with her hand, she brought down with a flick of her long sleeve, then, descending on him and quickly pressing five Vital Points on his body, she rendered him completely paralysed, so that he lay there as motionless as the other four.

She glanced at the three bodies lying side by side at the foot of the partition. From the wet patches on their red robes where the dagger had entered their backs and the holes in the wooden panels behind them she guessed at once how they had been killed. Then she looked back at the lama lying paralysed at her feet.

'You . . .' she said sternly, 'you . . . what do you . . . ?'

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She began swaying on her feet. Trinket and the Green Girl rushed to catch her as she collapsed; but even as they caught her, a stream of bright blood came gushing from her mouth. Her prolonged resistance—one seated, unarmed woman against five men—had drained her of all her inner power and this final effort had proved just too much for her failing body. They carried her over to the long and laid her down gently, supporting her head and shoulders so that she did not choke. Her eyes were tightly closed and her breathing barely perceptible. After a few moments she brought up a lot more blood. The Green Girl was terrified but could only cry helplessly, not knowing what she could do. The innkeeper and his serving-man had removed themselves to a safe distance as soon as the fighting began. Now that it was quiet again, they came tiptoeing back and peeped inside the door. When they saw the pools of blood and bodies all over the floor they set up a great outcry and only stopped when Trinket, holding a lama's cutlass in either hand, told them, in the coarsest possible language, that if they didn't instantly shut up he would silence them himself. When they had quietened down, he got out two silver ingots each weighing five taels from his little store of treasure and handed them to the serving-man.

'We need a big covered cart to continue our journey. One of these should be enough for the hire. The other one is for you.'

The serving-man brightened, scarcely able to believe his luck, and ran off to hire a mule-cart.

Trinket counted out forty taels.

'Now,' he said to the innkeeper, 'I must settle for our lodgings. Bad men, those lamas, weren't they, fighting each other like that? I expect you saw with your own eyes how they killed each other.'

The man looked at the money, several times what he would normally have charged, gulped,

and nodded.

There we are,' said Trinket. 'I think that should just about cover what we owe you.'

Presently the serving-man returned to announce that a large mule-cart and driver were waiting outside. Trinket took a quilt from the kang to wrap the White Nun in and he and the Green Girl carried her outside and laid her down gently inside the covered cart, nearest the driver's end.

'You stay here and look after her,' he told the Green Girl before going inside again.

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He got the serving-man to help him carry the immobilized lama and lay him in the back of the cart, not forgetting to first ask for a length of rope to tie him up with in case the paralysis wore off while they were travelling. Then, before himself getting in beside the lama, he told the mule-driver to follow the main road southwards until otherwise instructed. After they had gone about three miles, the Green Girl called out to Trinket to tell the driver to stop. Trinket saw that she was crying.

'Shifu's breathing is getting fainter and fainter/ she said. 'I'm afraid—' She was unable to finish.

Trinket moved back to look. The White Nun was barely breathing. She seemed to be very close to death.

'If only there was something we could give her,' said the Green Girl tearfully.

Trinket suddenly remembered that he was still carrying in his pocket the little bottle containing the thirty Body Strengthening Pills that the King of Korea had given to the fake Empress Dowager (and which she in turn had given to Trinket to take to the Leader and Madame Hong). He took it out and shook two of the pills on to his palm.

These might help,' he said. They're supposed to work very fast.'

He somehow got them into the White Nun's mouth and the Green Girl poured a little water from her water-bottle between her lips. The effect was miraculous. Within a matter of minutes she gave a little sigh and opened her eyes.

'I've just given you two pills, Reverend Mother,' said Trinket. They seem to have done you some good. Let me give you another two.'

The White Nun shook her head.

'Enough—for today,' she said, speaking very faintly. 'Let me get out.'

Trinket rolled the trussed-up lama out of the way and they helped her down from the cart. She sat down cross-legged on the grass at the side of the road and closed her eyes. Realizing that she wanted to meditate in order to restore some of her inner strength, they sat, in respectful silence, at some distance away from her. The Green Girl watched her anxiously, not taking her eyes off her. Trinket for his part gazed at the Green Girl until, becoming aware of his gaze, she blushed and looked cross.

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After a while they noticed that the White Nun was breathing regularly. A few moments later she opened her eyes. 'We can go now/ she said, still speaking very faintly. !,,:., 'There's no hurry/ said Trinket. 'Rest a bit longer.' 'No need/, 'she said.

Trinket wanted to give her the little bottle with all the rest of the pills, but she refused to take it. When it became clear that no amount of persuasion would induce her to accept it, they helped her back into the cart and continued their journey.

After they had been travelling for another mile or two, the White Nun told Trinket that they should find some quiet, out-of-the-way place where they could stop and interrogate their prisoner. Trinket ordered the mule-driver to head towards a little fold in the hills, out of sight of the main road. When they were there, he got the man to help him lift the lama out of the cart and lay him on the grass at the foot of the slope, with his head a bit higher than his feet. Then he told him to unhitch the mule, take it round to the other side of the hill to graze, and not come back until he was called. Making sure that the lama could see what he was doing, he took out his dagger, cut a branch from a nearby thicket, and proceeded to trim off the twigs and branchlets until only a stout stick remained.

'See?' he said. 'Trimmed. You want to be trimmed?' The man's eyes had followed each movement, bulging with terror.

'Not want,' he said.

'All right,' said Trinket. 'You talk then, eh?' Talk/ said the lama.

'What's your name?' said Trinket. 'Name.' 'Name Hubayin/,' said the lama.

Hubayin was cooperative, but the information took a long time (and about a hundred questions) to extract. It appeared that they had set out from Peking, ten of them in all, to capture the White Nun and force her to hand over a copy she held of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. (It took a while to establish this, because Hubayin was more familiar with the Tibetan title of the Sutra.) He didn't seem to know what the special importance of this copy was. He said that their leader was the Grand Lama Sangge. Trinket remembered that this was the name of the lama he had been introduced to, along with the Mongol prince Galdan and Brigadier Ma from Yunnan, when he was a monk in the Shaolin Monastery. It

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was pretty obvious, though Hubayin didn't know this, that Sangge must have been prompted to undertake this expedition by the false Empress Dowager, since only she would have known that the White Nun had taken a copy of the Sutra from the Palace. Hubayin knew nothing about the Blue Girl.

Trinket calculated that Sangge and four other lamas must still be at large and probably not very far away. If, as seemed likely, they went to the inn to find out what had become of the other five, it was quite possible that they might soon be on their track. This was alarming. The White Nun was certainly in no condition to face an attack by another five lamas, and he and the Green Girl would be quite unable to defend her. He climbed inside the cart and told her what he had discovered. The White Nun shook her head sadly.

'Even if I were better/ she said, 'I couldn't take on the five of them. I've heard of Sangge. Of all the Tibetan Tantrics, he is known to be the most formidable/

Somewhat diffidently, for he was afraid she might find it beneath her dignity, he unfolded a plan of escape. It was that they should buy some clothing at the first market town they came to, disguise themselves as peasants (the White Nun could be a widowed mother travelling with her son and daughter), and ask for lodgings at some farm where they could stay until she had fully recovered her strength.

The Green Girl intensely disliked the idea of posing as Trinket's sister, but the White Nun could see the sense of the plan, only insisting that, in adopting it, she should pass herself off not as a mother of children but as an aunt travelling with her nephew and niece. That decided, Trinket called back the mule-driver who re-harnessed his mule and helped him lift Hubayin back into the cart. Then, as soon as Trinket himself was in the back, they set off once more on their journey south.

On the Road with Sir Zheng

They had not been on the road again very long when they heard the sound of hooves in the distance. It sounded as if a sizeable company of horsemen was coming up behind them, riding at speed, because the sound was growing louder by the moment. 'Damnation!' thought Trinket. 'It's the lamas. It doesn't sound like five, though: more like a dozen.'

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But when the horsemen came in sight, he breathed a sigh of relief. These were not red-robed lamas but laymen in black: a person of some importance attended by twelve mounted companions. As they overtook the cart, he heard the Green Girl cry out excitedly.

'Zheng! Sir Zheng!'

The leader of the company reined in his horse and waited for the cart to catch up with him. A slatted blind in the side of the mule-cart was rolled up and the dashing Sir Zheng, an extremely handsome young man of twenty-three or so, trotted along beside the cart and leaned down to talk to the girl inside.

'Miss Chen! What a surprise! Is Miss Wang with you?'

'No.'

'Are you going to Hejianfu? If you are, we can travel together.'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Oh, you should. It will be lots of fun/

'Why? What's happening in Hejianfu?'

Trinket noticed with a pang that the Green Girl's cheeks were flushed with excitement. He had never seen her like this, so happy and so animated. It was clear that she had known this young Sir Zheng for quite some time and that he occupied a high place in her affections.

'We can't go to Hejianfu,' Trinket muttered. 'We're trying to escape.'

Either his remark was inaudible or the other two ignored it.

'It's the big Rat Trap Congress,' said Zheng.

From the conversation that ensued, Trinket gathered that this was the code name for the meeting of all the different anti-Manchu groups to plan joint action against the Satrap Wu Sangui. As Master of the Green Wood Lodge, he had once heard the Helmsman discussing plans for the meeting with the other Masters. The Green Girl was eager to take part.

'Shifu, may we go?' she asked the White Nun pleadingly.

Trinket didn't wait for the reply.

'If those lamas catch up with us, we're done for/ he said. 'Our best plan is to hide/

'What lamas are those?' asked Zheng, pricking up his ears.

'Sir Zheng, I want you to meet my Shifu/ said the Green Girl. 'She has been attacked by some lamas and is seriously hurt. The ones who were attacking her she killed or captured, but five of the group they belonged to are still around and they are out to get us.'

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Zheng whistled to his companions to halt. The mule-driver stopped the cart and Zheng jumped off his horse and leant inside it to introduce himself. He was the grandson of Marshal Zheng, it seemed, that famous Coxinga who took Taiwan from the Dutch and held it for the Ming Court in exile. The Marshal, created Prince of Yanping by one of the Ming Pretenders, had died in the first year of Kang Xi's reign. The present Prince of Yanping and ruler of Taiwan was the Marshal's son Zheng Jing. Trinket's Shifu, the Helmsman, was the Prince's military adviser. This young Sir Zheng was the Prince's second son and younger

brother of his Heir Apparent. His full name was Zheng Keshuang.

The White Nun was not nearly as impressed as the young man had hoped she would be when she heard who he was. She merely made some polite remark about his being 'of loyal stock'. He could not know, of course, that she was an Emperor's daughter, to whom his princely grandfather was merely one of her father's generals. When she went on to ask him under what teacher he had trained, he told her that he had had not one teacher but three. She was a little shocked by the disrespectful way in which he referred to the first two of his teachers, but it transpired that one of them, an army officer called Shi Lang, had surrendered to the Manchus. 'If I ever meet him again, I shall kill him,' he said, looking even more dashing as he said it.

The third one, under whom he had already been training for ten years, was a professional called Feng, also known as the Bloodless Sword because of his superior swordsmanship which enabled him to kill an opponent without drawing blood. The White Nun had heard of this paragon.

'You don't need to worry about those lamas,' he said. 'We're thirteen against their five; but even if we didn't outnumber them, my men would be more than a match for them fighting just one to one. They are the pick of our fighting-men on Taiwan.'

The White Nun wasn't so sure, but held her peace. She had already half made up her mind to travel with them. Disguise and concealment, enabling her to rest and recuperate, would no doubt have been the best course, but she was not going to dress up as an old peasant in the presence of this dashing young nobleman and his twelve companions. After a little hesitation she consented to travel in their company to Hejianfu.

Trinket cursed inwardly. The insufferable Sir Zheng was older than him, taller than him, and more good-looking and well-spoken

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than him. And he was the son of a prince. ('Loyal stock!' he thought. 'I haven't got any stock at all!') Worst of all, the Green Girl was fond of him. And if the White Nun knew that he, Trinket, was young Zheng's rival for her hand, she would probably kill him on the spot for even daring to think about marrying her.

Now that it was decided that they should travel together, the blind was lowered and they resumed their journey. Young Zheng continued to ride beside the mule-cart, but his companions divided themselves into two groups, six of them riding ahead of the cart, the other six bringing up the rear. They took a right turn at the next junction as they were journeying westwards now, in the direction of Hejianfu.

About midday they arrived in Fengerzhuang, one of the larger market towns of West Hebei, and decided to look for somewhere to eat. When they had found a place and had all dismounted, Trinket saw just how much taller young Zheng was than himself and how magnificently dressed. His companions, too, were big, swaggering fellows, full of arrogant self-assurance.

Inside the eating-house the Green Girl helped the White Nun to a small table and, when she had got her seated, sat down herself at one of the sides next to her. Young Sir Zheng sat at the side opposite the Green Girl. Trinket was about to sit down in the remaining seat, opposite the White Nun, when the Green Girl scowled at him and told him to sit elsewhere. 'There's plenty of room over there,' she said. 'You can't sit here. I shan't be able to get my food down if I have to sit next to you.'

Trinket blushed scarlet and, with rage in his heart, went to sit alone at a distant table.

The White Nun was shocked.

'Ah Kor,' she said, 'why are you always so rude to that boy?'

'He's horrible, Shifu,' said the Green Girl. 'There's nothing so bad that he wouldn't do it. If it weren't for you, I would kill him.'

Trinket heard all this from his table and entertained dark thoughts of waiting until Zheng and the Green Girl were married, then killing Zheng and magnanimously consenting to take the widowed Green Girl as his wife. When the food was served, Zheng's companions, who were sitting all round him, fell on it like hungry wolves. Trinket was so disgusted that he took some of the steamed buns that had been served with the meal and went outside

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to feed Hubayin, who was still lying trussed up in the cart Hubayin's company seemed preferable to that of Zheng's bully-boys inside. After feeding him a few of the buns, he went in again and, from his distant table, gloomily contemplated the Green Girl and young Sir Zheng happily chattering and laughing together while the White Nun ate silently between them.

Sa-sa-satisf action!

While he was picking without much appetite at his food and trying to think of some way in which he might widow the future Lady Zheng without her finding out that it was he who had murdered her precious husband, his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sounds of a party of horsemen arriving and dismounting outside. A moment later five red-robed lamas came into the eating-house. The tallest and thinnest of them he thought he recognized as the Grand Lama Sangge whom he had last seen in the Shaolin Monastery in the company of Galdan and the Brigadier. As soon as they caught sight of the White Nun, they began talking excitedly to each other in their foreign language. The one whom Trinket had identified as Sangge gave an order and the five of them sat down at a table near the door and ordered a meal. From time to time, while they were waiting, they would glance round in the direction of the White Nun with angry looks. Presently one of them got up and marched towards her table.

'Hey, you! Nun!' he said in a voice loud enough for everyone in the eating-house to hear. 'It is you kill my friends?' Young Sir Zheng leapt to his feet.

'What do you mean by it, shouting at people like that? Have you no manners at all?'

'You are who?' said the lama angrily. 'I talk with nun. This not your business. You fuck off!' In a trice four of Zheng's followers leapt up and rushed on the lama to seize him, but they were quickly disposed of. Two of them he swept aside with his right arm, one he sent flying with a mighty kick, and the fourth he smashed on the nose with his fist, so hard that the man sank bleeding and unconscious to the floor.

'Right! Get in formation!' shouted one of Zheng's eight remaining men, and all eight of them jumped up, drew out their swords, and stood shoulder to shoulder for a fight. The lamas, too, drew out their monk's knives, all except Sangge, who continued to

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sit at his table looking on. He and his lamas, and Trinket and the White Nun's party were now the only diners left, the others having all retreated at the earliest sign of an affray. A small melee now took place in the middle of the eating-house, in which, amidst the sounds of tables being overturned, crockery being smashed, and the clash of weapons, it was for a time hard to tell what was going on. Then quite suddenly there was a cry and one of the men's swords went flying upwards and lodged itself in the ceiling. This was followed

by another sword and then another. Trinket watched in astonishment as, one by one, each of young Zheng's followers was disarmed in this novel manner.

'On knees!' shouted one of the lamas. 'Surrender, or cut off heads!'

But the men had courage enough to continue. Some of them put up their fists and some of them picked up benches to defend themselves with. The four lamas went back to where Sangge was sitting and flung down their knives so that they stuck quivering in the table. Then they moved in a slow and deliberate manner towards the men. Presently there were shrieks and cries and Trinket realized with horror that the lamas were systematically breaking the men's legs. Soon all of them lay groaning and helpless on the floor amidst the overturned tables and the broken crockery. To begin with Trinket had felt rather pleased to see Zheng and his companions being humbled, but now he was really frightened and wondered whose turn it would be next. The lamas went back to their own table, however, pulled out and resheathed their knives, and sat down as if nothing had happened.

'Waiter!' Sangge shouted towards the kitchen. 'Let's have some wine! What's happened to our dinner?' (Unlike the lesser lamas accompanying him, Sangge spoke fluent Chinese.) He called several times, but there was no response.

'Holy yak butter!' shouted one of the lamas. 'Not bring dinner, we burn house down!'

This threat brought the proprietor to the kitchen door.

'Yes, yes, Your Reverence, immediately,' he said, and turned to address the trembling waiter inside. 'Quickly, boy, quickly! Take the wine and the dishes to Their Reverences!'

Trinket looked to see how the White Nun was reacting to this sudden change of fortune. She was slowly sipping tea from her cup and appeared to be totally unaware of what was going on around

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her The Green Girl, on the other hand, was ashen-faced and there was terror in her eyes. Young Sir Zheng's hue was changing from blue to white by turns. He was standing with his hand on his sword, but the hand was trembling. Though honour told him that he should fight, it seemed uncertain whether honour or fear would prevail. The sinister Sangge observed this with a mocking laugh and, getting up from his table, went over to confront him. Young Zheng jumped back a pace and held up his sword in front of him. 'Wha-wha-wha-what do you want?' His voice was husky with fear.

'What I want has to do with this nun here and nobody else,' said Sangge. 'Who are you? Are you her disciple?' 'No,' said Zheng.

'In that case, if you know what's good for you, you'll keep your nose out of this,' said Sangge.

'I mu-must ask you for your name,' Zheng stammered. 'I shall be requiring sa-sa-sa-, sa-sa-sa—'

'What will you be requiring? Satisfaction?' 'Ye-yes.'

Sangge threw his head back and roared with laughter. When he had finished laughing, he flicked the sleeve of his robe in young Zheng's face. Zheng made a feeble pass at him with his sword, whereupon Sangge, with the greatest of ease, knocked the sword flying from his hand, seized him by the collar, and forced him down on to a bench. Then he pressed a point on the back of his neck so that he could no longer move.

'Now sit there like a good boy!' he said, and returned, laughing, to his own table to rejoin the other lamas.

The lamas had now incapacitated Zheng and all twelve of his followers, yet still not laid a finger on the White Nun. Trinket couldn't understand what they were waiting for. The fact is they were scared of her. They believed she was solely responsible for the deaths of all five of their fellows in the Cangzhou hostelry, and having caught up with her at last, were simply

observing her, not quite sure what they would do next.

Now that things had finally quietened down a bit, the waiter came in with some plates of food and a jug of wine. The wine-cups were quite large ones and by the time the waiter had half-filled all of them, the jug was empty. One of the lamas banged on the table angrily. 'This all wine we get? This not enough!'

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The waiter, who had been trembling to start with, hurried back to the kitchen, now almost fainting with terror. Trinket had a sudden inspiration and slipped in after him. The lamas seemed scarcely to notice his departure. Even Sangge, who had met Trinket once before at the Shaolin Monastery when he had been posing as a monk, paid no attention to this little rich boy.

In the kitchen Trinket found the waiter trying to pour wine from a wine-jar into the jug, but his hands were shaking so badly that very little was going inside it. Trinket took out a small ingot of silver and held it out to him.

'Don't be afraid!' he said. 'Look, you can take what I owe for my meal from this. The rest is for you. Let me give you a hand with that wine.'

He reached for the wine-jar, which the waiter yielded up gladly, scarcely believing that the world could contain so kind a benefactor.

Tricky bastards, those lamas!' said Trinket. 'You never know what they'll do next. Better go and see what they're up to.'

The waiter obediently went to the kitchen door to look. While he had his back turned, Trinket took from his inside pocket a paper packet containing some of the strong opiate that he always carried with him for emergencies, and emptied the entire contents into the jug. He had just finished swishing it round to dissolve the powder when the waiter came trotting back.

They don't seem to be doing anything,' he said. 'Just drinking.'

'Here you are, then,' said Trinket. 'Better hurry. Don't want them getting angry again and burning the place down!'

The waiter went off with the wine-jug, invoking blessings on this kind young gentleman. One of the lamas snatched the jug from him and poured out another round.

'Not enough,' he said. 'Go get more!'

Trinket watched from the kitchen as they drained their cups.

'Donkeys!' he thought. This is one of the oldest tricks in the book. Anyone on River and Lake could have told them to watch out for drugged wine.'

One of the lamas, a big, fat fellow, had a weakness for girls. He had been itching to get his hands on the beautiful Green Girl from the moment he set eyes on her and it was only fear of the White Nun that had held him back. Already half-drunk before imbibing the drugged wine, he now, under the influence of the

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drug, completely forgot about his fear and went lurching over to accost her.

'Not married, girlie?' he said with a leer and reached his fat hand out to touch the smooth skin of her cheek. The Green Girl was trembling all over but managed to get out her sword. Before she could use it, however, he had seized and twisted her wrist. The sword dropped to the ground. The lama gave a great laugh and threw his arms around her. She screamed and struggled, but he only tightened his embrace.

During these last few moments young Zheng had begun to feel the sensation returning to

his limbs. Now, desperate to help the Green Girl, he clung to the edge of the nearest table and attempted to raise himself to his feet; but the fat lama saw him. Still holding the struggling girl in his right arm, he lashed out with his left fist and sent young Zheng rolling on the floor.

Trinket knew that the drug would soon take effect—in fact, he couldn't understand why it had not done so already—but seeing the fat lama kissing and nuzzling the Green Girl's cheek, he could bear to wait no longer. While the other lamas' attention was fixed on their lecherous colleague, he extracted the dagger from his boot and hid it in the long sleeve of his jacket, then, ambling over with a big grin on his face, as if to show that he found the girl's plight a joke, he jovially accosted her tormentor.

'Hey, Brother,' he said, stretching out an arm towards him and delivering what any onlooker would take to be a playful dig in the back, 'what's your game, eh?'

The incomparably sharp blade slipped through his sleeve and through the fat lama's ribs, transfixing his heart. Trinket withdrew it, chuckling, and stepped aside.

What's the big idea, Brother? Aren't you afraid of what my Shifu's going to do to you?'

The fat lama crashed to the floor, still clutching the Green Girl in his arms. When Trinket knelt down to release her from his embrace, he somehow contrived to slip the dagger back inside his boot without any of the others noticing what he was doing. Then he prised open the arms of the dead or dying lama and helped the Green Girl to her feet.

'Ah Kor,' he said (it was the first time he had ever spoken her name), 'quickly! Come with me!'

He took the White Nun's arm with his other hand and, accompanied by the two of them, one on either side of him, made

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for the door, stopping only to shout at the other lamas as they lurched towards him:

'Stand where you are! My Shifu has the power to strike each one of you dead. You see what she's already done to your fat friend?'

The lamas stopped uncertainly, swaying slightly. At that very moment there was a thump, followed, moments later, by another thump. The drug had finally taken effect and two of the lamas had fallen unconscious to the floor. By the time Trinket and his womenfolk had reached the door, there had been two more thumps as two more lamas hit the ground. This left only Sangge. He tried to stop them, but his legs seemed out of his control and his head was swimming. Before he could reach the door, he collapsed on top of a table, so hard that it gave way beneath him.

'Sir Zheng, Sir Zheng!' cried the Green Girl as they made their way outside. 'Come with us, quick!'

'I'm coming,' croaked Zheng and, struggling with some difficulty to his feet, he staggered after them.

Outside the eating-house there was only Hubayin in the cart, looking thoroughly scared: the mule-driver was nowhere to be seen. Trinket helped the White Nun inside, and the Green Girl and Zheng got in after her. There was no time to look for the mule-driver, so Trinket got up on the driver's seat at the front, took up the reins, and cracked the whip. The mule started without a second bidding, and off they went, making for the open road.

In the Sorghum Field

After they had been bowling along at speed for about three miles, the mule began to tire and they were forced to slacken the pace. As ill luck would have it, it was just at that moment

that they began to hear, still faint in the distance, the sound of pursuing horsemen. 'Pity we didn't take the horses,' said Zheng. 'The lamas would never have caught up with us then.'

'The Reverend Mother can't ride,' said Trinket. 'And anyway, who invited you to come with us in the cart?'

No one had ever spoken to the young nobleman like this before, but as things were, there was nothing he could do but swallow his indignation.

'Reverend Mother,' said Trinket, 'we'll have to get out and hide.'

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He looked around. They were in the open country now, not a house or a barn in sight. To the right, however, there was a field of newly-harvested sorghum. All over the field, at intervals of ten yards or so, the tall sorghum plants, none less than eight feet high, had been laid together in tent-like stocks to dry. 'We could hide in one of those,' said Trinket. 'How can I do that?' said Zheng. 'If my people got to hear of it, I should be a laughing-stock.'

'You can stay in the cart and drive on, to draw the lamas off the scent,' said Trinket. While he was saying this, he was helping the White Nun down from the cart. He began making his way across the field with her leaning on his arm. The Green Girl stood wavering, torn between the White Nun and Sir Zheng.

'Come on, Ah Kor!' said the White Nun. The Green Girl followed, calling to Zheng as she went 'Come and hide with us, please\'

Zheng followed the other three and crouched down with them inside one of the stocks. But no sooner had they done so than Trinket remembered the cart and went running back. It was useless to hide so near Hubayin and the cart. Both, in different ways, must be disposed of. There was nothing else for it. He took out his dagger and looked into the back of the cart, intending to dispatch the lama with one swift blow. Unfortunately, since Trinket last looked at him, Hubayin's paralysis had worn off and he had succeeded in freeing one of his arms. When Trinket bent over him with the ger, the lama clutched his sleeve in terror. 'No good,' said Trinket. 'Sorry!' and he forced the blade down into his chest.

After one or two convulsions the lama was still, but the hand continued to clutch Trinket's sleeve. Now every second counted. There was no time for remorse. Swiftly withdrawing the dagger from the lama's chest, Trinket sliced off the hand with it, severing it neatly at the wrist; then, dashing forward to the front of the cart, he poked the dagger into the mule's backside. The wretched animal kicked up its hind legs and went dashing forwards, clattering along the road at a tremendous pace with Hubayin in the cart behind it. Trinket raced across the field, still holding the severed hand, and plunged into the stook where the other three were hiding. He wasn't quite sure what to do with the hand. Perhaps he could use it later, he thought, to play some trick on Zheng. Crouching with

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the others in the darkness, he got out a large handkerchief, wrapped the hand in it and stuffed it inside his gown.

Inside the rick they were huddled close together. Trinket quickly discovered that young

Zheng was the person next to him and that the Green Girl was on Zheng's farther side. Determined, even in this emergency, to have some fun at his rival's expense, he suddenly let out a high-pitched squeal and claimed that Zheng had been fondling his person. 'Do you mind, Sir Zheng! That's me you've got hold of. Keep your dirty hands to yourself!' Then he reached behind him and fondled the Green Girl's waist. 'Sir ZhengY the Green Girl exclaimed in a very shocked voice. When this little pantomime was repeated a few moments later, Zheng, while protesting his innocence, endeavoured to move away a little and in doing so exposed one of his legs outside the rick. Trinket had chosen a bad moment for his horseplay because it coincided with the arrival in the vicinity of one of their pursuers. Sangge had never entirely succumbed to the opiate. He realized that they had been drugged and had retained sufficient presence of mind to call for the help of the waiter. After several dowsings of cold water, he had sufficiently recovered to attend to the resuscitation of his followers. All of them revived after three or four buckets had been emptied over them, all, that is, except the fat lama, on whom they continued to pour water until it became obvious that he was dead. Sangge and these three survivors, not waiting to burn down the eating-house as they had promised, threw themselves on their horses and galloped off westwards down the road that the others had taken. One of them, who had far outstripped the others, was passing the field of sorghum, looking about him as he rode, when his eye chanced to light on what looked like a human foot at the base of one of the stocks. The lama reined in his horse and dismounted. Keeping his eye on the foot—he was sure that it had moved a little—he walked stealthily across the field until he was within reach of it. He thought he could hear voices in the stook. Then a pounce, a tug, and out came Sir Zheng, a little rumpled and still protesting his innocence, in all his finery. 'Nun in there?' said the lama, dragging Zheng to his feet.

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This is bad,' thought Trinket. 'He'll have us all out in a minute.'

The lama was holding the front of Zheng's jacket in both his hands and shaking him. Trinket saw in a flash that this was his only chance of saving them. Dagger in hand, he leapt out of the stook and struck. The lama felt an intense pain in his back and went down without ever knowing what had hit him.

'Now/ said Trinket to Zheng, 'we've got to hide him. Give us a hand! We haven't got much time.'

He began throwing sorghum-stalks on the fallen lama and Zheng, after a moment's hesitation, followed his example. But it was too late. Sangge and the other two lamas were already visible on the road, and from their shouts and gestures it was evident that they had already seen them. There was nothing for it but to stand where they were and try to think of a ruse.

Soon the lamas were striding towards them across the field. They stopped at some distance away from them, however. At first Trinket wondered why, but then it dawned on him. It was the lama's body they had just noticed, half concealed beneath the straw. Even the crafty Sangge must believe that the White Nun had supernatural powers. Already she had eliminated seven of their number—or so it would seem to Sangge—the last two without even raising a finger.

'You see what my Shifu's powers are like?' he called to Sangge. 'She's really very merciful, though. She's willing to forgive you and not harm you if you will only go away and leave her

in
peace.'

'She knows perfectly well what she must do if she wants to be left alone,' said Sangge. 'She must hand over her copy of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections.'

'Oh, thai*,' said Trinket. 'She's given it to him to look after.'

He pointed to young Zheng.

'No, she didn't,' said Zheng. 'I haven't got it.'

Sangge's two subordinates seized hold of Zheng and began feeling him all over. Then they began tearing off his clothes, ripping each garment apart to make sure that there was nothing in the linings, until he was stark naked.

'I told you, I haven't got it,' he said and began pulling his now tattered garments back on again.

'Where have you hidden it, then?' said Trinket. 'I know she gave it to you. What have you done with it?'

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One of the lamas grabbed Zheng by the arm and dealt him a hefty slap on the face.

'Where it is? You tell!'

'I've told you already/ said Zheng. 'I haven't got it. I've never had it. I don't know where it is.'

The lama hit him again, even harder, on the other side of the face.

Tell!'

'Didn't I see you burying something behind that eating-place?' said Trinket. 'Was that it? Why don't you tell them?'

'I think the boy is telling the truth,' said Sangge. 'We had better take this man back to the town.'

'Yes, better,' said the lama, and planted another hard slap on Zheng's already swollen face. This was more than the Green Girl could bear. On hands and knees she pushed her way out of the stock and began shouting distractedly as she clambered to her feet.

'Don't listen to that boy! He tells nothing but lies. Sir Zheng has never seen that Sutra. He knows nothing about it.'

'I was trying to save you both,' Trinket muttered. 'Don't you care about your Shifu?'

Sangge motioned to the lama who was holding Zheng to stop hitting him. He wanted him in one piece.

'I think we should all go back to look,' he said. 'We'll take the children, too.' He addressed the stock: 'You, too, nun, you had better come with us.'

Trinket noticed that he didn't go any nearer the stock, although he had guessed that she was inside it.

'Let me go in and tell her,' he said.

Sangge made no objection. When Trinket crawled in, the White Nun was waiting with outstretched hand.

Take this,' she whispered.

She was holding a little bag. Trinket recognized it as the bag in which she had put the cut-up pieces of map extracted from the Sutra's binding. Judging that her situation was now hopeless, she had resolved to die; but before she died, she wanted to leave the precious fragments with someone she could trust. Trinket felt immensely proud that she was giving them to him and not to her own disciple.

Tell them I won't come out,' she said. 'If I can, I shall try to

think of some way of saving you all. But I won't come out. I won't show myself to those lamas.'

Trinket put the bag inside his gown and crawled out again.

'She won't come out,' said Trinket. 'She says she refuses to go with you.'

'We'll see about that,' said Sangge.

He beckoned to the other two lamas to come closer, still keeping Zheng as their prisoner, and join him in a little huddle. Trinket and the Green Girl were left standing by the stook in which the White Nun was hidden, while the lamas squatted by another stook about ten or fifteen yards away, jabbering to each other in Tibetan. Puzzled, Trinket saw them get up, tear several sheaves of dried sorghum from it, and then squat down again. He didn't remain puzzled for very long, however. Soon Sangge had produced a little flame with a tinder-box he was carrying and was lighting the end of a sheaf. He hurled it as far as he could, but it fell short of the stook in which the White Nun was hiding. It lay on the ground blazing harmlessly, though making a great deal of smoke.

'We must get her out of here,' said Trinket to the Green Girl. 'You will have to help me.'

The far side of the field was bounded by a low cliff in which there was a little cave. With a bit of luck and sufficient smoke to obscure their getaway, they might get the White Nun out of the stook before it caught fire and run with her towards this cave. He dived inside the stook.

'Reverend Mother,' he said, 'I've found a better hiding-place.' He half-dragged her through the far side of the stook to where the Green Girl was waiting. She took the nun's other arm, and between them they began hurrying her across the field. It was a near thing. The second sheaf of burning sorghum landed right at the foot of the stook and soon flames were shooting up from it twenty feet into the air. Fortunately, as well as flames, there was so much smoke, and the breeze blew the smoke about so capriciously, that the three of them were halfway to the cave before the lamas could see that they had got away.

But when they reached the cave, they were not much better off than they had been before. This was for two reasons. The first was that the cave turned out to be a very shallow one, little more than a deep hollow in the side of the cliff, so that even when they were inside it, they were fully visible to anyone in the field, and far from affording them protection, it merely cut off their retreat. The

second was that, although their flight across the field had been largely obscured by the smoke, the lamas had seen enough to guess that the White Nun was either ill or wounded, since she seemed to move with some difficulty and to need support. She therefore no longer appeared to them as an invulnerable enemy possessed of supernatural powers but as a weak woman whom they could fairly easily overcome. They hurried across the field to the mouth of the cave. Yet some residual fear of her still remained, for they did not venture in to lay hands on her, but piled up some sorghum stalks and prepared to smoke her out.

'Reverend Mother,' said Trinket, 'I think we're going to have to give them the Sutra. After all, it's no use to anyone without the pieces of map.'

'You are right/' said the White Nun, handing it over to him. 'Do with it as you think best.'

Trinket knelt down with his back to the others, laid the Sutra on the ground in front of him, and got out the severed hand, glancing over his shoulder from time to time to see how far the lamas had got in their preparations. When he had unwrapped the hand, he took out his

dagger and cut some strips of flesh from it which he laid carefully on the Sutra. By this time the lamas had lit the sorghum and it was beginning to blaze. Smoke drifted towards the cave making their eyes water and causing them to cough.

'Hey!' he called out over his shoulder. 'I've got the Sutra here. If you don't put that out, I'll throw it in the fire.'

That will keep them busy for a while,' he thought, taking out the little phial of Decomposing Powder. He didn't know if the powder would take effect on living bodies, but he thought it was worth a try. He remembered that there had to be blood for it to start working, which is why he now shook some of it on the flesh he had sliced from the hand. He glanced out at the lamas, who were throwing flat stones and earth on the burning sorghum and stamping out the flames, then back at his handiwork. The flesh strips were sizzling slightly and oozing yellow droplets. So far so good, but he needed a little time. He got to his feet and stood with the other two to face the lamas.

Throw out that Sutra now!' shouted Sangge, when the fire was thoroughly extinguished.

'My Shifu will let you have it if you'll promise to use it properly,' Trinket called back. 'It's very precious. It comes from the

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Palace. There's a secret locked up inside it, and anyone who can unlock it will have the power to convert the whole world to the Buddhist faith.'

He glanced down behind him at the Sutra. The strips of flesh were fast dissolving in a pool of yellow liquid.

Sangge knew that the secret contained in the Sutra had nothing to do with the propagation of the faith; but he also knew that the copy he had already sacrificed so much to obtain had in fact been taken from the Palace, and he was sure this was the one. He was trembling with excitement to think that it was now almost within his grasp.

Tell your Shifu, the conversion of the world is very dear to my heart,' he said.

'My Shifu read through this copy of the Sutra, but she couldn't discover the secret,' said Trinket. 'She says that if you are able to discover it, you must promise to share it with monks and nuns everywhere, not just be selfish and keep it to yourselves.'

'Of course,' said Sangge. Tell her she can set her mind at rest. I am perfectly willing to give that undertaking.'

'If you can't work out what the secret is,' said Trinket, 'she says you are to hand it over to the Shaolin Monastery. And if the monks of the Shaolin Monastery can't make it out, they are to hand it over to the Pure Coolness Monastery on Wutai. And if the monks on Wutai can't make it out, they are to hand it over to the Zen Wisdom Monastery in Yangzhou.'

'Certainly,' said Sangge. 'I promise to abide by all of these conditions.'

It seemed obvious to him from all this that the White Nun had no inkling of the Sutra's real value. They could make what conditions they liked! Once he had the Sutra, he would dispose of the lot of them.

Trinket glanced down once more and was delighted to see that the flesh had entirely dissolved and the yellow liquid had been absorbed into the cover of the book. He doubled up the cloth in which the hand had been wrapped to protect his own hands with while he picked it up.

'Here it comes, then—your precious Sutra!'

He lobbed it for Sangge to catch, then hurriedly threw away the cloth. But Sangge suspected a trap and allowed it to fall to the ground. It was the other two lamas who picked it up,

pouncing on it, and fighting each other to hold it and have a look.

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'Hey, you guys!' Trinket shouted. 'Look at you! You've got centipedes on your faces!' The lamas instinctively brushed at their faces with their hands but could feel nothing there. Stupid brat, they thought. They took the book over to Sangge.

'Look, Father,' (they were speaking Tibetan now), 'is this the book we have been looking for?'

'Let's take it over there,' said Sangge. 'We need to have a good look to make sure they haven't given us a fake.'

They sat down with it at some distance from the cave.

'It's wet/ said Sangge. 'We'll have to be extra careful we don't tear the pages.'

He began turning them over carefully, using only the tips of his fingers. While they were all looking at the book, one of the lamas unconsciously scratched his neck and suddenly became aware that his fingers were itching. Sangge and the other lama, too, felt their fingers itching, but at first paid no attention. The itching grew more insistent, however, and when they looked, they noticed that the tips of their fingers were wet with some yellow liquid.

'Strange!' they said. 'Where's this coming from? Surely it's not from the book?'

At that point the cheeks of Sangge's two companions started itching unbearably and they began furiously scratching themselves. When Sangge looked up from the book, he saw that there were bloody scratch-marks on both men's cheeks. The itching of his own fingers was now intolerable. Then he realized what the cause was and dropped the book in horror.

'Aiyo!' he cried. 'The book is poisoned!'

The yellow liquid was dripping like blood or sweat from his fingers. He wiped them frantically on the ground. The scratch-marks on the faces of the other two were now deep red furrows. Their cheeks not only itched now but hurt as well. When they saw blood on their finger-ends and drops of greasy yellow liquid dripping from their chins, they began to howl and scream and presently threw themselves to the ground, clutching their heads and writhing in agony.

In Sangge's case it was only his fingers that were affected, but finding that the tips were no better for all his dabbing and wiping and that they continued to ooze yellow liquid, he tore off his robe, wrapped the poisoned book in it, and rushed off with it under his arm to look for water.

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Trinket was relieved to see Sangge run off into the distance, but the sufferings of the other two were more than he had bargained for. A quick thrust through the ribs with his dagger would, he thought, be doing them a kindness; but just as he was about to act on this merciful impulse, the men jumped up, mad with pain, and began running round in circles. Then, as if acting on the same impulse, they rushed to the cliff and began banging their heads against it. They banged and banged until both of them were unconscious.

It was then that Trinket ran over to finish them off. But the sight that met his eyes was so terrible that for a while he stood gazing down in horror, trembling too violently to carry out his purpose. The men's faces had been completely eaten away: eyes, lips, cheeks, nose were gone, leaving only traces of red scum and a few sinews on the white bones.

Presently Zheng, who had been lurking at some distance behind the lamas, came over to look at them and was promptly sick. Then the Green Girl came to join Zheng and, though

warned not to look, did so out of curiosity and screamed. Even the White Nun, who seldom betrayed any emotion, gave a shudder at what she saw. She looked from the faceless bodies of the two lamas to the body of the other dead lama across the field, now charred and blackened, beside the burnt-out stock. She thought of Hubayin and those other ones who had died in the hostelry. How many more thousands or tens of thousands must die, some of them as terribly as this, before the Ming dynasty could be restored? She wondered if that was really what she wanted.

CHAPTER 18

In which Sir Zheng is taught more than One Lesson



Trinket becomes a Disciple-Again

For some time the White Nun remained lost in thought. When she at last looked up she was shocked to see that Trinket, who had quickly recovered from his fright, was grinning triumphantly. She was grateful to him for saving her life—and probably her honour too, for the lamas, she felt sure, were no respecters of virginity— but killing people, though sometimes, as in this case, it was unavoidable, ought never, she thought, to be a source of satisfaction.

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When you were speaking to those lamas, you referred to me as "Shifu",' she said. 'In the school of Martial Arts I belong to we study only clean methods of fighting. I am grateful to you for saving our lives, but if I were really your Shifu, I would never allow you to practise the sort of murderous, underhand methods you have been using today. I hope you're not going to keep using them in the future.'

'I won't/ said Trinket. 'It's only because I'm no good at clean methods that I've had to fall back on dirty ones.'

'You say you're no good at clean methods of fighting,' said the White Nun, 'but surely you must have learned a few things all that time you were in the Shaolin Monastery? What about that Brother Simple you were telling me about? He must have taught you a thing or two.'

'All he taught me was how to avoid being killed by Ah Kor,' said Trinket.

'Well, I suppose now you've started calling me "Shifu", we'd better make it official,' said the White Nun.

At once Trinket was on his knees kowtowing. Eight times he bumped his head on the ground, each time calling out 'Shifu!' in a loud voice.

'Now that you are my disciple, you will have to behave yourself and keep the rules,' said the

White Nun with a little smile. The school of Martial Arts I belong to is called the Iron Sword School. It's a Taoist school. Although I am a Buddhist nun, my Shifu was a Taoist. My name in religion is "Tribulation".'

Trinket was already a disciple of the Triads' Helmsman Chen Jinnan and it was entirely against the rules that someone who already had a Shifu should, unless he had special permission to do so, acquire another. But Trinket cared nothing for such niceties. As long as he could be near the Green Girl, he didn't care how many rules he had to break.

The Green Girl saw how pleased he was looking and pulled a face. She knew very well why he was so pleased and was mortified to think that now he was a fellow-disciple she could no longer try to kill him or attempt to drive him away with kicks and blows. It seemed like the last straw when the White Nun told her that the two of them must from now on call each other 'Brother' and 'Sister'. She dared not tell him what she thought of him in front of her Shifu, but she glared at him with hate in her eyes.

'You really must try to let bygones be bygones, Ah Kor,' said

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the White Nun. 'Remember, the poor boy is very unfortunate. He was forced to become a eunuch. You ought to feel sorry for him. It's an advantage now of course, because it means that there's no harm in the two of you being together. But you must keep this to yourself.' For the Green Girl this information was a solace. She had previously thought of Trinket only as an evil-minded little monk. If he was a eunuch, his former behaviour towards her now seemed less heinous. She still didn't like him, but her anger against him was somewhat assuaged.

'How are you, Sir Zheng?' she said, turning to the real object of her affection. 'Are you badly hurt?' Zheng came limping up to them.

'Not too bad,' he said. 'I think I must have pulled a muscle in my leg.'

'Shifu,' said the Green Girl, 'what are we going to do now? Are we still going to Hejianfu?'

'I suppose we might as well go, to see what happens,' said the White Nun. 'But there's a danger that the Grand Lama Sangge might come back. I'm still not very mobile.'

'Wait here and rest, Shifu,' said Trinket, 'while I go and look for a carriage.'

But the best he could do after scouting round in the neighbourhood was an ox-cart which he bought from a farmer. The White Nun and the other two sat in the cart while Trinket trudged along beside the ox. It was a very slow way of travelling. At the first little market town they came to they abandoned it and hired a couple of carriages. Trinket now had the White Nun to himself. He managed to persuade her to take some more of the Korean medicine and by the time they arrived in Hejianfu at midday two days later she had almost recovered her strength.

The Rat Trap Congress

In Hejianfu, as soon as they were installed in an inn, young Zheng went off to inquire about the congress. He returned about two hours later looking very downcast. He had been everywhere in the town asking about the Rat Trap Congress, he said, but no one had even heard of it.

'How did you first hear about it, Sir Zheng?' the White Nun asked him.

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'The Shen brothers, who are supposed to be organizing it, got the Triads to send news of it

to my father in Taiwan inviting him to send a representative,' said Zheng. They said it was to be held on the fifteenth of this month. There are only four days to go. I was expecting an official welcome. At the very least I thought the brothers would be waiting for me.'

'Perhaps they have found out that the Tartars have prior knowledge of the congress, so they have had to change the date/ the White Nun suggested.

'In that case they ought to have let me know,' Zheng said crossly.

But just at that moment a waiter came in to say that there was someone outside asking for him and he hurried out to see who it was. He returned much later, all smiles. The Shen brothers had come in person to meet him, he said. They were full of apologies for not having contacted him sooner, but they had been expecting him to arrive with a large escort and had been waiting several days for him outside the town. That very night they would be throwing a big party to welcome him. He hoped that his friends, too, would attend.

The White Nun shook her head.

'No, I think it would be better if you went alone. I'd rather you didn't say anything about my being here, either.' Zheng was disappointed.

'I can understand that Your Reverence might not like the noise and excitement of a party,' he said, 'but what about your disciples? Perhaps they could come with me.'

'No, I think not,' said the White Nun. 'I'd rather we waited here until the congress opens and then go there together.'

That night Zheng came back very much the worse for drink. Some time around midnight the twelve members of his escort, who had last been seen lying, most of them unconscious, on the floor of the Fengerzhuang eating-house, came limping into the inn, some of them with a leg or an arm in splints and one or two of them on crutches. Altogether they presented a sorry sight.

Next morning Zheng treated the White Nun, Trinket, and the Green Girl to a full and glowing account of the party he had been to. He made much of how respectfully the Shen brothers had treated him, how he had been made to sit in the place of honour throughout the banquet, how everyone had praised his family for keeping the flag of resistance flying in Taiwan, and much else touch-

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ing on his own importance. The White Nun asked him about the other guests who had been present, but he seemed unable to remember a single one of their names. After several unsuccessful attempts at extracting some useful information from him, she fell silent, concluding that the intelligence of this dashing young gentleman did not quite match up to his good looks.

In the remaining days before the congress the White Nun strictly forbade her two charges to go out of doors. She feared that with so many underworld characters about in the town they might get into trouble. Young Sir Zheng, however, was out almost continuously being entertained by this or that River and Lake celebrity, so that they hardly saw him until the day of the congress.

When the great day arrived, an hour or two before they were due to set out, the White Nun dressed herself up in some clothes that Trinket had bought for her. She tied a black kerchief round her head and disguised her face by rubbing a brownish powder into it and painting on a pair of heavy, downward-sloping eyebrows. Trinket and the Green Girl dressed themselves in the simple clothes of a country boy and girl. For his part, young Sir Zheng, scorning disguise, laid aside his false pigtail and put on the magnificent court dress of a

high-ranking Ming nobleman. Even the White Nun, in spite of her low opinion of him, was impressed, though the flood of nostalgia brought on by this sight caused her as much pain as pleasure. The Green Girl was enraptured. Trinket muttered under his breath that he looked like a baboon in fancy dress.

The congress was, for reasons of security, planned to take place at night, beginning at nine o'clock in the evening. Promptly at eight o'clock a large carriage provided by the Taiwanese delegation drew up at the inn and conveyed the splendid Sir Zheng and his three dowdy companions to the place where the congress was meeting. This was a small, level plain called the Locust Field, a mile or two outside the walls of Hejianfu, surrounded by hills and bordered with locust trees. Normally it was used by the townsfolk and the people from the villages round about for fairs and festivals.

In spite of the darkness they could make out the large audience that had already assembled, augmented at every moment by new arrivals. Young Sir Zheng's arrival was greeted with applause and as soon as he stepped down from the carriage he was swal-

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lowed up by a crowd of enthusiastic supporters and carried off into the middle of the field. But the White Nun and her young charges quickly made for the edge of the field, where the three of them sat down under the locust trees in a place from which they could see without being seen. Soon a full moon began to rise up into the sky and details of the assembly became more distinctly visible. Seeing so great a multitude all dedicated to the extermination of Satrap Wu, Trinket began to wonder if the Triads and the Mu faction, who were in friendly rivalry to see which of them could accomplish this aim the soonest, might not both of them be beaten by some third group from among those present.

When everyone had finally got settled, a tall, very venerable old man rose to his feet and introduced himself. The White Nun whispered that he was the father of the two Shen brothers who had been a redoubtable warrior some twenty-odd years before this time. Trinket noticed that she appeared to be quite moved and guessed that she must have met him some time in the past when she was a young girl. When, in his introductory address, he came to the object of their meeting, a chorus of voices rose up from the audience calling Wu Sangui every foul name under the sun and invoking curses on him and all his family up to the eighteenth generation of ancestors. A high, boyish voice was heard after the shouting had abated, uttering an imprecation even more frightful than those which had so far been employed. It sounded so incongruous that the whole assembly burst into a great roar of laughter. The voice was, of course, Trinket's. The Green Girl was quick to express her disgust.

Shortly after this, refreshments provided by the Shen family were distributed in the form of cold beef, wheatcakes, and wine. There was comparative silence for a spell while the assembly regaled itself. Then, fortified with the wine, they set to again, excitedly shouting out the various things they would like to do to Wu Sangui if they had him in their power. At this point Old Shen rose to his feet once more and called for silence.

'My friends,' he said in his clear, ringing voice, surprising in one of his years, 'most of us here are crude fighting men, willing to shed our blood for the cause, but having little knowledge of politics, statecraft, or strategy. We are fortunate in having with us tonight the most distinguished scholar of our age, Mr Gu Yanwu, who, ever since our beloved land was taken over by the Tartars, has devoted all his time and energy to travelling up and down the

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country recruiting our best brains to join with him in planning for a Restoration.' He gestured to the gaunt-faced, elderly individual standing at his side. 'Mr Gu Yanwu, my friends. I am sure you will want to make him welcome.'

This was the Gu Yanwu who, with his friends Lii Liuliang and Huang Zongxi, was rescued by the Helmsman Chen Jinnan when the boat in which they were travelling to Yangzhou was taken over by government agents at the beginning of our story. As we saw then, he was a rare example of a scholar with a wide acquaintance of all classes of people and a sympathetic understanding of them, which meant that he was able to address this largely unlettered audience without talking down to them and in such a way that they felt valued and uplifted and willing to do anything he suggested to them with as much enthusiasm as if they had thought of it themselves. Gu Yanwu could see at once that what his audience chiefly lacked was organization and a proper sense of security. Personally he did not set much store on a national movement devoted solely to the elimination of an individual, but as he could not very well tell them this, he proposed an organization which could be used to expel the Manchus and bring about a Ming Restoration after this first objective had been accomplished. What he had in mind, he told them, was a nationwide 'League for the Eradication of Traitors' or 'Eradication League'—they agreed at once that this sounded more dignified than 'Rat Trap League'—which should have branches in each of the eighteen provinces. Each provincial branch would elect its own representative, but the affiliated societies and associations who elected him would keep their existing leaders and not be in any way subordinate to him: he should be thought of as an organizer who would regularly confer with representatives from the other provinces and pass on the outcome of their deliberations to members of his own branch. Gu knew that among the fighting-men in his audience there were some very temperamental individuals who would resent any challenge to the authority they held over their own communities.

There were one or two questions from the audience. A Triad whom Trinket recognized as Butcher Qian from his own Lodge asked which branch the Triads ought to join, bearing in mind that they had members in every province. Gu suggested that each Lodge should affiliate with the branch of the province in which it was located. When this and one or two other questions had been dealt with, his proposal was adopted with enthusiastic applause, and at

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Old Shen's suggestion the audience at once split up into groups and proceeded to elect representatives for each province.

'Which province do we belong to, Shifu?' Trinket asked the White Nun.

'None,' she said. 'I work on my own. I like to come and go as I please. I have no need to join any society.'

'Someone like you deserves to be head of the whole League,' said Trinket.

'In future I'd rather you didn't say things like that,' said the White Nun.

The field was now dotted with separate little crowds of voters, but there were several dozen individuals wandering about aimlessly in the spaces between them. Evidently the White Nun was not the only loner. Neither Gu Yanwu nor Old Shen made any attempt to press these independent spirits into joining a group.

After a while the results of the separate elections were declared. Among those elected were the Abbot of the Shaolin Monastery, Father Wisdom, the representative for Henan Province; the Little Countess's brother Mu Jiansheng to represent Yunnan; young Sir Zheng

had been chosen for Fujian; Old Shen for Shanxi; while no fewer than three provinces were to be represented by Lodge Masters of the Triad Society. When the newly elected representatives assembled, it was found that only thirteen of them were present, the rest having been elected in their absence. After conferring together for some minutes they decided to co-opt two Honorary Presidents to act as their military advisers. Gu Yanwu was invited to become one of them; the other one was to be the Triads' Helmsman, Chen Jinnan, who was not present at the meeting.

The different groups were still discussing plans for the assassination of Wu Sangui when the White Nun and her charges slipped from the field and made their way back to the inn.

Sir Zheng is taken down a Peg or Two

Early next morning they hired a carriage and began the eastward journey to Peking. The White Nun was still wearing her disguise. She knew that the roads would now be full of River and Lake figures of one sort or another making their way back home. Some of them might have known her in the past and she did not want to be recognized.

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Trinket was happy to be leaving Zheng behind, a fact which the Green Girl was quick to notice. When she reproached him about it, he teased her by pretending that he had run into Zheng in the street that morning when he went out to hire a carriage, laughing and talking with four very good-looking girls.

'He told me to give you and Shifu his regards.' 'Oh?' said the Green Girl. 'Why didn't you tell me before? What else did he say?'

'He said the girls are Martial Arts enthusiasts. He's promised to take them back to Taiwan with him to see the sights.'

The Green Girl suppressed a sob.

After travelling until about midday, they stopped at a noodle shop beside the road to break their fast. As they were about to start on their noodles, a group of horsemen rode up and dismounted outside.

'Chicken, beef, and noodles!' one of them shouted as they entered the shop.

Trinket recognized them as they came inside and sat down. They were all Triad friends from his own Lodge: Brother Xu (the Eight-Armed Ape), Butcher Qian, Big Beaver, old Brother Li, the taciturn Brother Feng, Gao Yanchao, Brother Fan, and the Taoist Father Obscure. He had recognized Butcher Qian at the meeting the night before, but hadn't seen any of the others. He decided that it would be best not to make his presence known to them. If they got talking, it would soon emerge that he had acquired a new Shifu, which would be sure to upset them. He kept his head down and avoided looking in their direction.

No sooner were the Triads settled than another party of horsemen was heard arriving and issuing identical orders to the proprietor.

'Chicken, beef, and noodles for all of us. And be quick about it! We're in a hurry!'

The Green Girl brightened instantly as they came clumping in.

'Sir Zheng!'

'Miss Chen! Your Reverence!' cried young Sir Zheng as he hurried over to their table in response to her call. 'I looked for you everywhere this morning, but I couldn't find you.'

The restaurant was a small one, and while Zheng stood by their table talking, his followers were looking for somewhere to sit.

'Hey, you, old fellow! Why don't you lot squeeze up together

and let us have this table?' one of them shouted rudely to Brother Xu.

'Damnation!' said Father Obscurus, always quick to take offence. 'Who the hell does he think he is?'

Brother Li, who remembered seeing Zheng in his princely Ming costume the night before, leant over and whispered to him: They're our folk—the Taiwan lot. Better not quarrel with them. We can let them have this table.'

Brother Xu, Big Beaver, Brother Gao, and Brother Fan got up and went to sit with Brother Feng.

Meanwhile, Zheng had seated himself next to Trinket and the Green Girl at the White Nun's table.

'What a liar you are!' the Green Girl hissed to Trinket. 'I knew you'd made that up about the four girls.'

'All right, all right,' said Trinket. 'I know you can't eat comfortably if I'm sitting next to you. I'll go somewhere else.'

He picked up his bowl and chopsticks and went over to squeeze himself in beside Brother Xu.

'Brother Xu, it's me,' he whispered. 'Can you tell the others? I don't want to be recognized.'

Brother Xu gave a little start, and for a moment his eyes lit up with pleasure; beyond that, though, he gave no sign of recognition and turned back at once to his noodles.

The Master's here,' he muttered from the corner of his mouth. 'Pass it round.'

Soon all the Triads knew that the Master of Green Wood Lodge was in their midst. They were delighted to have him with them, but not one of them so much as glanced in his direction.

Meanwhile young Sir Zheng was in great form, holding forth to the White Nun and the enraptured Green Girl in a voice that could be heard all over the restaurant.

'At the meeting last night they chose me to be the representative for the Fujian branch. We were up all night discussing—you know—the big job. I didn't get back to the inn until after dawn, and by that time you'd already gone. I'm awfully glad I've managed to catch up with you.'

'I must congratulate you on your election, Sir Zheng,' said the White Nun politely, 'but surely these secret matters ought not to be mentioned in public?'

'Oh, there's no one here that matters,' said Zheng loudly.

'These rustics wouldn't know what I was talking about even if they were listening.'

The Triads had disguised themselves as peasants. All of them were bare-footed and one or two had brought rakes or hoes with them which they had propped up against the wall.

'Loud-mouthed turtle-head!' said Trinket. His head was bent over his noodles and he was speaking in a low voice, just loud enough to be heard by the others at his table. 'You should have heard the things he was saying about us Triads back in Hejianfu: how one of our Masters used to empty the piss-pot for his grandfather; how our old Master Yin wasn't much of a fighter so it wasn't surprising he got killed; how he's always the boss over the Helmsman when there are meetings—a whole lot of stuff like that. And I've heard him telling people what some of our passwords are.'

These were all lies, of course, but seemed of a piece with Zheng's overbearing manner and his apparent readiness to relay information about last night's meeting to an unknown woman. Big Beaver was with difficulty restrained from banging on the table.

'I think he needs to be taught a lesson,' said Trinket. 'Brother Feng, could you do it, do you think? Don't hurt him seriously; just show him a thing or two. So that he doesn't get roughed up too badly, I'll come over after a bit and pretend to rescue him. You'll have to let me win.'

Brother Feng nodded.

Now that the Triads were looking for a fight, they didn't have long to wait for provocation. Two of Zheng's followers had still not found seats, and one of them, spotting a place vacated by Butcher Qian, who a moment before had got up and left the room, came up behind the Eight-Armed Ape and tapped him on the shoulder.

'Look, there's still room there. You could give us another table.'

Brother Xu jumped up in a rage.

'I've had just about enough of this. We've already given you a table. If there's one thing I can't stand it's young toffs pushing poorer people around.'

He turned his head and spat, seemingly at random, into the air; but in fact it was a well-aimed gob, landing, with great precision, on the back of young Sir Zheng's neck.

'Muddy-footed oaf!' Zheng shouted angrily as he took his

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handkerchief out and wiped it off. These creatures have no respect for anything or anyone. That fellow wants a good thrashing!'

One of his followers aimed a blow at Brother Xu with his fist. Brother Xu put on a great performance, falling over and rolling about on the floor almost before he was hit.

'Oh! Oh!' he hollered. 'He's killing me!'

Zheng and the Green Girl laughed out loud.

Brother Feng rose purposefully to his feet.

'What are you laughing at? What's so funny?'

'I suppose I can laugh if I like,' said Zheng angrily. 'What's it to you anyway?'

Brother Feng reached out and dealt him a resounding slap on the face.

Recovering from his surprise, Zheng fell on him with both his fists; but Brother Feng, dodging from side to side, retreated backwards through the restaurant and out of the door, with Zheng still bearing down on him. Outside he continued to duck and weave, punching and kicking, but rarely making contact with Sir Zheng or sustaining more than a light touch from Zheng's blows.

The other Triads were anxious that their identity should not become known, since by laying hands on Zheng they were in effect breaking their allegiance to the Society's most senior patron.

'Keep it up!' Brother Li shouted to Brother Feng. 'It's for the honour of the Sitting Ox Mountain boys. Don't let yourself be beaten by a stuck-up pretty boy in fancy dress!'

The Sitting Ox Mountain boys are in luck today,' said Brother Xu, catching on to the idea.

'We don't even have to go looking for business, it's fallen straight into our laps. He'll fetch a good ransom, this one, if we nobble him. His father will give a million to get him back.'

Now that it appeared that these bare-footed ruffians were not farmers but brigands from the neighbouring hills, Zheng's followers took out their swords and prepared to cut them down; but they would have been no match for the Triads even if they had not still been suffering from the effects of their recent brush with the lamas. Within a couple of minutes

they had been disarmed and herded into a corner, where a couple of Triads with swords could keep them in order.

Both to avert suspicion and to avoid inflicting serious injury on his adversary, Brother Feng gave a convincing impression of

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clumsiness, several times stumbling and once or twice nearly tripping over. Zheng, on the other hand, anxious to make a good impression on his girlfriend, was showing off all his skills. The Green Girl was sure that her hero would give the clumsy brigand a trouncing and cheered him on enthusiastically. When the White Nun told her that the 'brigand' was the better fighter of the two and only playing with his opponent, she was incredulous. As if to prove the White Nun's point, Brother Feng suddenly changed his tactic. There was a loud sound of tearing fabric and Zheng found to his surprise that his splendid embroidered jacket had been almost ripped in two. This was followed by another tearing noise and then another, until the young man's fine clothes were in ribbons and his body was scarcely decent. Brother Feng then seized him by the wrists, pulled him towards him, gripped him round the lower part of the body, gave a heave-ho, and threw him up sideways into the air. 'Catch!' he shouted to Father Obscurus, who was standing at no great distance away.

Father Obscurus caught him and threw him to Brother Gao, Brother Gao threw him to Big Beaver, and two or three other Triads spread themselves out in a circle in order to join in the game. Trinket watched them, laughing, until a sharp rap on the back of the head from the Green Girl's knuckles put an end to his laughter. She began to upbraid him, and by the time their bickering had ended the Triads' ballgame was over. They had tied Zheng's hands behind his back and were loading him on to a horse.

'Hey!' one of them shouted. 'You folk had better hurry up with that ransom. We'll be giving him three hundred of the best every day until we get the money. The longer you delay, the more he gets beaten.'

'You hear that?' said the Green Girl tearfully, impulsively seizing Trinket by the hand. 'Just travelling to Taiwan and back to get the money from his father will take more than a month. He'll never stand up to so much beating.'

'What will you do if I save him?' said Trinket. Will you marry me?'

'Why start that nonsense again?' said the Green Girl. 'There's nothing you can do anyway.' She began crying even louder.

'As a matter of fact, there is,' said Trinket. 'But I'll only save him on one condition.'

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The Green Girl stopped crying, uncertain whether to believe him or not.

'What condition?'

'You must stop being nasty to me.'

'All right,' she said. 'Only hurry!'

Trinket stepped forward.

'Sitting Ox Mountain boys,' he said, 'I'd like a word with you.'

'Certainly, little brother,' said Gao Yanchao. What do you want to ask?'

Why do you need this money?'

'There are a lot of us up there on the mountain,' said Brother Gao, 'and we've run out of supplies. We need this million to set ourselves up again.'

'No problem,' said Trinket. Til lend it to you.'

Brother Gao laughed.

'Easily said, little brother, but how do I know I can trust you? Who are you, anyway?'

Trinket Wei,' said Trinket.

'Aiyo!' said Brother Gao in mock surprise. 'Little White Dragon! The hero who killed the Manchu Champion.' He clasped his hands and made a profound bow. 'Honoured to make your acquaintance.'

Trinket bowed in return.

'The honour is mine.'

'We'll release the young man, of course, since he's with you,' said Brother Gao. 'Forget about the money.'

Brother Xu was meanwhile fishing a large ingot of silver from an inside pocket. He presented it respectfully to Trinket with both his hands.

'Just in case you should run out of cash on your journey, Mr Wei, would you do us the honour to accept this little present?'

That's very kind of you,' said Trinket, graciously receiving the ingot and handing it to the Green Girl. She took it from him round-eyed, her mouth agape with wonder. Never would she have thought it possible that this evil little monk whom she so despised and detested could be a person of such great consequence that even fierce bandits deferred to him. But the farce was not yet over.

'One moment!' said Brother Feng dramatically. 'Can we be

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sure that you really are who you claim to be? Can you give us some proof?'

'Certainly/ said Trinket. 'What sort of proof do you want?'

'Well/ said Brother Feng, 'if it's not too presumptuous to ask, could you demonstrate one or two of your techniques? The Manchu Champion's killer is sure to be a great expert in the Martial Arts. If you really are the famous Trinket Wei, though, I must ask you to go easy with me. I don't want to get hurt.'

'I'm not all that good/ said Trinket modestly. He was laughing inwardly to think that Brother Feng, normally not so much a man of few words as a man of no words at all, could, when he was play-acting, become so voluble.

Brother Feng took up a defensive stance. Trinket, having taken up a stance facing him, darted his left hand forwards as if about to poke him with his finger, simultaneously performing a complicated circling movement with the palm of his right hand which ended in a downward chop. In pretending to defend himself, Brother Feng very nearly succeeded in falling over backwards. The attack that Trinket had used was a Prajna Hand technique taught him by old Brother Simple.

That's a "Praj . . . Prajjer" something-or-other, isn't it?' said Brother Feng. 'Brilliant!'

Trinket followed with one or two more Prajna Hand techniques which were found equally impressive.

As a matter of fact, the Triads were genuinely surprised, not only that he knew about these techniques, but that he could execute them so stylishly. He was a quick learner and had picked up quite a few things during his Shaolin stay, which of course they knew nothing about. But his knowledge was superficial. As he was too lazy to practise anything, he had never built up either the muscular strength or the inner power to make proper use of it. If he had been fighting seriously, these fancy flourishes he was demonstrating would have proved totally ineffective.

Brother Feng and the Triads now professed themselves wholly convinced that Trinket was

indeed the heroic slayer of the evil Manchu Regent. Young Sir Zheng was handed over, and after an exchange of courtesies and an invitation to Trinket to visit them on Sitting Ox Mountain whenever he liked, the Triads mounted their horses and rode away. The Green Girl was now seeing Trinket in a new light. 'I seem to have misjudged him/ she thought. 'All those times

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I beat him or got the better of him, he must have been deliberately letting me do it.' The wretched, tattered Sir Zheng was obliged to thank Trinket for coming to his rescue.

Sir Zheng eats Humble Pie

They were now able to resume their journey. Towards evening they put in at a large inn in the county town of Xianxian in Hebei. The White Nun called Trinket to her when the Green Girl was out of the room to question him about the morning's happenings. She had not been taken in by the little pantomime he had put on with the Triads and guessed that they were friends of his.

No, he told her, they weren't his friends.

'If they're not your friends/ she said, 'why did they pretend to let you do as you liked with them? They are obviously highly skilled fighters whom you could not possibly have stood up to if they had been really trying/

'Probably they were offended by Sir Zheng's uppity way of behaving/ said Trinket. 'I think they only wanted to teach him a lesson. I don't think they really wanted to hurt anyone.'

This explanation seemed to satisfy her, for she did not pursue her questioning. Trinket decided to go out and buy something nice for her supper. Outside he nearly ran into Zheng and the Green Girl who appeared to have left the inn just a little before he did. They were sauntering along very affectionately, shoulder to shoulder. Trinket experienced a pang of jealousy.

'Why are you following us?' the Green Girl asked when she became aware that he was shadowing them.

'I'm not/ he said. 'I've come out to buy vegetables for Shifu's supper/

'Oh, come on, Sir Zheng/ she said. 'We'll walk in that direction/ She pointed towards some high ground beyond the west wall of the town.

When Trinket returned to the inn from his shopping, Zheng and the Green Girl were still not back. He was gloomily imagining the romantic tete-a-tete they were no doubt enjoying when someone came up behind him, threw his arms round him, and addressed him laughingly.

Trinket, old fellow! What are you doing here of all places?

He turned his head round to look. It was Dolong, Intendant

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of the Palace Guards, his nominal Chief. There were a number of other Guards officers with him, all of them, like Dolong himself, dressed in privates' uniforms. It transpired that all of them except Dolong had been sent to look for Trinket by the Emperor, who had been anxiously awaiting news of his favourite ever since the mysterious figure in white ran off with him from the Pure Coolness Monastery. Dolong had decided to join them, partly out of affection for his young friend and partly, as he put it, 'to get outside for a bit'.

It seemed that they had found out about the Rat Trap Congress and two of their number

had infiltrated it in disguise. They knew about the newly founded League. They even had the names of several of the regional representatives. They knew that the representative for Yunnan was the Little Countess's elder brother, Young Count Mu, and that young Sir Zheng, or 'Zheng Keshuang, the son of the rebel leader in Taiwan' as they called him, was the representative for Fujian. Trinket inquired nervously whether they would be able to recognize these representatives if they saw them again.

'No,' said Dolong. 'It was too dark for our fellows to see them properly. We only know their names.'

'I've got a favour to ask,' said Trinket.

'Fire away, Colonel!' said the guards. 'Any little job you want doing we shall be only too pleased to carry out for you.'

He had been extremely generous with them in the past and they knew that anything they did for him would be rewarded.

Trinket explained that a certain young lady in whom he had taken an interest was being led astray by a slippery and most undesirable young man. Could they, without harming the girl, find some means of discouraging the young man? Short of crippling or permanently injuring him, of course. Without naming names, he gave them as good a description as he could of Sir Zheng and the Green Girl and an indication of the general direction in which he had seen them going. Dolong and his companions were both indignant on Trinket's behalf and tickled at the prospect of what looked like being a bit of fun. While Trinket went to give the vegetables he had purchased to the cook and instruct him about the dishes he wanted prepared from them, the men went off, laughing and joking, to look for the errant pair. When Trinket had finished giving his instructions to the cook, not forgetting to reinforce them with a generous tip, he ambled off

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into the west part of the town to see how the men were getting on with their errand. He had not gone very far when the sounds of a fray—shouting, curses, and the clash of weapons—reached him from some way ahead. Hurrying in the direction of the sounds, he soon came to where the streets ended in an open space beneath the circumference wall of the town. There, with their backs to the wall, a group of seven or eight swordsmen were defending themselves valiantly against at least twice their number of Manchu soldiers, whom Trinket instantly recognized as the Palace Guards who had parted from him only a quarter of an hour before. The soldiers had surrounded the swordsmen in a half-circle from which, outnumbered as they were, they had little chance of escaping.

Just as Trinket was congratulating himself on the prompt performance of his errand, he noticed among the spectators of this fray two figures standing hand in hand on top of the wall. It was young Sir Zheng and the Green Girl. Something had gone seriously wrong. He looked again at the embattled swordsmen. The two in the middle, a young man and a girl, he now recognized with dismay as the Little Countess and her brother Mu Jiansheng, the Young Count Mu. One of those fighting alongside them was Shaker Wu, whom a year or two earlier he had helped to escape from the Palace. This was the Yunnan delegation on its way back from the congress.

Fortunately Dolong, too, was among the spectators. He had a sword in his hand, but must, at the last moment, have decided that brawling in the street was unbecoming in a person of his rank. Trinket edged up to him and whispered urgently in his ear.

'You've got the wrong couple. The two on the wall are the ones I meant.'

Then he moved away again.

Dolong shouted to his companions:

'Hey! Fellows! This isn't the one we lent the money to. Let him and his friends go free!' Instantly the guards disengaged and fell back, allowing the imprisoned Yunnanese to depart. Young Count Mu had been assuming that he must have been recognized and denounced to the authorities and that the Manchu soldiers had come to arrest him. He was relieved to find that the only reason they had approached him was that they had mistaken him for a defaulting debtor; and as his little party was greatly outnumbered by the Manchus,

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he judged it best to get away as quickly as possible while the going was good. The little group hurried off without saying a word, making for the nearest town gate, and were very soon out of sight.

There was a flight of stone steps not far from where Trinket was standing which led up to the top of the wall. He climbed up to join the two others.

'Who were those people?' he asked the Green Girl. 'What were they fighting about?'

'I don't know,' she said. The soldiers said something about owing them money.'

'Hadn't we better get back before Shifu starts worrying?' he asked her.

'You go first,' she said. 'I'll follow you later.'

While they were talking, several of the guards were climbing up the steps.

'That's the man!' one of them shouted, pointing at young Sir Zheng. That's the one we lent the money to.'

That ten thousand taels we lent you in the Hejianfu brothel the other night,' said another of them, 'we want it back.'

'Don't talk such nonsense!' said Zheng angrily. 'I've never set foot in any Hejianfu brothel. How could I possibly owe you money?'

'What do you mean, you never set foot in it?' said another of the guards. 'I saw you with my own eyes. You were sitting there with a tart on each knee, hugging and kissing.'

The Green Girl remembered the scene she had witnessed in the brothel in Tantoupu and her eyes filled with tears. Nevertheless when one of the more aggressive of the 'creditors' began punching and slapping Zheng, demanding to know whether or not he was going to 'cough up', she rushed to his defence, only to be sent reeling back by Dolong.

'Why does a nice young lady like you want to be going out with a randy little whore-licker like him?' he asked her, and restrained her from dashing once more to the rescue.

A number of the guards were standing round Zheng now, kicking and thumping him. He was bleeding profusely from his nose. Since she was unable to get to him, the Green Girl called out to them pleadingly.

'Please don't hit him any more! Can't we talk it over instead?'

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Tell him to give us back our money and we'll stop hitting him,' said one of the men.

'I think we should cut his ears off first,' said another of them and unsheathed a formidable knife.

The Green Girl seized Trinket's hand imploringly.

'What shall we do?' she sobbed. 'What shall we do?'

'I've got ten thousand taels; the question is whether we ought to give him the money if it's only for paying back what he spent in the whore-house,' said Trinket self-righteously.

'But didn't you hear? They're going to cut off his ears.' She called to the men. 'Do stop hitting him! He'll pay you back the money.' She turned to Zheng. 'Brother Wei has got the

money. If you ask him, I'm sure he'll lend it to you and you can pay the soldiers back. You will lend it, won't you?' she said, tugging Trinket's hand.

Zheng, though raging inwardly, was obliged to eat humble pie again and beg Trinket for the money, which he then promptly handed over to the nearest guard. The men weren't quite sure what they should do now. Trinket had said nothing about taking money, only that the young man should be 'discouraged'. Trinket realized why they were hesitating.

'Lousy soldiers!' he shouted. 'You've got your money, what more do you want? Why don't you share it out among yourselves and bugger off?'

This was just what they wanted to hear and they began to drift away, discussing the correct way of dividing up the spoils. Dolong, however, when he saw the Green Girl at once rush over to tend to the bleeding and battered Sir Zheng, felt that the task Trinket had given them had not yet been properly completed. He strode over and took the unfortunate Zheng by the scruff of the neck.

'Now see here young man,' he said, emphasizing his words with an occasional shake, 'in future leave this young woman alone. A respectable, well-bred young lady like her has got her reputation to think of. She doesn't want a dirty, sneaking little pimp like you hanging around her. From now on if I catch you anywhere near her, I'll wring your head off.'

He put his great hands round Zheng's neck as if to demonstrate. Zheng's pale face turned purple and there seemed every likelihood that the big man would choke him to death.

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'Leave him alone!' cried Trinket. 'Surely you're not going to kill him now you've got the money?'

He attacked Dolong with both his fists. The form of attack he used, a Two Dragon Snatch, was designed to strike an opponent on the temples, but because of the disparity in their heights—Dolong was a great giant of a man and Trinket still a rather short fourteen-year-old—the blows landed on his ribs just below the armpits. With a roar of counterfeit rage Dolong released the half-choked Zheng and kicked out at Trinket, deliberately missing him and demolishing a small jujube tree that was growing out of a crack in the wall. Seeing his great strength, the Green Girl cried out in alarm.

'Brother Wei, don't fight him! Let's go back to the inn!'

Trinket suddenly felt indescribably happy.

'She really cares for me,' he thought. 'At last she cares for me!'

He began to execute all the showiest figures he could remember of the ones he had been taught by Brother Simple and the old eunuch Hai Dafu. Neither he nor Dolong were doing more than barely touching each other, but the show they put on was impressive. At one point, as Dolong lurched sideways to avoid a blow, he dislodged an unstable piece of battlement which dropped off and disappeared in a cloud of dust. A moment later Trinket aimed a blow at his belly. Still play-acting, Dolong cried out as if in pain and his legs were seen to buckle under him. When Trinket followed this up with a kick, he toppled over and fell from the side of the wall.

For a few seconds he clung on to the parapet with his fingers, then his grip slackened and he fell once more, ending up spread-eagled on his back on the ground below. Trinket, not sure that this last part of the performance was intended, leant over and looked down at him in

some concern, wondering if he might inadvertently have killed his friend or at the very least broken his back. But as he gazed down, the recumbent figure on the ground below suddenly raised its head a fraction, opened its eyes, and winked, at the same time giving a little wave with its hand. A second later it lay there spread-eagled and inert as before and to all appearances dead.

Trinket could feel the Green Girl tugging at his hand.

'Quickly, quickly!' she said. She already had Sir Zheng by the other hand. The three of them made a dash for the steps. As the soldiers seemed preoccupied with their unconscious leader, they

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were able to run back to the inn without further mishap. Seeing the Green Girl flushed and out of breath, the White Nun asked what had happened.

'Sir Zheng was set upon by a gang of Tartar soldiers,' said the Green Girl. 'Fortunately—' she seemed reluctant to go on, 'fortunately Brother Wei was able to knock out their leader.'

'I think in future it would be better if you stayed with me quietly in the inn,' said the White Nun severely. 'All this wandering about outside is just asking for trouble.'

The Green Girl hung her head and said nothing. Trinket noticed that shortly after this she hurried off to Zheng's room to see if he was all right. His companions had already attended to his injuries and put him to bed so there was nothing for her to do and she came away looking rather disconsolate. Trinket glumly reflected that, in spite of all he had done, her every thought was still only of the detestable Sir Zheng. For all his precocious cleverness, Trinket still knew very little about love.

Instructions for a Third Lesson

That night, while everyone in the hostelry was sleeping, Trinket was woken up by a gentle tapping on the window of his room. He sat up, still half asleep, and listened. Someone was calling softly to him from the other side of the window.

'Mr Wei! Mr Wei!'

The voice was familiar. After a moment or two he recognized it as that of Shaker Wu, the grizzled retainer of Young Count Mu whom he had once helped to escape from the Palace and whom he had seen that morning with his back to the town wall, fighting side by side with his master and the Little Countess when they and the other members of the Yunnan delegation were set upon in error by the Manchu guards. He jumped out of bed and went to open the window.

'MrWu!'

Shaker Wu jumped lightly into the bedroom and enfolded Trinket in a tight embrace. Then, having first closed the window carefully behind him, he took Trinket by the hand, led him over to the bed, and sat down shoulder to shoulder with him on the side of it.

'I asked some of your Triad people at the big meeting in Hejianfu where you were,' he said, 'but they wouldn't tell me.'

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'I was at the meeting myself,' said Trinket, 'in disguise. They weren't being unfriendly: they didn't know I was there.'

'You saved my life again this morning, Mr Wei/ said Shaker. 'I don't know what would have happened to us when those Tartar soldiers attacked if you hadn't intervened. Young Count

Mu was very grateful. At the time, we had to get away as best we could, but we couldn't have left the area without thanking you.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Trinket. 'We're all friends, aren't we? Can't you stop calling me Mr Wei, though? Can't we just be brothers?'

'All right,' said Shaker. 'Provided you'll stop calling me Mr Wu. Tell me, brother, where are you making for?'

That's rather a long story/ said Trinket. 'Right at the moment, I'm thinking about getting married.'

'Congratulations! Who's the lucky girl?' said Shaker, expecting to be told that it was Fang Yi.

'Her family name is Chen/ said Trinket. 'I'm having a bit of trouble, though.'

'Oh? How's that?'

'She's got another boyfriend/ said Trinket. 'He's bad news. He's trying to get her away from me. But that's not the worst of it. The worst of it is that he's a traitor. He gives secret information to the Tartars. It's because of him that you were attacked by those Tartar soldiers this morning.'

'Little swine!' said Shaker angrily. 'What's the matter with him? Is he tired of living?'

'You'd never guess who he is/ said Trinket. 'He's from Taiwan: the Prince of Yanping's second son. You know about this agreement that whoever takes out the Satrap first should be leader of the Resistance? Well, he's not prepared to play fair like the rest of us. He reckoned he could get you Yunnan folk knocked out of the competition by setting the Tartars on to you. Luckily the Tartars don't know what your master looks like, so I was able to persuade them that they'd got the wrong man.'

Shaker's head was beginning to shake at an alarming rate. 'So that's why we were attacked! Tamardy! What a dirty little rat! Leave him to me, brother. I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry. Where can I find him? How shall I know who he is?'

'He's travelling with us/ said Trinket. The young man with a black eye. He could certainly do with a lesson. Don't overdo it,

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though. After all, Prince Yanping is our boss: we don't want to upset him. The best thing would be if you were to knock him about a bit and then let me come to the rescue.'

Having settled this important piece of business, Trinket went on to ask Shaker what had happened to him after he and the others were captured by members of the Mystic Dragon Sect. Shaker told him that the Mystic Dragons had themselves been made prisoner by a group of women who appeared to be the sole inhabitants of the haunted house and who had then proceeded to set himself and his companions free, but that another lot of Mystic Dragons had arrived on the scene and released the first lot. In the ensuing darkness and confusion they had somehow all got separated and next morning they could see no sign of Trinket and the two girls. The only resident of the house they could get hold of was a deaf old woman from whom they could extract little sense, and though he and old Xu had spent nearly a fortnight searching the whole area for some clue that might suggest what had happened to them, lack of success had forced them in the end to give up. Trinket felt thankful that Shaker and the other two men had not fallen into the hands of the sinister Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect and been forced to become his puppets. He decided not to tell him about the two girls.

Well, brother, I'd better be going now/ said Shaker. Take care of yourself! And don't forget, there are lots of other nice girls in the world. Don't worry too much about this young lady of yours.'

Trinket sighed and said nothing.

Shaker opened the window and vaulted out.

Little Flower

Next day Trinket, the White Nun, and the Green Girl, accompanied as before by young Zheng and his retainers, resumed their journey to the north. As they drove through the town gate, the White Nun rather pointedly asked Zheng where he was bound for.

Taiwan/ he said. Til escort you for just another stage of your journey, and then I'll take my leave.'

They travelled on uneventfully through the day; but the White Nun was growing fatigued with so much travel, and in the late afternoon they decided to break their journey at an inn they could see a little way ahead of them and make an early start next day. Just as they were approaching the inn, a small group of

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mounted peasants who had for some time been trailing along behind them made a sudden dash forward and overtook them.

'That's die one! That's him!' cried the rough-looking farmer at their head, pointing to young Sir Zheng.

Trinket could see at a glance that the farmer was Shaker Wu. The other members of the group surrounded the carriage and blocked the way ahead.

'Dirty bastard! What were you up to in Li Family Village last night?' said Shaker Wu. 'Did you think you could get away with it?'

'What on eardi are you talking about, my good man?' said Zheng angrily. 'I've never in my life been near your Li Family Village. You're obviously mistaking me for someone else.'

'Filthy liar!' said a younger peasant, whom Trinket identified as Shaker's much-tattooed disciple Ao Biao, the Blue Tiger. 'You spent half the night in our Litde Flower's bed. That's him, sister, isn't it?'

The 'Little Flower' he addressed was a big-boned young peasant woman, of hideous aspect but gaudily dressed in what must have been her best domes, and with a patterned kerchief about her head. Trinket imagined they must hwe hired her and wondered why they couldn't have picked someone slightly less ill-favoured.

That's him, that's him!' said Litde Flower. 'After all his promises, I let him have his way with me. Oh, I'm so ashamed! Waa-aa-aah!'

She broke into a sort of quavering yell that was evidently meant to simulate weeping.

'What did he say, then, Little Flower?' said Shaker. 'Never fear! Don't be ashamed!'

'He said his father was a great prince in Taiwan,' said Little Flower. She fished a large silver ingot from her bosom. 'He gave me this. He said there were mountains of silver where this came from. He said he would make me ... he would make me ... Waah!' She resumed her wailing.

While she had been speaking, a litde cry of anguish, probably audible to none but Trinket, had escaped the Green Girl. The idea that her handsome Sir Zheng could have bestowed his favours on this coarse, lumpish, buck-toothed peasant girl had seemed so preposterous mat she had at first assumed this to be a case of mistaken identity. But when she heard this same ignorant

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peasant girl mention Prince Yanping and Taiwan, it seemed obvious that it was from

Zheng's own lips alone that she could have heard about diem. The doubts raised by the guards' charges the day before now seemed confirmed.

There's only one way to mend this,' said Ao Biao. The young gentleman will have to marry my sister, for I'm sure no one else will have her now that she's been ruined.'

Like the Green Girl, Sir Zheng's retainers were now convinced that the peasant girl really had been seduced by their master. They had been impressed by the size of the ingot. No peasant girl, they reasoned, could possibly earn so substantial a sum except by prostituting her person.

'Your sister's had her payment/ said one of them. 'Now just clear the road and let us pass.'

'Our Little Flower is an honest girl,' said Shaker Wu. The young man promised her marriage—isn't that so, Little Flower?'

'Yes,' said Little Flower in her raucous, hooting voice. 'He said the silver was a betrothal present.'

Zheng was now growing desperate. Ever since he had set foot on the mainland he had encountered nothing but trouble. The importunacy of these stupid yokels was the last straw. He raised his riding-crop and struck Ao Biao on the head. Ao Biao gave a yell, slipped from his saddle, and lay motionless on the ground. Little Flower dismounted and knelt beside him. 'He's dead,' she said. 'Murderer!' 'Murderer! Murderer!' cried the other peasants. Observing the agility with which Little Flower cocked up her leg and hopped down from her horse, it suddenly dawned on Trinket that 'she' was a man—probably one of Young Count Mu's followers with whom he was not yet acquainted. He could not have been a very good-looking man: it was small wonder he made so ill-favoured a young woman. But Zheng was too concerned about his predicament to have an eye for such particulars. As the son of the Manchu government's most dangerous enemy and with an enormous price on his head, the last thing he wanted was a confrontation with the local bureaucracy. He decided to make a getaway.

'Break out!' he cried to his retainers, digging his heels into his mount so that it reared. 'Let's get away from these clowns!'

In a trice the group of peasants transformed themselves into accomplished fighters. The dead brother leapt up from the ground and dragged Sir Zheng from his horse, Little Flower flung her arms

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round her betrothed in what looked more like a wrestler's lock than a womanly embrace, and the others set about unhorsing the retainers and temporarily incapacitating them with skilful thrusts in particularly painful places. One of them produced a length of rope from somewhere and proceeded to rope the riderless horses together; then, once more mounting their own horses, with young Sir Zheng still clasped in the iron grip of his future bride and with the retainers' horses clattering along behind them, they rode off in great good humour, promising themselves a boozy wedding party ahead.

'Shifu, Shifu!' cried the Green Girl, running up to the carriage. They've taken away Sir Zheng. What are we going to do?'

The White Nun had all this time been lying down resting in the carriage. She had heard the shouting and racket but seen nothing of what was going on. Had she done so, she would have known at once that these were no peasants who had carried off Sir Zheng but seasoned warriors. She shook her head.

'Young Sir Zheng's conduct leaves very much to be desired,' she said disapprovingly. 'I'm sure these countrymen intend him no serious injury. It will certainly do him no harm to be

taught a lesson.'

The retainers had now struggled to their feet and were running down the road after the horsemen, though with little hope of ever catching up with them or even discovering where they were going. This left only Trinket and the Green Girl beside the carriage. There was nothing for it but to go on to the inn, stable the mule, and get the White Nun settled in a room.

By now it was already dusk, but Trinket knew that the Green Girl was bound to make some sort of attempt to find out what had become of Zheng, and when the lamps had been lit and the White Nun had partaken of a simple meal, he went out to the stable and concealed himself in a pile of straw, reasoning that if she wanted to go off to look for Zheng, she would need a horse, and that in her anxiety to save him she would not hesitate to 'borrow' someone else's mount. His guess proved correct, for he had not been lying more than ten minutes or so in the darkness of the stable, when the stable door was pushed softly open and a slight, girlish figure glided inside. She gave a start and a little gasp when Trinket jumped out of the straw.

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'What are you doing here?'

'Waiting for horse thieves,' he said drily. 'There are a lot of them around in this part of the country.'

'Brother Wei,' she said, 'please help me. We must do something to rescue him.'

'Rescue him?' said Trinket teasingly. 'He's not in any danger. This is his wedding day. He's probably feeling very happy.'

She began to cry.

Trinket,' she said pleadingly (he couldn't recollect that she had ever called him by his real name before), 'please help me get him back.'

Trinket relented.

'All right,' he said. 'What will my reward be if I do?'

She nearly said, 'Anything you like', but remembered that he would almost certainly revive the usual nonsense about wanting to marry her and said nothing.

'Come on!' he said.

They untied two of the horses and led them out of their stalls and through the yard, as quietly as they could. Fortunately no one seemed to have noticed, and when they got on to the road outside, they mounted and began riding along it in the direction they had come from earlier in the day. After they had been riding for some time, they came upon a group of men, one or two of them holding lanterns, sitting on the ground beside the road just before its junction with a narrow lane. It was the retainers, who had evidently given up the chase. Under the dark trees behind them they could make out the shapes of horses.

'Where is Sir Zheng?' said the Green Girl, reining in her horse.

Recognizing her voice, the retainers jumped to their feet. In the light of the lanterns it could be seen that all of them had a dejected, beaten look.

'Down there,' said one of them, pointing down the lane. 'In that temple.'

'What's he doing there?'

The countrymen wanted him to go there to get married,' said the man. 'He didn't want to go, but they made him.'

There weren't very many of them,' said the Green Girl crossly. 'What's the matter with you? Couldn't you have stopped them?'

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'Those countrymen—they seem to be trained fighters/ said the man sheepishly.

'Suppose they are/ said the Green Girl, 'how could you just stand by and let your master be carried off like that? Very well. At least you can take us there.'

'They said if we gave them any more trouble they would kill us all/ said one of the retainers, a somewhat older man. They left us our horses. They said as far as they were concerned we could go back home if we liked, but if we tried to follow them, they would kill us.'

'Really!' said the Green Girl. 'I thought good bodyguards were prepared to die for their masters.'

'Yes, miss/ said the man. 'All the same, I think it would be best if you left your horses here. We don't want to give them warning of our coming.'

The Green Girl sniffed contemptuously, but dismounted all the same. Trinket followed her example and the two of them tethered their horses to a tree, a little way apart from the others. The retainers put their lanterns down and led them down the lane.

After a few hundred yards, the lane passed through a grove of tall trees, then through a graveyard. At this point the retainers refused resolutely to advance a step further and Trinket and the Green Girl had to go on alone. Beyond the graveyard was a sizeable building, too big for a house, which they assumed must be the temple. Light was streaming from one side of it. A sudden sound of drums and cymbals broke out from it as they approached. The Green Girl clutched Trinket's sleeve and together the two of them crept round the building until they came to a gateway. Entering this gateway, they moved stealthily across a small courtyard to a window of the building from which the light and sound were coming.

The scene which met their eyes when they peered inside must have been planned to coincide with their arrival. A somewhat battered-looking Sir Zheng was standing on a mat, shoulder to shoulder with his gawky bride, whose head was now enveloped in a red silk cloth beneath which only her neck was visible. Someone had thoughtfully stuck red wedding favours in his hat. Shaker Wu, acting as Master of Ceremonies, stood a little distance away from them to call out the commands. The other 'peasants' stood ready at hand to enforce his commands if necessary, though from the look

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of things Zheng had already been so manhandled that he had decided to go through with whatever was asked of him without any further resistance.

'Bride and groom, first kowtow to heaven!' Shaker sang out in a clarion voice.

The incongruous pair turned to face the door of the hall, knelt down on the mat, and kowtowed.

'Bride and groom, stand!'

They stood up.

'Bride and groom, second kowtow to earth!'

They about-turned, knelt down, and kowtowed towards the inner side of the hall.

'Bride and groom, stand!'

Up they got again.

'Bride and groom, third kowtow to each other!'

They turned to face each other and kowtowed as before.

'Again!'

'Isn't that enough?' said Zheng plaintively, rising to his knees.

'Oh, no/ said Shaker. 'In these parts it's the custom to do it fifty times.'

This is intolerable!' cried the Green Girl, and before Trinket could stop her, she had leapt through the window and was charging into the middle of the hall, brandishing her sword.

'Let him go at once, you stupid peasants, or I'll kill each one of you!'

Shaker laughed.

'If you've come to drink the bride's health, young lady, there's no need for the sword.'

The Green Girl ignored him and, presumably because he was standing nearest to Sir Zheng, struck out at Ao Biao in a rage. It was a savage blow: Ao Biao was obliged to pick up a long bench to defend himself, but so fiercely did she press down on him that he was forced to retreat.

'She's a spunky little fighter/ said Shaker admiringly and stepped in to take Ao Biao's place. Shaker was a more experienced fighter than Ao Biao, and though the Green Girl fought skilfully and Zheng leapt to his feet to help her, Zheng was quickly overpowered and it was now her turn to retreat.

'Brother Wei/ she called out, 'come and help me!' 'I'm doing my best, sister, I'm doing my best/ Trinket shouted back at her.

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From the racket outside the window it sounded as if he was struggling with a formidable opponent.

Til handle this/ said Shaker, winking at his younger companions. Two of them quickly took over the Green Girl while Shaker, shouting 'Who's that out there?', ran out of the door. He had difficulty in not laughing out loud when, in the darkness outside, he made out the figure of Trinket, perched on a low window-ledge, single-handedly attacking the window-frame with his fists and feet.

'Aiyo!' Trinket shouted for the benefit of the Green Girl inside. These countrymen are trained fighters. Aiyo!'

He jumped down and ran across the courtyard with Shaker following.

'Thanks, brother,' he said, when he and Shaker were in the doorway of the temple, out of earshot of the rest. 'I like the way you've chosen to rid me of that pest. Can I ask you another favour

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'Anything, brother.'

'Now that you're in the business of marrying people, could you find some way of marrying me to that girl?'

Shaker suddenly looked grave.

'I don't like having to say this to you, brother, but though I don't mind a bit of fun like what we've had just now, we fighting men are not in the business of pimping for each other. I'm sorry you asked me this.'

'No, no, you don't understand,' said Trinket. 'I really, truly, want to marry this girl. I love her! I want to live with her and look after her for the rest of my life. I've wanted to for a long time. The only snag is, she's set her heart on this scumbag you've just been sorting out for me.'

Shaker brightened up again.

'Oh well, that's different. I'll have to think of some way of bringing this off. I think perhaps to start with I'd better pretend to make you my prisoner.'

He undid Trinket's belt and tied his hands behind his back with it, then, taking him by the collar, marched him back into the temple hall, where the Green Girl, now disarmed, was standing a prisoner between the two young men.

'Let the lass go,' said Shaker. 'I like her spirit. She'd make a good match for my younger brother. What do you say to it, lads? Shall we have another wedding?'

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There were enthusiastic cries of assent, but the Green Girl was horrified.

'No!' she said, 'no! I'd rather die than be married to one of you.'

'Very well,' said Shaker magnanimously. 'If you won't marry my brother, what about marrying this young fellow here?' He gave Trinket a push. 'I reckon the two of you would make a good match. Both of you are good little fighters. Both of you have got plenty of spirit.'

'No!' said the Green Girl very firmly. 'I don't want to marry him.'

'I'm beginning to lose patience with you, young woman,' said Shaker threateningly. 'Tie her up!'

The young men quickly did his bidding.

'Please don't hurt her,' said Trinket. 'If all you want is a wedding, I don't mind being married instead of her. Haven't you got a sister or a daughter I could marry?'

'I haven't got a sister,' said Shaker, 'and my daughter is only three years old. What about you young fellows?' he said, addressing the other men.

'I haven't got any sisters,' said one.

'Nor I,' said another.

'My sister's already married with eight children,' said another. 'Her husband's a sick man, mind you. You could marry her when he dies.'

'We can't wait that long,' said Shaker. 'We want a wedding now.'

'We want a wedding now,' echoed the others.

'I'm sorry, sister,' said Trinket. 'It looks as if you'll have to marry me.'

'I am not marrying you/ said the Green Girl determinedly.

'Now I really have lost patience/ said Shaker. 'If we're not going to have a wedding, neither of you is any use to us. We might as well top the pair of you.'

'Cut off their noses!' said one of the younger men blood-thirstily.

'Cut off his too/ said another of them, pointing to Zheng. 'I can't see he'll be much use to our Flower, except to give a name to her child/

'Is that what you want?' Shaker asked the Green Girl.

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'No!' she cried in a half-scream. She had turned deathly pale. There's nothing for it, sister,' said Trinket. 'We'll just have to go through with this.'

'That's more like it,' said Shaker, undoing Trinket's bonds. 'They've both agreed now. Set the girl free again.'

As soon as they released her, she fetched Ao Biao a tremendous punch in the chest, but it didn't seem to concern him unduly. While another of the men held a cutlass to her neck, he plucked the red cloth from the head of the pseudo bride and draped it over hers. At this, the

din of drums and cymbals broke out again, and the Green Girl, resigned now to humouring the eccentric wishes of these yokels with an outward show of compliance, allowed herself to be put through the same performance with Trinket that Zheng had shortly before been forced to undergo with the hideous Flower.

'Bride and groom,' said Shaker, when the little ceremony was over, 'I think you owe me a kowtow now as the matchmaker.'

The Green Girl's answer to this was a kick in the stomach. It doubled him up, but after getting his wind back he merely laughed. The bride is a dangerous young woman,' he said. Just at that moment sounds of whistling and running feet could be heard from every direction outside. It was clear that the temple was surrounded by a considerable body of men.

Manzi, goowah tooloo!

'Sst!' said Shaker. Tut out the lights!

Instantly all candles in the hall, except for a little one on the altar which they somehow missed, were extinguished. Trinket seized the Green Girl's hand.

'Come on, wife, quick! We must hide.'

The Green Girl tried to disengage her hand.

'Don't call me that!' she hissed. That wasn't a real wedding. It doesn't count.'

'Of course it counts,' said Trinket. 'Once you've done all that kowtowing, there's no undoing it.'

A chorus of inhuman yells and cries outside caused her to draw closer to him. No longer resisting, she ran hand in hand with him to the shrine at the back of the hall and crouched down with him behind the altar. Suddenly the hall was lit up again with the light of blazing torches as a throng of some thirty or forty yelling

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warriors burst inside. They were the strangest-looking creatures imaginable, naked except for the animal skins round their waists and their feathered head-dresses, their faces and bodies patterned all over with warpaint. Wild Manzi! What were these savage tribesmen from the forests of Yunnan and the Burmese border doing in North China? The Green Girl cowered against Trinket's body, so close that he could feel her trembling.

The crowd of savages halted, and a big man who appeared to be their leader looked round imperiously.

'Chinee man—bad!' he said. 'All kill! Goowah tooloo ahasleeV

'Goowah tooloo abaslee!' the other savages shouted menacingly.

Shaker Wu had lived all his life in Yunnan and had picked up a few words of the Yee language spoken by many of the aboriginal tribesmen in that area, but had no idea what language these painted savages were speaking.

'We Chinee man good man,' he ventured in his pidgin Yee. 'Not kill!'

The Manzi chief shook his head uncomprehendingly.

'Chinee man—bad. All kill!' he insisted. 'All kill! Goowah tooloo abaslee!'

'Goowah tooloo abaslee!' shouted the other Manzi, and instantly set upon the members of the wedding party, including the unfortunate Sir Zheng, who to them was a 'Chinee man' like the rest.

The weapons these primitives wielded were by no means primitive and their fighting methods too were sophisticated. The Chinese fought back valiantly, but they were so greatly

outnumbered that, after a few minutes, they had all, with one exception, been disarmed; two of them, Ao Biao and one one, were wounded. The exception was Shaker Wu, with whom the Manzi leader was engaged in single combat. Shaker fought on desperately, aware that his opponent was more than a match for him but hoping against hope that he might somehow manage to overcome him and force the other Manzi to release his friends. While he was parrying a downward stroke aimed at his head, the shock made by the impact of the two blades temporarily paralysed his arm. As ill luck would have it, it was just at that moment that another of the tribesmen aimed a sweeping blow at his legs. He skipped aside to avoid it, but in that split second the Manzi chief was able to change the direction of his sword so that it ended up with the blade pressing against his neck. There was nothing for it but to drop his own sword and surrender. The tribesmen had already trussed up the

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others with leather thongs, so now it was his turn to be bound. He was made to sit on the floor with the rest while several of the tribesmen went round each corner of the building with their torches to see if anyone was hiding.

Trinket could see no point in waiting to be discovered. Holding the Green Girl tightly by the hand, he made a desperate dash for the door; but the two of them did not get very far. The Manzi leader darted forward, stretched out his arm, and caught the Green Girl by the collar from behind, while three other tribesmen fell upon Trinket and held him fast.

'Manzi man good. Not kill. Goowah tooloo!' cried Trinket hopefully.

This produced a quite unexpected result. The Manzi leader turned his head and stared at him intently. Then his expression changed. Letting go of the Green Girl, he advanced on Trinket with arms outspread and gathered him up like someone picking up a child.

'Heehoo aboo killee wondong!' he shouted, and began walking towards the door with Trinket cradled in his arms.

Though frightened out of his wits, Trinket managed to shout a last message to the Green Girl before the two of them disappeared into the darkness outside.

'I think this painted ape is going to kill me, Ah Kor. You'll be a widow. Don't marry that other man, please!'

The Manzi leader trotted with him across the courtyard before putting him down.

'Laurie Goong-goong,' he said, in faultless Chinese, 'whatever are you doing here?'

'You know me, Manzi-man?' said Trinket. It would be hard to say which was greater, his relief or his surprise.

'I'm Yang Yizhi,' said the Manzi, 'the Satrap's man, Yang Yizhi. You know, the one you helped win at gambling at Prince Kang's. I'm not surprised you didn't recognize me.' He laughed.

Trinket laughed too; but before he could say anything, Yang took him by the arm and suggested in a low voice that they should move to somewhere farther away from where there would be no risk of their being overheard.

When Yang was satisfied that they were far enough away to speak freely, he explained to Trinket that the Satrap, having received information from his agents that a big underworld congress was to be held in Hejianfu for the express purpose of planning some

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mischievousness against him, had sent him with other members of his bodyguard to infiltrate the congress and find out more about it. They had identified some of their old enemies from the Mu Family who were attending the congress and had been shadowing them ever since. This

evening they had finally decided to strike, but because of the embarrassment it would cause the Satrap if it became known that his followers had engaged in armed violence so far outside his own jurisdiction and so near to the Capital, they had disguised themselves in this highly colourful manner so that there could be no possibility of their being identified. The Mu Family had already tried to make trouble for the Satrap by impersonating his followers in a raid on the Palace—he was deeply grateful to Laurie Goong-goong for having cleared his name on that occasion—and he was anxious that no embarrassment of that sort should occur again.

The Emperor knew about the congress, too,' said Trinket, rapidly improvising a role for himself that would be acceptable to his friend. 'Like you, I was sent to spy on it and report back. I knew the Mu gang were your master's most dangerous enemies, and I knew the Emperor was worried about your master's safety, so after the congress was over I decided to keep an eye on them and I've stuck with them ever since. They think I'm a friend. That's how I come to be with them now. What about you? What are you planning to do with them now that they're your prisoners?'

Take them back to Yunnan and make them talk,' said Yang grimly.

'Hm.'

'Perhaps you think that's not such a good idea?'

'Oh no,' said Trinket. 'It's just that their leader's still at large, of course—Mu Jiansheng—"the Young Count" as they call him— and old Liu Something-or-other, his adviser. And that old man you were fighting just now—he's a pretty tough customer. Do you think you can make him talk?'

'Shaker Wu?' said Yang. 'He's a bloody good fighter. No, perhaps you're right. We did have Mu Jiansheng in our sights as far as Xianxian, by the way, but then somehow or other we lost track of him. What do you think we ought to do?'

The thing is,' said Trinket; 'I've been trying to persuade this Shaker to take me to Young Count Mu and he's more or less agreed. I'd been planning to wait until I knew where the Young Count was

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and then get the Emperor's men to round them all up. Catch the whole lot at one go.'

That way's much better,' said Yang. 'In that case I'll have to think of some way of releasing you all. Hm. I can't let on that you and I are friends. Not in this gear, anyway.'

'Couldn't I go on pretending that I can speak the goowah tooloo stuff? We could talk away in the tooloo tooloo for a bit, then you could pretend that you've decided we're all pals and just go away— without any killee Chinees?'

That sounds all right. The others will probably understand what I'm up to if I give them a wink or two. Let's go back, then.'

'Wait,' said Trinket, 'there's just one thing I ought to tell you. That girl in there is my wife. The idiot with the black eye and the red bobbles on his hat has been making trouble between us. He's a bloody nuisance! If you could find an excuse for taking him away with you when you go, you'd be doing me a very good turn. I don't mean hurt him or anything. Just get him out of the way.'

Yang couldn't quite understand what a young eunuch was doing with a wife; nevertheless, he readily agreed to do the best he could, and the two of them walked back to the hall, exchanging meaningless gibberish with each other as they came within earshot of the rest. The fact that Trinket apparently knew the language of these tribesmen inspired Shaker and the other captives with hope. But when they saw the Manzi leader pointing at various of their number and Trinket nodding vigorously or shaking his head, they wondered anxiously

what was being said. Eventually the jabbering stopped and Trinket turned to them and spoke to them in Chinese.

'I think they're going to let us go,' he said. The trouble is, they want to take one person with them, I can't quite make out why. I think it must be something to do with their religion.' The leader went over to the Green Girl and made her stand up. He touched her several times and spoke a few words in his own language.

'No!' said Trinket. 'No! My wife. Me. Wife.'

'Wife?'

Evidently neither of them knew the word for this in the other's language.

Tell him Ah Kor, tell him,' said Trinket, desperately.

The Green Girl pointed to herself and then to Trinket.

'ME—HIS—WIFE.'

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The leader shook his head again uncomprehendingly.

Trinket put his arms round the Green Girl and hugged her.

'My wife, you silly painted baboon!'

'Ah! Wiffee. Ha ha ha!'

The painted baboon seemed to think this a huge joke. He pointed to Zheng, who was by far the best-dressed person present and certainly, apart from his black eye, the handsomest male.

'Son?'

'No,' said Trinket, shaking his head emphatically. 'Not son.'

'Aah!'

The big man pointed again at Zheng and then gestured to two of the tribesmen to pick him up. They did so, each holding him under one arm as if he were a log. Then, at a command from the leader, with a few hoots and whistles, the whole troop of them departed as suddenly as they had come. Trinket stood in the doorway until the sounds of their departure had faded, then, hurrying inside again, he relit the candles and set about freeing the captives from their bonds. He did this as quickly as possible by cutting through the leather thongs with his dagger.

Those savages were tidy fighters,' said Shaker. 'Good job the bridegroom could talk their lingo, or we'd all have been goners.'

'How are we going to rescue Sir Zheng?' said the Green Girl. The false bride, who all this while had been silent, began to wail.

The savages have taken my man. I'm sure they're going to eat him. They'll boil him and eat him, I'm sure they will.'

Shaker clasped his hands and bowed to Trinket respectfully.

'You're a hero, young man. May I know your name?'

'Wei,' said Trinket

'I haven't yet given you a wedding present, Mr Wei,' said Shaker. He fished two minute silver ingots from an inside pocket and ceremoniously offered them to Trinket with both his hands.

Thank you,' said Trinket, receiving them with equal ceremony.

'It wasn't a real wedding,' said the Green Girl. 'We aren't really married.'

'Of course you are,' said Shaker. 'You kowtowed to heaven and earth. You said "Me his wife" to that painted savage only a moment ago. Anyway, we must be off now. We'll leave you two newly-weds in peace.'

With a bow and a hand-clasp apiece he and his companions trooped out of the temple and vanished into the night. There was a sound of galloping, so their horses must all the time have been tethered somewhere outside.

Alone now with Trinket in the silent, empty hall, where the only movements were made by the flickering light of the candles, the Green Girl felt suddenly frightened. At the same time a wave of shame and revulsion swept over her when she thought of the words she had been forced to utter. She stamped her foot and simultaneously burst into tears.

'It's all your fault/ she cried. 'You're horrible.'

'You wouldn't say I was horrible if I rescued Sir Zheng/ said Trinket.

'Would you?' she said, suddenly brightening. 'Do you think you could?'

She looked so beautiful when she said this, that Trinket's heart was melted.

'Come on!' he said. 'Let's get out of here.'

The Bloodless Sword

There was no moon that night but, when their eyes were accustomed to it, enough starlight to see their way in the dark. There was no sign of the retainers in the cemetery or the little wood, and the two of them had to walk all the way to the main road before they found them, clustered together with a few lanterns in their midst, exactly where they had left them earlier on, their horses still tethered to the trees behind them.

'Here's Miss Chen back/ one of them called out as they approached. 'No Sir Zheng. I wonder what's happened to him.'

A tall, thin figure slipped out from their midst, moving with a speed and suddenness that made Trinket jump.

'Where is Sir Zheng?' he demanded, in a high, unpleasant voice.

He had his back to the light, so Trinket couldn't see his face, though he had thrust it forward so aggressively that it was only a few inches from his own.

'He—he was carried off by a troop of Manzi tribesmen/ said Trinket. 'We're afraid they may be going to eat him.'

'Manzi tribesmen?' said the man scornfully. 'What would Manzi tribesmen be doing in the North China Plain?'

'We don't know/ said the Green Girl. 'But they really were. Do please let's try to rescue him.'

'How long ago did this happen?'

'Not very long/ said the Green Girl. We started walking quite soon after they left.'

'Which way did they go?'

'Hard to say. I'm surprised you didn't hear them.' • • •

The thin man thought for a moment.

They must have cut across the fields to meet the road further south.'

Without another word, he jumped on his horse and galloped off into the darkness.

'Who's he? the Green Girl asked one of the men.

'Sir Zheng's Shifu/ said the older retainer who had spoken to them earlier. 'His name is Feng Xifan. The Bloodless Sword. He's a world champion. He'll get Sir Zheng back all right, don't you worry.'

'Why ever didn't you send him to the temple?' the Green Girl asked him.

'He only arrived a few minutes before you did. We sent a carrier pigeon to Hejianfu

yesterday asking him to come and join us/

'So this Feng Shifu was in Hejianfu/ said Trinket. 'How come we didn't see him at the congress?'

The men looked at each other sheepishly and did not answer. Trinket guessed that his presence there had been a secret. It was beginning to look as if one half of the people at the congress had gone there for the purpose of spying on the other half.

Trinket and the Green Girl were by now exhausted. Trinket borrowed a saddle-blanket to lie down on, but the Green Girl was too worried about Sir Zheng to rest and would only sit down on a corner of it while they waited. Trinket dozed off fitfully from time to time, and when the sound of hooves and the excited cries of the retainers welcoming Feng and Zheng's return suddenly jolted him into full wakefulness, he had no idea whether he had been lying there for one hour or two hours or half the night.

'Still in one piece, then?' he asked as Zheng dismounted. 'No bite-marks?'

Zheng stared at him stonily, unaware that he was supposed to have been eaten.

'Who is this boy?' asked Feng.

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'Miss Chen's brother-in-arms/ Zheng told him.

'Humph.'

Trinket had a better view of the man now. He had a yellow, cadaverous face with a little forked beard and eyes like narrow slits. He looked more like someone in an advanced stage of tuberculosis than a famous fighting man.

'Did you kill the Manzi leader?' Trinket asked him.

'They weren't Manzi,' he said curtly. 'Bogus.' : : 'But they were speaking the Manzi language.'

'Bogus/ said Feng again, and turned from Trinket to address Zheng, not deigning to waste words on a mere boy.

'Sir Zheng, you must be tired,' he said. 'Before we do anything else, I suggest that we go to that temple, so that you can rest a bit.'

'I think we had better hurry back,' said the Green Girl. 'If Shifu wakes up and finds that we aren't there, she will be worried.'

'Yes, we ought to be getting back/ Trinket agreed.

The Green Girl looked pleadingly at Zheng, obviously hoping that he would go with them.

'I think perhaps we ought to go straight to the inn and have something to eat/ he said, in answer to her unspoken entreaty. 'We can have a good sleep after we have eaten.'

The horses were untethered, and when everyone had mounted, they set off at a brisk walking pace along the road to the inn. Riding along beside Sir Zheng, Trinket had to listen to a lot of boasting about his Shifu, Feng Xifan, but gathered that this military paragon had not succeeded in harming Yang Yizhi.

To Peking

It was dawn when they got to the inn and the White Nun was already up. She had guessed that the Green Girl would try to drag Trinket off to rescue Zheng and had not been unduly concerned when she found that the two of them were missing. As soon as Zheng had finished introducing his Shifu, she told him that she had important business to attend to and was resolved to leave with her disciples straight away. He was very much taken aback. 'But Your Reverence, I was so looking forward to spending some more time in your company/ he protested. 'I have time on my hands at the moment. Couldn't I travel with you

a little longer?'

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The White Nun shook her head.

Travelling with people in holy orders has disadvantages for both sides/ she said; and after a very perfunctory leave-taking, she hustled her two charges into the carriage, issued a brief order to the coachman, and drove away. While Zheng stood open-mouthed at the roadside watching them go, the Green Girl looked out at him with tear-filled eyes.

'Where are we going, Shifu?' Trinket asked.

'Peking/ said the White Nun. After a pause she added:

'If that young man tries to follow us, I forbid either of you to speak to him. If I catch either of you doing so, I shall strike him down.'

'But why?' said the Green Girl, startled by the extraordinary severity of the threat.

'Because I say so/ said the White Nun. 'I like peace and quiet. I don't like people round me chattering all the time.'

All this was music to Trinket's ears. Dear Shifu! He resolved in future to pray to the Buddha for her health every single day of his life! Impulsively he bent down and kissed her hand.

'Don't do that!' she cried, snatching it away; but there was a tiny smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. It was more than twenty years since anyone had kissed her hand. This further example of the nun's favouritism added to the bitterness the Green Girl already felt at being separated from her beloved Zheng. A big tear rolled down her cheek.

Now that the three of them were travelling on their own, the journey was uneventful. They reached Peking within a few days and found a quiet hostelry in the East City. As soon as they were settled, the White Nun called Trinket into her room and barred the door.

Trinket/ she said when they were alone together, 'can you guess why we are here?'

'I suppose it's to do with those Sutras/ he said.

'Exactly. I can't see much good coming of that congress we went to. Killing Wu Sangui will not get rid of the Tartars. But if we had all the Sutras and then issued a call for a patriotic rising, there is just a chance that we might drive the Tartars out. A Ming Restoration is still a possibility. I need another month, though, to nurse back my inner strength before I can go to the Palace and look for the other seven.'

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'I could go first/ said Trinket. 'You never know, I might pick up some clues.'

She nodded.

'You are an intelligent boy. It would be wonderful if you could.'

Trinket was so touched that he nearly blurted out that five of the missing Sutras were already in his hands; but then he thought of Kang Xi and what a good friend he had been to him. Depriving a best friend of his Empire was not the sort of thing that any of his favourite heroes would have done. She saw his hesitation but attributed it to fear of failure.

'Don't worry if you can't find out anything useful,' she said. 'Man proposes, Heaven disposes. We can only do our best. It's a very difficult task and I shan't at all blame you if you don't succeed. By the way,' she added, as she unbarred the door to let him out, 'you

won't say anything about this to Ah Kor, will you?'

'Funny!' he thought, as he went off to his own room. 'Ah Kor is so beautiful and so lovable, but Shifu doesn't seem to like her as much as she likes me.'

The Emperor receives a Revelation

Early next morning Trinket entered the Palace and appeared before the Emperor. Although Kang Xi knew by now that he was alive and well, having recently had news of him from Dolong, he was none the less delighted to have him back, eager to know how he had escaped from the clutches of the 'evil nun', as he had learnt to call his would-be assassin. He was also anxious to discover if Trinket knew on whose behalf she had tried to assassinate him. Needless to say, Trinket was ready with a story. It was the Satrap, Wu Sangui, that she was working for, Trinket told him. While he was still her captive, she had been visited by someone called Yang Yizhi, also working for the Satrap, and he had been able to overhear the two of them talking together. It appeared that the nun had lost all her family during the Manchu invasion. The Satrap had shown some kindness to her and she had gladly undertaken the murderous mission he sent her on as a means of avenging their deaths. Yang had told her that he, too, had received kindness from the Satrap. The Satrap had done something for his father, and for a long time he had been his devoted follower. But then he had discovered that the Satrap was plotting against the Emperor and hoping to become

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Emperor himself. Yang had by this time come to realize that the young Manchu Emperor was a wise and benevolent ruler and that the Chinese people were much better off under him than they would be under the cruel and capricious Satrap. After this the two of them, Yang and the nun, had had a long and earnest discussion, some of which he had not been able to hear, but the upshot was that they both decided that in future, if there was any further attempt on the Emperor's life, they would not only do nothing to support it but would actually prevent it by killing the assassin.

Trinket made up this entire rigmarole up in the hope that, if Yang Yizhi or the White Nun ever fell into the hands of the Manchu authorities, there was a reasonable chance that they would survive. Kang Xi had nodded several times throughout this recital and now remarked that these sounded like sensible people and that if this Yang Yizhi were ever to leave the Satrap and offer his services to the Court, he would personally see to it that he was rewarded with suitable employment and rank.

Trinket went on to say that, from what he had heard, the Satrap appeared to be plotting joint action with the Zhengs of Taiwan. The possibility that his all but autonomous vassal in the West might one day join forces with his most powerful enemy in the East had for some time past been giving the Young Emperor nightmares, and Trinket's fabrication produced an explosion of anger and a whole stream of 'tamardy's'. But when Trinket suggested that on the Zheng side Zheng Keshuang and his Shifu Feng were the most dangerous ones, whereas Chen Jinnan, their military counsellor, was somewhat of Yang Yizhi's persuasion—a good man who had become aware that the young Manchu Emperor was a wise and benevolent ruler and who might one day be persuaded to defect—the Emperor was not impressed. He knew all about Feng Xifan. He even knew that his nom de guerre was the Bloodless Sword. But he also knew about the Helmsman, in his view a far more dangerous enemy, and dismissed Trinket's estimate of him as that of an ill-informed boy whose judgement was not to be trusted. Trinket thought it wisest not to pursue the subject. A

silence followed during which Kang Xi paced to and fro in the study, his hands clasped behind his back. Suddenly he stopped and turned to face Trinket again.

'Laurie, tell me something. Would you be prepared to go to Yunnan for me?'

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Trinket was startled. This was rather more than he had bargained for.

'You mean to find out what Wu Sangui is up to?' Kang Xi nodded.

'I know this is dangerous, but you are young. I don't think Wu would feel threatened by you. Anyway, you've got this man Yang there to look after you.'

'I'm not afraid of the danger/ said Trinket. 'It's the thought of leaving you. After all, I've only just got back.' Kang Xi nodded.

'I know. I feel the same way as you do. But an Emperor can't always do as he likes. If I could do as I liked, I'd go with you to Yunnan. I'd take hold of Wu by the beard while you held his arms behind him, and I'd say, "Tamardy, Wu Sangui! Do you surrender?"'

Trinket laughed.

'All right,' he said. 'When I get to Yunnan, I'll try to think of some way of persuading him to come to Peking. Then the two of us can deal with him here!'

'I doubt you'd be able to. He's too crafty,' said Kang Xi, laughing. He paused a moment. 'I tell you what, though. I think I know what would get him here. I'll marry Princess Ning to his son. He'll have to come then.'

'But that's doing him a favour, isn't it?' said Trinket. 'Not at all. It's that vile woman's daughter I'm thinking about. When the time comes and Wu and his family are executed for treason, she'll lose her head too, along with all the rest.'

Only a short while ago, Trinket reflected, Princess Ning had been the Emperor's favourite sister. Now he hated her. It was because of her mother, the false Empress Dowager, who had killed Kang Xi's own mother and brought about the mental collapse of his father.

'As for that vile woman who murdered my mother,' said Kang Xi, pursuing the same vengeful line of thought, 'we'll say that the Princess came to a bad end because her mother didn't bring her up properly. She can't be executed, but she'll be forced to take her own life.'

Trinket judged that the time was now ripe for some revelations.

'She's not who you think she is,' he said. 'What do you mean?' said Kang Xi, puzzled.

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'She's not really the Empress Dowager.' 'Not the Empress Dowager? I don't understand you.' Kang Xi listened open-mouthed while Trinket told him that a maid-of-honour, acting on his behalf, had discovered that the person whom Kang Xi now called 'that vile woman' was an impostor who was keeping the real Empress Dowager a prisoner. The maid-of-honour story was a sudden inspiration. He couldn't very well tell Kang Xi about Aunt Tao and the White Nun.

'Where is this maid-of-honour?' Kang Xi asked him. His voice was shaking and there were beads of sweat on his brow.

'At the bottom of a well,' said Trinket. 'I didn't like to do it, but it seemed to me that this was something that mustn't be allowed to go further.'

Kang Xi was silent a moment, then nodded. 'You did right, though I'm sorry for her. Have

her body taken out of the well as soon as possible and given a decent burial. And see to it that something is done for her parents.'

He got up and took two swords down from the wall, one of which he handed to Trinket. 'We must deal with this business straight away,' he said, '— just die two of us. We don't want any of the women or eunuchs to know about it.'

The Young Emperor, having learned all he knew of Martial Arts from the false Empress Dowager, felt sure she would prove a dangerous enemy. Trinket didn't let on that in actual fact her brush with the White Nun had left her practically harmless. It was agreed, therefore, that as soon as they entered the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity, Trinket should seize hold of her and Kang Xi immobilize her by cutting off one of her arms, after which he could question her at leisure.

'Shouldn't we have some guards with us?' said Trinket. 'She's a very dangerous woman. I wouldn't like to think what would happen to Your Majesty if she managed to slip out of my grasp.' After thinking a bit, Kang Xi nodded.

'I suppose you're right. But if we do take guards with us, they'll have to be killed afterwards, to make sure that nobody hears about this.'

He summoned eight of his guards to accompany them to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. When they arrived, he stationed them in the garden outside the Hall with orders to wait there until they were called. As he and Trinket entered the building, the ladies-in-

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waiting and eunuchs knelt in silent rows to greet them. Kang Xi ordered them to wait outside in the garden and under no circumstances to come inside. The women and eunuchs tremblingly obeyed.

'Let me go in first,' said Trinket. The Emperor is too important a person to take risks.' Knowing that the false Empress Dowager was powerless against him, Trinket could afford to be heroic, but Kang Xi's knuckles were white as he grasped his sword. He need not have worried, for when they entered the bedchamber there was no one there, and the plan they had made had instantly to be abandoned.

Then they noticed that the bed-curtains had been drawn. The Empress Dowager was inside resting. She must have heard them enter, for her voice addressed them quaveringly from behind the curtains.

'It's a long time since Your Majesty has been to see me. How have you been keeping?'

'I was told that you hadn't been too well lately,' said Kang Xi. 'I thought I'd come over to see how you were.' He turned to Trinket. 'Draw back the curtains so that I can have a look at Her Majesty.'

'No, don't!' said the false Empress Dowager. 'It's only a cold I've got, but I have to be careful of draughts.'

Trinket made signs indicating that he would ignore this request, throw back the curtains and seize her, and that the Emperor must be ready as he did so to strike at her with his sword; but just at that moment Kang Xi experienced a sudden loss of nerve.

'I know she's done all those terrible things,' he thought, 'but suppose Laurie's wrong about her being an impostor? However wicked she is, I can't raise my hand against the Empress Dowager.'

He shook his head and gestured to Trinket to step aside.

'I'm not happy about this cold,' he said. 'I want to see if you've got a fever or not.'

As he said this he stepped forward boldly and threw back the bed-curtains. The woman who looked up at him was gaunt and hollow-eyed.

'I shouldn't have doubted Laurie,' he thought. This isn't the Empress Dowager: it is an impostor. She wasn't expecting a visit, so she hasn't bothered to put her disguise on.'
'You've lost weight,' he said.

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'I haven't been eating well,' she said. 'Ever since we got back from Wutai, I can only pick at my food.'

Kang Xi's mind was working quickly.

'Look, look!' he shouted excitedly. There's a big rat behind that carpet.'

He pointed to the hanging carpet that concealed the closet in which Trinket said they had found the real Empress Dowager.

There are no rats in here,' said the false Empress Dowager; but Trinket had already rushed over and rolled up the carpet by tugging on the tasselled cord.

'Rat or no rat,' said Kang Xi, 'I'm sure I heard something in there. Better open it, Laurie, and have a look.'

Trinket tried the fastening, but it was locked.

'What sort of game are you two playing at?' said the false Empress Dowager testily. 'You can see I'm not well. I'm not in the mood for all this horseplay in my bedroom.'

'Game? That's it!' said Kang Xi gaily. 'It's Princess Ning again. We were playing hide-and-seek and I couldn't find her. I bet she's hiding in that closet. Can you tell us where we can find the key?'

'I've told you, I'm not in the mood for this foolery,' said the false Empress Dowager. 'Now please just get out of here and leave me in peace.'

'It could be an assassin,' said Kang Xi excitedly. 'Better force the lock, Laurie.'

Trinket's metal-slicing dagger made quick work of the lock, but when he looked inside the closet he found only the bedding that the captive Empress Dowager had been lying in.

'She must have killed her,' he thought.

Rummaging among the bedclothes for some sign of their former occupant, he thought he saw the corner of a book. Sure enough, when he lifted the bedclothes up, there underneath was a copy of the now familiar Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. He covered it up again hastily and glanced round to see if Kang Xi had noticed. But Kang Xi was staring fixedly at a hump in the coverlet of the false Empress Dowager's bed—an extremely large hump that could not possibly be part of her anatomy.

Kang Xi at once assumed that the hump must be the real Empress Dowager. He had better act quickly, he thought, before the false one decided to kill her—if she had not done so already.

Why!' he cried, striving as best he could to give an impression

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of boyish glee, 'you've had the Princess there with you all the time, hidden inside your bed! Laurie, come here and pull her out!'

Trinket rushed over and plunged a hand beneath the covers. But what it made contact with, to his considerable astonishment, was not the real Empress Dowager but a man's hairy leg which presently shot out from under the covers and kicked him hard in the chest. As he reeled backwards with a cry of pain, an extraordinary, comical figure bounced out of the bed. It was a naked man, but his body was so extremely fat and his legs so extremely short that he looked more like a huge ball of flesh than a human being. He gathered up the false Empress Dowager, bedclothes and all, in his stumpy arms and shot out of the bedchamber,

running, in spite of his burden and his dwarfish legs, at what seemed like superhuman speed. Three of the eight guards outside the building were knocked flying by him as he passed; the other five pursued, but he was over the garden wall in a trice and out of sight. Kang Xi, who had followed, called to them to come back and wait outside as before. Trinket meantime, having recovered from the first shock of the blow, had had time to go back to the closet, retrieve the Sutra from underneath the bedding, and hide it inside his gown.

Kang Xi re-entered the bedchamber.

'So what do you make of that?'

'It looked like a monster,' said Trinket, 'A spook of some sort.'

'No, no, it was a man,' said Kang Xi. 'Didn't you see? Very short and fat, but it was a man all right. It must have been her lover.'

Trinket grinned, but Kang Xi looked serious.

'Where's the real Empress, then?'

There's a secret compartment in the bed/ said Trinket.

He threw off the bedclothes and removed the lid of the receptacle in which the false Empress Dowager had kept her treasures, but this time the only thing in it was the gold-inlaid Emei stiletto which had been Hai Dafu's undoing. He thought for a bit.

'We could try taking the bottom of the bed out.'

Kang Xi helped him lift out the boards which made up the base of the bed. It was, as it turned out, an inspired guess, for there underneath, lying on a narrow mattress with only a thin coverlet over her, was the body of a woman. There could only have been a few inches between the bed-boards and her face.

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'Light a candle,' said Kang Xi. (It was too dark inside the bed to make out who she was.) What they saw when Trinket brought a lighted candle to shine on her were the rounded features that the false Empress Dowager in her disguise had tried to imitate. They helped her up into a sitting position. The woman opened her eyes but then quickly closed them again, dazzled by the light.

'Who . . .' she said faintly, 'who . . . ?'

This is His Majesty the Emperor,' said Trinket. 'He has come to rescue Your Majesty.'

The Emperor?' said the woman, then gave a great sobbing cry and threw her arms round Kang Xi's neck.

Trinket tactfully drew away from them. Still holding the candle, he went slowly and deliberately round the large bedchamber, looking in every corner to make absolutely certain that there was no other living soul there but themselves, then, placing the candle on the table, he slipped noiselessly from the room, closing the door behind him as he went.

'I guess they've got plenty to say to each other,' he thought. They won't want me hanging around.'

Outside, the eight guards were still standing stiffly to attention where the Emperor had left them. Behind them in rows stood the eunuchs and ladies-in-waiting, all of them with fear in their faces. Trinket walked some distance into the garden and then beckoned to them to join him.

'Now, listen,' he said, when they had gathered round. The Emperor has been playing hide-and-seek with Her Highness the Princess Ning. Just for a laugh the Princess disguised herself as—as a human meat-ball. I expect you all saw her just now, running away in her disguise.'

'Oh yes,' said one of the guards who was quicker on the uptake than the others. 'She's a

great one for dressing up, is Princess Ning. She could make herself look like anything.'

'Well, I just thought I'd better warn you,' said Trinket: 'His Majesty doesn't much like the idea of people getting to know about these pranks of theirs. It makes him look a bit silly. So if you feel like talking to anyone about what you've just seen, remember it'll probably cost you your head. You get my drift?'

'We won't say a word,' they chorused fervently, guards, eunuchs, and women speaking almost with one voice. Trinket nodded.

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'Good.' He turned to the three injured guards. 'So what happened to you lot?'

'Weapons training, sir,' said one of them. 'We were practising together and it got a bit out of hand.'

'Grandmother's!' said Trinket. 'They're your own mates, not the enemy. In future you'll have to be a bit more careful.'

'Yes, sir,' they said. 'Definitely, sir.'

'Right then,' said Trinket. 'You can each draw twenty taels sick pay to mend your heads.'

Thank you, sir. Thank you, Colonel/ said the men gratefully. Like all the others present, they knew that witnesses of an Imperial scandal were normally silenced by being summarily executed and that Trinket was doing his best to save them.

'Now listen, all of you,' said Trinket, 'remember what I said. If you want to keep a head on your shoulders, not a word of this hide-and-seek business to anyone. If you think there's a danger of your talking about it in your sleep, better cut your tongue out. And while we're about it, you'd better give me your names.'

They did so, one after the other, first the guards, then the ladies-in-waiting, and then the eunuchs.

'Good,' said Trinket. 'From now on, then, if I hear so much as a word of this anywhere, you're all of you for the chop—the whole lot of you.'

As he was about to leave them, they fell on their knees and kowtowed.

'Thank you, Goong-goong,' they said, 'thank you. You've saved our lives.'

'Nonsense,' said Trinket. 'It's the Emperor you've got to thank.'

He went back to the building and sat on the steps outside the door. He must have been sitting there for all of half an hour when he heard Kang Xi's voice calling him to come in. Entering the bedchamber, he found Kang Xi and the Empress Dowager sitting side by side on the edge of the bed and holding hands. He went straight up to them and kowtowed.

'Congratulations, Your Majesties. Your Majesty, I've told the thirty-five people outside who saw Princess Ning in her disguise that if a word of this hide-and-seek business gets about, the whole lot of them will lose their heads. I think I've frightened them so

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much that there won't be much danger of their talking. What do you think, Your Majesty? Do you want them silenced? If so, it would be better to do it straight away.'

Kang Xi seemed to be hesitating, but the Empress Dowager quickly intervened.

'My dear, this is such a happy occasion, we mustn't spoil it by taking people's lives.'

'You're right,' said Kang Xi. 'A service of thanksgiving to the Buddha is what we should be thinking about right now.'

'And this boy,' said the Empress Dowager, 'we owe him so much. He too must be thanked.'

'Nothing to thank me for, Your Majesty,' said Trinket modestly. 'I blame myself for not having found out sooner what was going on and saved Your Majesty some suffering.'

The Empress Dowager, at the thought of her sufferings, began to cry.

'He is a very good boy,' she said to Kang Xi. 'You must do something special for him, to show our appreciation.'

'Well now, Laurie, what's it going to be?' said Kang Xi. 'I've already given you about as much promotion as I can. I think we'll have to make you a viscount. That means you're a member of the aristocracy now: Lord Wei.'

Trinket knelt and kowtowed to each of them in turn, first the Empress Dowager, then the Emperor.

Thank you, Your Majesty. Thank you Your Majesty.'

Kang Xi dismissed him with a friendly wave of the hand.

'Viscount,' Trinket thought as he left the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. 'What good will that do me? Don't suppose there's any money in it.'

Fatty's Sutra

When he got back to his own room, he took out the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections from inside the front of his gown to have a look at it. The silk-covered binding of this copy was blue with a scarlet border. He remembered hearing Aunt Tao say that her teacher was attempting to steal a copy of the Sutra from the Chief Clansman of the Bordered Blue Banner when he was mortally wounded by a leading member of the Mystic Dragon Sect. This must have been the copy.

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Trinket knew that the false Empress Dowager, or Mao Dongzhu as he must now learn to call her, was a member of the Sect and it seemed likely that this fat lover of hers was also a member. He couldn't imagine what the history of the Sutra could have been during the intervening years since Aunt Tao's teacher made his unsuccessful attempt to steal it, but it seemed likely that the Mao lady's pumpkin-shaped lover had come by it quite recently and had called in to see her on his way back to Snake Island to share his triumph with her and spend a few nights with her in bed. Presumably she had turned the unfortunate Empress Dowager out of her closet to make him a hiding-place, which is why he had found the Sutra there under the bedding.

'It's going to be a bit awkward if the two of them go to Snake Island now and tell the Master what's happened,' he thought. 'I'd better send him this copy, perhaps with one or two of the others, to keep him happy—after taking the bits of map out of the cover, of course. They won't be much use to him without the pieces, but we don't know anything about that, do we? Maybe he doesn't either. If he does, he hasn't said anything to me about it.'

'On the other hand, suppose Fatty comes back here for the Sutra? Could be dangerous. I'd better tell Dolong to double the guards.'

His chest was hurting and he could no longer think very clearly. He decided that he had had enough excitement for one day, so, with those two resolutions in mind for acting on in the morning, he went to bed and fell asleep almost instantly.

CHAPTER 19

In which Trinket the Viscount travels to Yunnan as an Imperial Marriage Envoy



The Helmsman and the Bloodless Sword

A couple of days later, Trinket slipped out to see the Triads, and found them in a state of great excitement.

'We're expecting a visit from the Helmsman,' Brother Li told him. 'He was already in Tianjin when we last heard from him. He should reach Peking some time today.'

That's wonderful!' said Trinket, remembering, with a sinking heart, that he had done no training. The Triads bustled about, preparing for their hero's arrival. Some went out to buy wine, some slaughtered and dressed chickens for a meal. Towards evening, Trinket took Brother Gao aside and asked him for some tools.

THE DEER AND THE CAULDRON
The Third Book

A Martial Arts novel

by Louis Cha

Translated and edited

by John Minford

with Rachel May

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For my mother, Patricia
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This Third Book finally brings the English Trinket trilogy to a close. Apologies to all (including the author) who have had to wait so long to follow their anti'hero into well'earned early retirement. Special thanks to Anastasia Edwards

at Oxford University Press, who has shown extraordinary patience, and provided

enormous doses of sympathetic encouragement and enthusiasm at crucial times.

I hope Trinket's antics in this volume will entertain. For all his faults, he remains, in my opinion, along with Monkey, Jia Baoyu, and Ah Q, one of the unforgettable characters in Chinese fiction. He is the heart of the book. That is why, although this third volume (like the second) is abridged from the Chinese original (it represents volumes 4 and 5 of the Chinese edition), it has been my goal throughout to preserve as much as possible of Trinket himself, his

words and deeds, his (often obnoxious) personality, his feelings (or lack of them).

My Shifu David Hawkes has once again gallantly contributed his kungfu skills to the completion of this saga. And my ever'loyal sister'in'arms, Rachel May, has in this volume gone far beyond the call of editorial duty. Without her creative collaboration and ingenuity, the book would quite simply never have been finished.

Fontmarty, August 2002

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To the extent that *Deer* ('s a historical novel, the action takes place between roughly 1663 and 1689

1559 Birth in the North'Eastern Long White Mountains of Nurhachi, the Exalted Founder of the Manchu Imperial House of Gioro, descended from a noble family of the Jurchen Tartars (rulers of China in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the Jin or Golden dynasty).

1592 Birth of Abahai, eighth son of Nurhachi.

1572'1620 Reign of the Ming Emperor Wan Li; beginnings of the Ming (Bright) dynastic decline.

1616 Nurhachi declares himself Khan or First Emperor of the Later Jin dynasty and presides over a growing Manchu state in the North'East.

1626 Death of Nurhachi, who is succeeded by Abahai, the Illustrious Ancestor.

1628 Accession of Chong Zhen, grandson of Wan Li, and last Emperor of the native (Han) Ming dynasty.

1629 Patriotic Ming general Mao Wenlong (in *Deer* he is the father of the Old Whore, Mao Dongzhu) is treacherously executed in his island fortress by Marshal Yuan Chonghuan (the father of Cha's fictitious and legendary swordsman Yuan Chengzhi).

1630 Yuan Chonghuan himself is executed, on charges trumped up by partisans of the corrupt eunuch Wei Zhongxian.

1636 Rise of rebel movements in northern and central China, including that led by Li Zicheng (General Bash'em); Abahai proclaims himself Emperor of the Qing dynasty, in the Manchu capital Mukden (present'day Shenyang).

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

XIII

1638 Birth of Fulin (later to be the Emperor Shun Zhi), fourth son of Abahai.

1644 Rebel leader Li Zicheng enters Peking; the Emperor Chong Zhen commits suicide; the Manchu army enters Peking, aided by the turncoat Satrap Wu and his

force of Chinese troops; beginning of the Manchu Qing dynasty proper in China

and of the reign of Shun Zhi.

1645 Massacre of Yangzhou.

1646'1647 Manchu conquerors try to consolidate their hold over central and southern China; Ming Princes (Pretenders) establish short-lived refugee courts in the South.

1654 Birth of Xuanye (later to be Emperor Kang Xi), second son of the Emperor Shun Zhi.

1659 Coxinga, leader of the anti-Manchu resistance, tries to take Nanking but fails.

1661 Death of Empress Donggo, the Emperor Shun Zhi's favourite consort; also supposed death of Emperor Shun Zhi.

1662 Accession of Kang Xi. Ming Pretender Prince Gui (Emperor Yong Li) is taken

prisoner in Burma and strangled in Kunming, with the connivance of Satrap Wu.

Coxinga moves his base to Taiwan. Death of Coxinga; formation, under Coxinga's

general, Helmsman Chen Jinnan, of the Triad Secret Society, committed to the overthrow of the Manchus and the restoration of the Ming Imperial House.

1662'1663 Inquisition surrounding the Ming History.

1663'1664 Dutch fleet helps Manchus drive Coxinga's son Zheng Jing from Fujian

to Taiwan; Manchu rule is established throughout mainland China.

1667 Kang Xi, aged thirteen, dismisses his Regents. 1669 Death of Oboi, formerly

Chief Regent.

XIV

1673 Rebellion of Satrap Wu (Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces), Shang Zhixin (Guangdong Province), and Geng Jingzhong (Fujian Province)-the Three Feudatories.

1678 Dzungar Prince Galdan invades Eastern Turkestan, taking Kashgar and Yarkand, then (1679) Kami and Turfan.

1681 Three Feudatories are finally put down; death of Zheng Jing.

1682 Death of Fifth Dalai Lama. The Grand Lama Sangge seizes power, and supports Galdan's territorial expansion.

1683 Surrender of the Pescadores Islands; Manchus finally conquer Taiwan.

1686 Kang Xi calls unsuccessful conference of Mongols and Tibetans.

1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk signed between Manchus and Russians, defining their border.

1690 War finally breaks out between Galdan and the Manchus.

1696 Galdan is defeated by Kang Xi's army at the battle of Jao Modo.

For an excellent, readable account of the historical background to , see the first three chapters of Jonathan Spence's book, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990). A colourful earlier account of this period is to be found in Backhouse and Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (London: Heinemann, 1914), chapters 1-10.

GLOSSARY OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

Where historical dates are given, they are based on Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, 1944)

Ah (as in Ah Ki) An affectionate diminutive. AH KI see Blue Girl AH KOR see Green Girl

AJIGE Commander of the Vanguard Regiment, until replaced by Colonel Tai.

These
crack troops were always feuding with Dolong's Valiants (shades of the King's Musketeers and the Cardinal's Guards in Dumas' The Three Musketeers, a work
Louis Cha greatly admires).
ALEXIUS MIKHAILOVICH Second Tsar of the Romanov dynasty, reigned 1645'1676. See
Sophia, Princess.
AMOY Important port; headquarters of Coxinga in southern Fujian Province.
AN FU GARDENS Literally, Park of Peaceful Prosperity. This was one of the Satrap's extravagant pleasure gardens, put at the disposal of Princess Ning during her stay in Kunming. Situated in the western suburbs of the city, it is said (historically) to have housed his large library.
AO BIAO The Blue Tiger. One of the Mu Family retainers, the much tattooed disciple of Shaker Wu.
BASH'EM, General Li Zicheng (1605'1645), rebel leader who drove the last of the
Ming Emperors from Peking in 1644, only to be ejected in his turn by Satrap Wu
and the Manchus. His subsequent fate is unknown. One legend says that he did not
die in 1645, but escaped to a monastery.
BA LANGXING Officer in Satrap Wu's army.
XVI

BATAI, Lord Grand Chancellor of the Hall of Middle Harmony, an elderly Manchu
statesman, simultaneously holding the post of Minister of the Board of Rites.

BLUE DRAGON MARSHAL Xu Xueting; elder of Mystic Dragon Sect.

BLUE GIRL Wang Ah Ki, twenty'year'old disciple of the White Nun, in love with
Prince Galdan.

BODONICH, Prince Leader of delegation of ministers and dignitaries sent to negotiate with Princess Sophia, after the mutiny.

BRONZE HAT LANE Alley in central Peking, location of Trinket's palace.

CHANG, Princess see White Nun CHEN YUANYUAN see Peerless Consort

CHIRONOV One of the musketeers sent to guard Princess Sophia in the hunting lodge outside Moscow; later promoted to Captain and sent east to Fort Albazin, with Vobolsky.

CHONG ZHEN, Emperor (1611'1644) Zhu Youjian, last Emperor of the Ming dynasty, who succeeded to the throne in 1627, aged sixteen, inheriting an empire too poor to stand the expense of maintaining the armies needed at the front. Wholesale desertion and banditry plagued his reign, and indecision and lack of confidence prevented the formation of a strong government. In 1629, his loyal general Yuan Chonghuan (one of the last hopes for the survival of the Ming in the face of the growing Manchu threat) was unjustly put to death. This was followed by the ever-increasing encroachment of the Manchus from the north-east, while from 1630 onwards China was ravaged by desperate hordes of bandits. Chong Zhen hanged himself on Coal Hill when the rebel leader Li Zicheng entered Peking.

CHRYSANTHEMUM SCENT Feng Xifan's fifth concubine.

GLOSSARY OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

CLAN LODGE Triad Lodge of Guangxi Province.

XVII

COXINGA (1624'1662) This was the Western name (sometimes written Koxinga, based on the Fukienese pronunciation of a tide Guo'xing'ye given him by the Ming Court) for the naval warrior Zheng Chenggong, Marshal Zheng, first Prince of Yanping, leader until his death of the anti-Manchu resistance, cryptically referred to as Dragon Brother by the Triads. His father was a Fukienese pirate and adventurer, his mother Japanese; the remnants of his army are supposed to have formed the first Triad Lodges. He is the subject of a famous play by the Japanese dramatist Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653'1725). Though Coxinga has passed into myth as a great hero, history seems to indicate that especially towards the end of his life he was guilty of the sort of paranoid'maniacal excesses we have

seen more recently in the dotage of Chairman Mao. In Deer we see an example of this in the fate of Shi Lang's family.

DARLI Manchu official, Senior Academician sent as an envoy to Satrap Wu. DOLONG Colonel and Chief Intendant of the Palace Guards, a member of the Plain White Banner.

DONG, Lady Principal wife of Coxinga, and mother of Zheng Jing. She favoured

Zheng Jing's second son, Zheng Keshuang (the Insufferable), over Zheng Kezang.

DOUBLET Pretty young orphaned maid given to Trinket by Widow Zhuang, as a reward

for having killed Oboi. A superb fighter, she becomes Trinket's devoted companion for the duration of the novel. Even when she may not have been mentioned for dozens of pages, she will never be far from the scene of the action, ever ready to save her Master from the jaws of certain death.

DUIKENA Manchu Grand Chancellor.

EMPRESS DOWAGER (Fake') Wife of Shun Zhi, daughter of the Mongol Prince Korcin,

of the Borjigit clan; referred to by Trinket as the Old Whore. It transpires during the course of the Second Book that the Old Whore is not in fact the real Empress, but an years.

EMPRESS DOWAGER Having emerged from her wardrobe'prison, she continues to lead a shadowy life in her apartments in the Forbidden City.

ENLIGHTENMENT, Shrine of Famous Zen Buddhist temple in the city of Yangzhou.

FANG YI Mu Family retainer; beautiful sister'in'arms of the Little Countess, much admired by Trinket. As it transpires in the Second Book, she is also a member of the Mystic Dragon Sect, and is entrusted with the job of luring Trinket to their island lair.

FAT DHUTA Once or twice referred to earlier in the novel as Bag'of'Bones. Originally a very fat disciple of the Mystic Dragon Sect; becomes excessively thin and tall after taking the Leopard Embryo Pill. Tries to ambush Trinket and take him to Snake Island. Brother'in'arms of Thin Dhuta (Meatball, or Lump'of'Flesh).

FENG, Brother Feng Jizhong, Triad with superb kungfu skills, but of dubious

loyalty.

FENG, The Bloodless Sword Feng Xifan; general in the service of Zheng Jing; evil mentor (and father-in-law) of Zheng Keshuang; supreme master of Kunlun School of kungfu.

FUJIAN Rich south-eastern coastal province, origin of much Overseas Chinese emigration to places such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. Strategically important because it is directly opposite the island of Taiwan.

GALDAN ('1644'1697) Mongol prince, Bushktu Khan of the Dzungars (a tribe of the Eleuths or Western Mongols), with ambitions to rule over Chinese Turkestan. He has been described as 'an extraordinary character, a sort of unsuccessful Genghis Khan, who dreamed of re-establishing the old Mongol empire under the domination of his own Western Mongols.' (Grousset, History of the

e, p. 285) In his youth, he lived as a novice in Lhasa, and remained on cordial terms with the Tibetan Lamaists. He was finally defeated by Kang Xi's armies in 1696.

GAO YANCHAO Young Triad, member of the Green Wood Lodge. Trinket's contact man.

GENG JINGZHONG (died 1682) Chinese Bannerman, son of Geng Jimao (died 1671), like his father the Satrap of Fujian Province, later involved in the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories against Manchu rule. Historically, he and ten other generals who had supported the Satrap's rebellion were condemned by Kang Xi to the ultimate penalty of Lingering Death.

GIYESU see Prince Kang

GOLITSYN, General Governor of Fort Albazin, and lover of Princess Sophia.

GOLOVIN, Fyodor Alexeyevich Duke of Lomonosoff, Russian Envoy sent to negotiate peace with China.

GREEN GIRL Chen Ah Kor, beautiful sixteen-year-old disciple of the White Nun,

much admired by Trinket, but infatuated with the 'cad', Zheng Keshuang. She accompanies Trinket to Yunnan, disguised as a waiting-woman of Princess

Ning. It transpires in the course of the Third Book that she is in fact the daughter of Chen Yuanyuan, the Peerless Consort, and Li Zicheng, General Bash'em. But the White Nun (the Princess Royal) kidnapped her as a young girl, and trained her with a view to avenging the death of her (the White Nun's) own father (the Ming Emperor Chong Zhen), for which she held the Satrap responsible. At certain moments, Green acts as though the Satrap were indeed her father (see Chapter 24). In the Third Book she becomes one of Trinket's seven wives.

GU YANWU (1613'1682) Renowned Loyalist scholar and philosopher. The senior member of the group known as the Four Gentlemen of the Resistance. In the Second Book he is elected nominal head of the Anti'Manchu Resistance United Front (at the Rat Trap Congress in Hejianfu-see Chapter 18).

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GU ZHIZHONG Master of the Red Fire Lodge of Guizhou Province.

GUANGXI Wild mountainous province west of Guangdong. The Kang Xi Emperor once remarked 'There are smells so vile that they must be worse than the foul vapours of Guangxi . . .' (Spence, Emperor of China, p. 103).

GUI, Invalid Gui Zhong, consumptive man of middle years, with the mental age of a nine'year'old, but formidable Inner Force kungfu skills.

GUI, Old Lady Wife of Gui Xinshu, and mother of Invalid Gui. No mean fighter herself.

GUI, Prince (1623'1662) The Ming Pretender recognized by the Mu Family. Took the reign title Yong Li in Canton late in 1646, and from 1650 wandered with his refugee court in the South, finally escaping into Burma only to be handed over by the Burmese and put to death by Satrap Wu (on secret instructions received

from the Manchu Regent Oboi). His wife and mother embraced the Christian faith, and took the names Helen and Mary.

GUI XINSHU Old Gui, father of Invalid Gui, a vigorous eighty-year-old with a long, flowing white beard. A famed exponent in his day of the Mount Hua School of kungfu, known as the Matchless Knight, and brother-in-arms of Lady Iron Hand.

GUIZHOU Mountainous province north of Guangxi and east of Yunnan.

HATTY see Hatiemo

HATIEMO Mongol envoy sent by Prince Galdan to Yunnan, to negotiate an alliance with Satrap Wu. He falls into the hands of Trinket, who escorts him to Peking.

HE SHENG Young disciple of Rootless the Taoist, the Red Dragon

Marshal of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

HE YOU Chinese general in campaign leading up to Treaty of Nerchinsk.

HELMSMAN CHEN (died 1680) Chen Jinnan, supreme leader of the Triad Society, in command of the Taiwan resistance forces.

HO GARDEN Magnificent landscape garden in Yangzhou, belonging to a wealthy salt-merchant. Trinket is lodged there during his official visit to Yangzhou.

HONG, Leader Hong Antong, elderly Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

HONG, Madame Su Quan, beautiful young consort of Hong Antong, Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect. In the Third Book she becomes one of Trinket's seven wives.

HU YIZHI The 'Peasant'. A former champion, known as Hu the Gallant, famous for his good looks and Martial Arts prowess, but now in retirement from River and Lake. A dogged admirer of the Peerless Consort for over twenty years.

HUANG ZONGXI (1610'1695) Renowned Loyalist figure who fought alongside the Ming resistance, retiring in 1649 to a life of scholarship. His work Mingyi daifang lu (sometimes translated as The Way of the Prince), written in 1662, a book which Kang Xi praises to Trinket in Chapter 28, was an outstanding Confucian attempt to curb the authoritarian nature of Imperial rule, and introduce much-needed reforms into the Chinese political system. (See de Bary, The Sources of Chinese Tradition [New York, 1960], pp. 530'542, for extracts in translation.)

IRON HAND, Lady Lady Yellow Tunic, the woman warrior. Called Iron Hand because of the hook at the end of her right arm. Previously guru of the Five Poisons Sect, she then became a disciple of Yuan Chengzhi, and joined the Mount Hua School. She gives Trinket the poisoned darts, which prove to be invaluable in his later adventures.

XXII

IVAN Half-witted brother of Princess Sophia, made joint Tsar with Peter, under Princess Sophia's Regency.

JERKEN Manchu official, Chief Secretary of the Board of Rites, sent as an envoy to Satrap Wu.

RANG, Prince (1645'1697) Giyesu, great-grandson of Nurhachi; friend of Trinket's.

KANG XI, the boy Emperor (1654'1722) This was the reign title of the second Manchu Emperor; his personal name was Xuanye (which means roughly speaking Dark or Mysterious Effulgence- he calls himself Misty, for Trinket's benefit). He was the third son of the Emperor Shun Zhi, whom he succeeded at the age of eight. By the beginning of the Second Book he is rid of the overweening Regent Oboi, and has assumed the reins of power. The Third Book chronicles his true coming of age as a ruler, his victory over the Three Feudatories, and his attempt to win over the goodwill of the Chinese intelligentsia. Anyone interested in this

extraordinary and civilized contemporary of Louis XIV is advised to read Jonathan Spence's brilliant study, based on original documents, *Emperor of China: Self-portrait of K'ang'hsi* (London, 1974).

KONG SHANGREN (1648-1718) Descendant of Confucius, and author of the famous play *The Peach Blossom Fan*, set in the last days of the Ming dynasty (from which Beggar Wu sings an aria in Chapter 21).

KONG YOUDE (died 1652) A former general serving the Manchu cause. His daughter, Kong Sizhen (born c.1641), was held in great favour at court, and had even been granted the status of a minor princess on account of her father's services. She had married Sun Yarding.

KUANG TIANXIONG, Brother Triad from Red Fire Lodge of Guizhou Province.

KUNMING Capital of Yunnan Province, the Satrap's fief in southwestern China, where (as the Chinese say) it is spring four times a year.

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LAUREL ('Laurie Goong'goong') Junior eunuch in attendance on Old Hai, murdered and subsequently impersonated by Trinket. Kang Xi continues to refer to Trinket occasionally as Laurie.

LERGIYEN, Prince Fourth son and heir of the Manchu Prince Lekedehun (died 1652).

Manchu general in command of expeditionary force sent to combat the Satrap's rebellion.

LI, Brother Li Lishi, tall thin elderly Triad.

LI XIHUA Young scholar and kungfu adept, son of Prince Li Yan.

LI YAN Former counsellor to Bash'em Li during his rebellion; Bash'em had him

unjustly put to death, and for this his son Li Xihua swears to take vengeance.

LI ZICHENG see Bash'em

LIN XINGZHU Formerly a general in the Resistance, under Coxinga

(historically,
according to Hummel, he was one of Wu Sangui's generals, not Coxinga's);
trained
in the Ditang School of kungfu; he transferred his loyalties to the Manchu
cause
and played an important part in the campaign leading up to the Treaty of
Nerchinsk.

LITTLE COUNTESS Mu Jianping, younger sister of Mu Jiansheng, descended
from old

Duke Mu. In the Third Book, she becomes one of Trinket's seven wives.

LITTLE DOUBLE The alternative name suggested by Su Quan for Trinket's
daughter

(by the Princess Ning), after the God of Gambling has twice insisted on the
somewhat less feminine name Bench.

LIU DAHONG Shifu of the Mu Family, known on River and Lake
as the Iron Dragon.

LIU GUOXUAN General in Coxinga's regime in Taiwan, who
finally surrendered to the Manchus.

XXIV

LIU YIZHOU Member of the Mu Family, of pale complexion and questionable
courage;
in love with Fang Yi.

LIUZHOU Large prefectural city in central Guangxi Province. Famous for its
coffin boards.

LONG WHITE MOUNTAINS Mountain range between Manchuria and Korea;
place of origin
of the Aisin Gioro clan, to which the Imperial Manchu family belonged.

LOSHA An old Chinese name for Russia, which sounds a bit like Russia, but in
Chinese means Demon. The Chinese have historically been rather fond of
referring
to barbarians and foreigners as one sort of devil or another (hence Foreign
Devil).

LU, Doctor Lu Gaoxuan, senior member of the Mystic Dragon Sect; a man of
wide
reading and culture, and a connoisseur of calligraphy and painting.

LU LIULIANG (1629'1683) Loyalist scholar, one of the Four

Gentlemen of the Resistance.

MA BAO, Brigadier One of the Satrap's top officers.

MA CHAOXING Fat Triad Lodge Master of the Clan Lodge of Guangxi Province.

MA YOU Provincial Governor of Jiangsu Province.

MACAO From the sixteenth century to the late twentieth century, a tiny Portuguese enclave in southern Guangdong Province.

MALJI Manchu Viceroy of the Three Provinces of Jiangsu, Anhui, and Jiangxi.

MALLET Trinket's second son, by Su Quan (ex'Madame Hong). MAO DONGZHU see Empress Dowager (Fake') MEATBALL Thin Dhuta's principal nickname.

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MINGJU (1635'1708) Manchu Minister of the Board of War; Kang Xi's trusted advisor during the war against the Three Feudatories. His son, Nalan Xingde, became one of the great lyric poets of the Manchu dynasty (writing in Chinese). MOLO (died 1675) Manchu general in command of the western front against Satrap Wu.

MU FAMILY This was the common appellation for the powerful faction surrounding the descendants of Old Duke Mu (1342'1392), who had made the south'western province of Yunnan their personal fief throughout the Ming dynasty. Young Duke

Mu (died 1661) was a loyal supporter of the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui. The Mu

Family were implacably opposed to Satrap Wu, who after the arrival of the Manchus supplanted them in the south'west. The Family had its own distinctive style of kungfu.

MU JIANSHENG see Young Count

MU JIANPING see Little Countess

MU TIANYAN Provincial Treasurer of Jiangsu Province.

MUKDEN Capital of present'day Liaoning Province (the city is now known as Shenyang), the Manchu capital before the conquest of China.

MYSTIC DRAGON This fanatical Sect, with its powerful mantra'based kungfu, is

based on Snake Island. Details of the Sect emerge in the Second Book. It is divided into Five Branches, each having its own colour, and its own Dragon Marshal. Among other things, there has been a purge of the Sect's 'elders', in favour of the young, and more fanatical, 'acolytes'. It is explained that one of the ways in which the Leader, Hong Antong, maintains control over the members of his Sect is by giving them the powerful Leopard Embryo Pill, which then makes them dependent on the Leader (or Madame Hong) for regular doses of the Antidote.

NAN HUAIREN see Verbiest

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NATALIA Dowager Tsarina of Russia. See Sophia, Princess. NERCHINSK Russian settlement founded in the 1650s.

NING, Princess Emperor Kang Xi's fifteen' or sixteen'year'old tomboyish 'half'sister'. In actuality, nothing of the kind, but the daughter of Mao Dongzhu (the Fake'Empress Dowager) and a Han'Chinese father, Deng Bingchun. In the Third Book, she becomes one of Trinket's seven wives.

NURHACHI (1559'1626) The Grand Progenitor, founder of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty.

OBOI, Lord (died 1669) This Imperial Guardian and Former Regent was one of Dorgon's trusted men. He was elevated to the rank of Duke in 1656 and at the death of the Emperor Shun Zhi (1661) he was one of the Four Regents for the boy Emperor Kang Xi (with Soni, father of Songgotu; Ebilun; and Suksaha). He is arrested and put to death in the First Book.

OBSCURUS, Father Taoist Triad. Orphaned son of a frontier fur'trader shot dead by the Russians.

ORCHID SCENT One of Feng Xifan's concubines.

PEERLESS CONSORT, the Chen Yuanyuan; once a beautiful consort of the last Ming Emperor, Chong Zhen, she subsequently passed through the hands of Bash'em Li (the rebel Li Zicheng), and then Satrap Wu, who was totally infatuated with her.

When the Third Book begins, she is living outside Kunming in a hermitage, having been obliged to make way for the Satrap's principal wife.

PENG CUN (died 1701) Manchu general who, together with He You and Lin Xingzhu, played an important part in the military campaign leading up to the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

PETER the First (later the Great) see Sophia, Princess

POTLUCK ISLAND Small island ten miles west of Snake Island, so named by Trinket, who uses it as his base during the campaign

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against the Mystic Dragon Sect. Later he settles on the island with his seven wives.

PRINCE ZHENG see Zheng Jing

SIR ZHENG see Zheng Keshuang

QIAN, Butcher Triad, pork'butcher to the Palace.

RED FIRE LODGE Triad Lodge of Guizhou Province.

ROOTLESS, the Taoist Red Dragon Marshal; senior member of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

SABSU (died c.1700) Manchu military official, who played an important part in the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

SANGGE Chinese name for sDe'srid Sangs'rgya'rgya'mtsho, Tibetan Grand Lama,

formidable and somewhat sinister exponent of Tantric kungfu. Historically, Sangge was the Tepas, or Temporal Ruler, of Tibet, and seized absolute power after the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1682, allying himself with Galdan.

SCHALL, Adam von (1591'1666) One of the great Jesuits of the China Mission. Full

name, John Adam Schall von Bell. Chinese name, Tang Ruowang. German Jesuit

priest (by this time elderly), skilled in many technical fields, especially astronomy, who was greatly admired and trusted by Kang Xi's father, the Shun Zhi

Emperor. After Shun Zhi's 'death' in 1661, Schall was accused of high treason, but his death sentence (to be carried out by Lingering Death, or the Slow

Process) was commuted to house arrest, probably as the result of the pleading of

Shun Zhi's mother. (Our novelist takes certain liberties with historical fact, since it is highly improbable that Kang Xi, aged seven at the time, had anything to do with Schall's survival.) Before serving the Manchus, Schall had served the last Ming Emperor, and even at one point offered his services to the bandit leader Li Zicheng (see Bash'em), when Li had taken Peking and seemed set to become the next ruler of China.

XXVIII

SHANG KEXI (died 1676) Chinese Bannerman and general (his defection to the Manchus dated from 1633); Satrap of Guangdong Province.

SHANG ZHIXIN (died 1680) Son of Shang Kexi, whom he succeeded as overlord of Guangdong, when his father was old and sick. In 1676, he threw his father into prison for refusing to turn against the Manchus, and personally joined Satrap Wu's rebellion. Known to have been a cruel, licentious individual, he had a habit of having his personal enemies torn apart by hunting dogs. He was executed by Lingering Death.

SHEN, Old Elderly adept of the Mount Hua School, Shifu of Old Gui. A legendary figure greatly respected on River and Lake. He is chosen, in the Second Book, as President of the League for the Eradication of Traitors, a Resistance United Front.

SHI KEFA (died 1645) Ming Loyalist general, in command of Yangzhou in early 1645 when the city was besieged by the Manchu army under Dodo. After a failed attempt at suicide, he was captured by Manchu soldiers and put to death. In the legendary version of his death made popular by Kong Shangren's 1699 play *The Peach Blossom Fan* (from which Beggar Wu sings a famous aria in Chapter 21), he is successful in drowning himself. Historically, it was not Kang Xi, but Kang Xi's grandson, the Emperor Qian Long, who erected a temple in memory of Shi Kefa, in 1768.

SHI LANG (1621'1696) A former officer in the service of Coxinga's father, Zheng Zhilong, who fell into disfavour with Coxinga's consort, Lady Dong. He went over to the Manchus in 1650, was made an admiral in the Imperial navy, and defeated Coxinga at sea. While in Taiwan he had been one of the teachers of Zheng Keshuang. Kang Xi wrote of him 'Shi Lang captured Taiwan speedily and proved a loyal official. Even if he was uneducated and arrogant, he made up for it by his rough and ready military abilities.' (Spence, Emperor of China, p.35)

SHUN ZHI, Emperor (1638'1661') The Hermit Emperor, often referred to as the Old Emperor (even though he is in fact barely forty years old), and sometimes the ex'Emperor. Shun Zhi was the

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reign title (the words mean literally 'obedience and rule') of Fulin, first Emperor of the Manchu dynasty, the ninth son of Abahai. He was known to have been deeply interested in Zen Buddhism, and it was widely believed that after the death of his favourite consort, the beautiful Empress Donggo, in the autumn of 1661, the young Emperor, 'pining for his lost mistress and weary of the dull routine of statecraft, voluntarily handed over the government to four of his Ministers and retired to the contemplative life' (Backhouse and Bland, Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking [London, 1914], p.235). As one contemporary poet wrote, 'He threw away the Empire as one who casts away a worn'out shoe. Following the example of the Lord Buddha, he preferred to seek the mystic solitudes.' This is the legend that lies behind the plot of Deer. The more conventional version of Shun Zhi's death is that he died of smallpox. In the Second Book, he has appeared in the guise of Brother Wayward, in retreat in the hermitage behind the Pure Coolness Monastery. His Zen Master is the Venerable Yulin.

SITU BOLEI Officer in Wu Sangui's army who, in disgust at Wu's collaboration with the Manchus, withdrew with some 30,000 of his men to the Wangwu

Mountains

(on the borders of Henan and southern Shanxi Provinces) and formed the resistance band known as the Wang Wu Clan, with its own distinctive style of kungfu. His son, Situ He, commanded the Wang Wu detachment that ran into Colonel

Wishy'Washy's (alias, Trinket's) regiment en route to Shaolin in the Second Book.

SITU HE Son of Situ Bolei.

SNAKE ISLAND Snake-infested island in the Gulf of Bohai, lair of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

SONGGOTU (died 1703) This immensely rich and powerful Manchu statesman of the

Heseri clan, third son of the elderly Regent Soni, becomes Trinket's 'adopted brother' and closest friend among the upper ranks of Manchu officialdom.

SOPHIA, Princess Russian Regent, and Trinket's lover. She was the sister of Tsar

Theodore of Russia (eldest son of Tsar Alexius Mikhailovich, who had been the second Tsar of the Romanov

dynasty, and reigned 1645-1676). Historically, Theodore died in 1682, and eventually his two surviving brothers, Ivan (Alexius' second son, almost an imbecile) and Peter (the third son, born in 1672 to Alexius' second wife, Natalia Naruiskina) were made conjoint Tsars, with their sister, the 'ambitious

and energetic' Princess Sophia Alexeyevna, as Regent. She continued to rule autocratically as Regent until 1689, when Peter and his maternal relations had her put in a convent. Peter ruled (he was Peter the Great) until 1725.

SPAFARII In a note to Chapter 48 of the Chinese original of Deer (p. 2019), the author refers to a certain N. G. Spafarii. This Spafarii is Nikolaie Milescu'Spatarul, sometimes referred to as Spathar'Milescu, a Rumanian scholar

in the Russian service, who in an embassy to China in May 1675 did in fact request that expert Chinese bridge-builders should be sent westwards to teach their methods to the Russians. (In Chapter 27 of the English translation of the Third Book, there is much talk from Vobolsky of the possibility of the Chinese building stone bridges for the Russians, though Cha's learned reference to Spafarii has not been translated.) The great historian of Chinese science and technology, Joseph Needham, says in one of his inimitable footnotes that this remarkable fact was brought to his attention by H.E. Sardar K. M. Panikkar. Milescu'Spatarul (or whatever his name was) wrote a long book about all this in

Russian in 1677, which was finally translated into Rumanian and published in Bucarest in 1956. All this is narrated in English by J. F. Baddeley, who gives his translation of Milescu, in Russia, Mongolia, China' Being some Record of

the

Relations between them from the beginning of the 17th century to the Death of the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich [d. 1676], London, 1919. See Needham, Science and

Civilisation in China, IV'3, p. 149, note b.

SPRING FRAGRANCE Spring Fragrance Wei, Yangzhou trollop, Trinket's mother.

SU QUAN see Hong, Madame

SUN SIKE, Colonel (1628'1700) One of Trinket's deputy

commanders on the Yangzhou expedition.

SUN YANLING (died 1677) Military Governor of Guangxi Province, married to Kong

Sizhen, the only surviving child of General Kong Youde.

SWEET DEW PARLOUR The main reception hall at the Vernal Delights bordello.

TAI, Colonel He replaces General Ajige as commander of the Vanguard Regiment.

TAIWAN At the time of the Ming'Qing transition, when this novel takes place, this island, about 210 miles long by 70 miles wide, was a wild place, and not considered part of China proper. It had been given the name Formosa (literally Beautiful Isle) by the Portuguese when they first tried to colonize it in the early seventeenth century. It is separated from the mainland by a channel about

100 miles wide, and presented itself as the perfect base for the resistance, led by Marshal Zheng (Coxinga). He ended up establishing what was virtually his own

kingdom on the island (he was called by the European powers the King of Taiwan).

It was finally taken from his family in 1683. At first attached to Fujian Province as a Prefecture, it only became a province in its own right as late as 1887. A mere eight years later, at the close of the Sino'Japanese war in 1895, it became a Japanese colony, and remained so until the end of the Second World War.

TANG RUOWANG see Schall, Adam von

TAO, Aunt Tao Hongying, once a maid serving Princess Chang, the Princess Royal,

daughter of the last Ming Emperor (see White Nun). She has sworn vengeance on

the Tartars. Adopts Trinket as her 'real' nephew.

TERTIUS Qi Biaoqing, sarcastic Triad.

THEODORE Tsar of Russia; Princess Sophia's twenty-year-old younger brother, a

bedridden invalid, who reigned from 1676 to 1682.

THIN DHUTA Alias Lump of Hesh, or Meatball; originally a very thin disciple of

the Mystic Dragon Sect, he becomes as fat as a pumpkin after taking the Leopard

Embryo Pill and failing to get the Antidote in time. One of the Fake Empress Dowager's lovers.

TIAN Favourite consort of Chong Zhen Emperor. TIGER Trinket's first son, by Green. >,'.' s

TOLBUSIN, Alexei Successor to Golitsyn as Governor of Albazin.

TRANSFORMATION

LODGE Triad Lodge of Zhejiang Province.

TONG GUOGANG (died 1690) Bannerman of Chinese descent, Kang Xi's maternal uncle.

TRINKET Wei Xiaobao, the novel's principal character. He is an incorrigible scamp born to Spring Fragrance in the Yangzhou whorehouse, Vernal Delights. He is

an egregious impostor, knave, and poltroon, and a young man of many identities.

In the course of his (never very convincing) attempts to learn kungfu from Whiskers Mao he acquires the nom de guerre Little White Dragon. In the Imperial

Palace he kills, and takes the identity of, the eunuch Laurel. He meets and befriends the young Manchu monarch Kang Xi, whom he knows as Misty, and who

calls him by the affectionate nickname Laurie. Subsequently in his encounter with the Triads he is made Master of the Green Wood Lodge. During his eventful

visit to Snake Island, he is appointed White Dragon Marshal of the Mystic Dragon

Sect. In order to enable him to travel to the Wutai Mountains, the Emperor appoints him Lieutenant Trinket Wei of the Imperial Guard. He is subsequently

promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and adopts the Manchu style sobriquet Wishy-Washy. As a monk, he takes the nom de religion Father Treasure. Kang Xi

makes him first a Viscount (Lord Wei), and subsequently promotes him step by step until he becomes a Duke (First Class). Princess Sophia makes him Count of the Eastern Tartar Region.

TUHAI Conservative Manchu Grand Chancellor.

VERBIEST, Ferdinand (1623'1688) Flemish Jesuit priest, patronized by the Emperor

Kang Xi for his great skill in the art of the calendar, the creation of ingenious mechanical toys, and the manufacture of cannon. Chinese name, Nan

Huairan. He learned not only Chinese, but also Manchu, and was personally responsible for teaching Kang Xi the Elements of Euclid and the principles of astronomy.

VOBOLSKY One of the musketeers sent to guard Princess Sophia in the hunting

lodge outside Moscow; later promoted to Captain and sent east to Fort Albazin, with Chironov.

WANG JINBAO (1626'1685) One of Trinket's deputy commanders on the Yangzhou expedition.

WANG WU CLAN see Situ Bolei

WEI ZHOUSHE Grand Chancellor of the Hall for Protecting Harmony, an elder with white hair and flowing white beard.

WEN YOUFANG Former gambling partner of Trinket.

WHISKERS Mao Eighteen, notorious brigand, who escapes from prison at the beginning of the First Book, befriends Trinket, and takes him to Peking. He appears again towards the end of the Third Book.

WHITE NUN One'armed Shifu of Green Girl and Trinket; also called Tribulation;

once upon a time Princess Chang, the Princess Royal, daughter of the last Ming Emperor Chong Zhen. A refined and beautiful woman, practitioner of the deadly

Buddhist style of kungfu known as Iron Sword.

WIDOW ZHUANG Her husband and many other Zhuang menfolk were executed at Oboi's

orders, as part of the Ming History Inquisition (see Prologue to the First Book). She and other Zhuang womenfolk escape on their way to penal servitude in

the northeast, and take up residence in a 'haunted house' where they set up shrines to the victims of the purge and wait for vengeance.

WU LIUQI The General known as Beggar Wu. Red Banner Master of the Triad Obedience Lodge of Guangdong Province; also Military Governor of

Guangdong. He

becomes the sworn brother of Doublet in the course of the Third Book.

WU, Satrap (1612'1678) Wu Sangui, the Big Traitor, was a turncoat Ming general

who joined forces with the Manchu commander Dorgon to drive the Chinese rebel Li

Zicheng (General Bash'em) out of Peking. For this he was rewarded with a princely title, 'Prince of the West'. He subsequently established his own fiefdom (or Feudatory realm) in the south'west, in Yunnan Province.

WU, Shaker Wu Lishen, the Shaker Lion, retainer of the Mu Family, Martial Arts

veteran and brother'in'law of Iron Dragon Liu.

WU WEIYE (1609'1672) Celebrated poet of the Ming'Qing transition period, famous

for his narrative ballads, one of which, 'The Ballad of the Peerless Consort', is recited extensively by the lady herself, Chen Yuanyuan, for Trinket's benefit in Chapter 20. Readers wishing to consult a complete translation of the ballad can find it in Lo and Schultz eds., *Waiting for the Unicorn* (Bloomington, 1986),

translated by John Coleman and Gloria Shen.

WU YINGXIONG (died 1674) The Little Traitor, Young Wu, eldest son and heir of

Satrap Wu. Marries Kang Xi's sister, the Princess Ning. Historically, the Satrap's eldest son did indeed marry a princess, but it was the Princess Kechun, half'sister of the Emperor Shun Zhi, Kang Xi's father.

WU ZHIRONG Prefect of Yangzhou; previously responsible for the Ming History

Inquisition (see First Book), in which many members of the Zhuang family perished.

XIA GUOXIANG, General Commander'in'Chief of the Satrap's

troops, married to the Satrap's daughter.

XU TIANCHUAN Apothecary Xu, the Eight'Armed Ape, Triad plaster'seller.

XU XUETING see Blue Dragon Marshal

L

YONG LI see Prince Gui

YOUNG COUNT Mu Jiansheng, brother of the Little Countess; head of the Mu Family.

YUAN CHENGZHI Son of Yuan Chonghuan; legendary adept of the Mount Hua School of kungfu.

YUAN CHONGHUAN (1584'1630) Ming general, responsible for the execution of Mao

Wenlong in 1629. Falsely accused of treachery and executed by Lingering Death in

the market'place. Described by the late'Qing scholar Liang Qichao as 'China's greatest soldier'. Louis Cha has written an extended biographical study of Yuan,

which is attached to his early (1956) novel The Sword Stained with Royal Blood.

ZENG ROU Beautiful fifteen'year'old female member of the Wang Wu Clan, daughter

of one of Situ Bolei's officers. In the Third Book she becomes one of Trinket's seven wives.

ZHA SHENXING (1650'1727) Distinguished poet belonging to the same Haining family

as Zha Shibiao, Zha Yihuang, and Louis Cha (whose real name is Zha Liangyong).

His poetry has often been compared to that of the two famous poets of the Song dynasty, Su Dongpo and Lu You.

ZHA YIHUANG (1601'1676) Loyalist scholar who for a time joined the court of the

Ming Pretender, the Prince of Lu. He features prominently in the Prologue to the

First Book, and reappears towards the end of the Third Book in the company of Gu

Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, and Lii Liuliang. Together they are known as the Four Gentlemen of the Resistance.

ZHANG KANGNIAN Palace Guard, friend of Trinket's.

ZHANG YONG (1616'1684) One of Trinket's deputy commanders on the Yangzhou expedition.

ZHAO LIANGDONG (1621'1697) Lieutenant'Colonel, second in command in Trinket's

expedition against the Wang Wu Clan.

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ZHAO QIXIAN Palace Guard, friend of Trinket's. ZHENG CHENGGONG see Coxinga

ZHENG JING, Prince (died 1681) Eldest son of Coxinga, and present Prince of Yanping. In 1664 he organized the government of Taiwan, and in 1674 went to the aid of Geng Jingzhong, Satrap of Fujian, in his revolt against Manchu rule.

ZHENG KESHUANG (1670'1707) Sir Zheng; second son of Prince Zheng Jing; a dashing (and insufferable) young man of twenty-three or so-hence Trinket's nickname for him' the Insufferable. He took over nominal control of Taiwan on the death of his father in 1681, finally surrendering to the Manchus in 1683. His father'in'law and mentor was Feng Xifan, the Bloodless Sword.

ZHENG KEZANG (died 1681) Eldest (illegitimate) son of Zheng Jing; historically he was the son'in'law of Chen Jinnan, the Helmsman. He took charge of Taiwan in 1679.

ZHOU, Queen Empress of Chongzhen.

ZHUANG TINGLONG (died c.1660) Nominal author of the Ming History; eldest son of Zhuang Yuncheng. He was already dead at the time of the Ming History persecution, but his coffin was broken open and his corpse gibbeted nonetheless.

ZHUANG YUNCHENG (died c.1663) Resident of Huzhou, patron of learning. Died in prison of maltreatment during the Ming History persecution.

ZHUGE LIANG Famous strategist of the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220'265), who served as a general in the army of the Shu'Han kingdom.

GENERAL GLOSSARY OF TERMS

relating to kungfu, Chinese culture, history, and society

ART OF WAR, The This ancient classic of military strategy, from which the

Emperor quotes, and which would have been familiar to every Chinese general and statesman (even Trinket learns to ape it), has often been translated into English. A copy of the excellent eighteenth-century French version (by the Jesuit Father Jean'Joseph'Marie Amiot, who served in China under the rule of Rang Xi's grandson Qian Long), is rumoured to have been in the possession of Napoleon.

BAIGAR SPIRIT This transparent fiery liquor, widely drunk in northern and north-eastern China (it is at Peony River market that Trinket sees the ginseng'gatherers drinking it), can be distilled from several different grains-including wheat, barley, sorghum, millet.

BATURU A military distinction conferred during the Manchu dynasty for distinguished service in the field. It meant literally 'brave', and brought with it the right to wear the peacock'feather. Kang Xi confers this distinction on Trinket before he sets off on his expedition to destroy the Mystic Dragons.

BED Since the bed comes to play such an important part in the Third Book, it is worth pointing out that traditional Chinese bedsteads were large, curtained, live'in structures, somewhat like Western four'poster beds. Some of them even had ante'chambers. The great German authority on Chinese furniture, Gustav Ecke,

refers to them as 'veritable alcove architecture'. Another authority, the American George Kates, calls them 'rooms within rooms', and comments wryly 'When the bed's curtains were drawn it formed a completely isolated sleeping unit, equipped with all necessities, not altogether unlike a modern railway compartment.' For the heated brick'bed popular in the North, see kang.

BOARD The Chinese government was organized from early times under six Boards, or

Ministries' Personnel, Revenue, Rites, War, Justice, and Works.

JJOYAR A privileged order of wealthy Russian aristocrats or grandees, who traditionally acted as advisors to the Russian tsar.

CASTRATION In China, when a eunuch was castrated, both penis and testicles were

removed. This has already been stated in the Glossary for the First Book (see under Eunuchs), but needs restating here to explain the Princess' radical treatment of the Little Traitor. She was merely making him a 'normal' eunuch. In

the circumstances, it is surprising that he survived at all. The classic study of this question is by Dr Jean'Jacques Matignon, in his book *La Chine Hermetique*

(Paris, 1898). As doctor to the French legation in Peking, Matignon once had occasion to treat a young eunuch.

CHINESE BANNERMEN Chinese who supported the Manchu cause were enrolled in the eight Chinese Banners (for the Manchu Banners, see the Glossary to the First Book), and treated to all intents and purposes as Bannermen. Kang Xi's own mother was the daughter of Chinese Bannermen parents. He was thus ethnically fifty per cent Han'Chinese.

CALLIGRAPHY This is one of the fine arts of the traditional Chinese scholar'gentleman, and a skill expected of every Chinese educated official. Trinket's 'calligraphic moment' (in Chapter 25, when he is writing a message in code for Kang Xi) is one of the most delightful satirical scenes in the novel.

DEER AND CAULDRON These two images, which give their name to the whole novel, both in Chinese and in English, occur for the first time in the very opening pages of the Prologue to the First Book. There, the Ming Loyalist scholar Lii Liuliang explains to his young son that the (hunted) 'deer' is a symbol of the common people, and hence of the Empire; while the 'cauldron' (of the tripod sort) is a symbol of the authority of the Emperor. Examples of the superb bronze tripods of the early Shang dynasty can be seen in many of the world's museums. The words are thus a code for the political'historical thread running through the novel, the theme of national conquest (by the Manchus) and resistance (by the Ming Resistance), and of the legitimacy of political power. It is against this background that Trinket's picaresque antics take place, and it is in this context that his multiple identities and loyalties become

more and more hard to manage. The place where the Manchu treasure is supposed to be buried, and where the Dragon Lines (which control the fengshui, and thus the destiny, of the Manchus) converge, is called Ludingshan, being the Chinese for the Mountain (shari) of the Deer ('®) and the Cauldron (ding). The walled town built by the Russians on or near this 'site' in the seventeenth century was called by them Fort Albazin, and by the Manchus Yaksha.

DITANG KUNGFU This School of kungfu, in which Coxinga's general Lin Xingzhu was expert, involved sneaking up to the enemy under the cover of specially made wickerwork shields, and then hacking at the legs of the enemy's horses.

EXECUTION GROUND (fachang) This was, until 1901, at the junction of two streets

in southern Peking, where there was a large open space, known as the Vegetable

Market (caishikou). Executions normally took place at daybreak, after which the

market was opened for business. The criminals were brought from the Board of Punishments in open carts. (See the classic 1935 study *In Search of Old Peking*, by L. C. Arlington and William Lewisohn, pp. 217'9.)

FORBIDDEN CITY (zijincheng) This was the name given to the huge fortified complex lying at the heart of old Peking, in which the Emperor and his entourage

resided and held court. The Chinese name itself includes a reference to the Pole Star (the first character, zi, being a shortened form of ziwei, the ancient name for the 'forbidden enclosure' of the Pole Star), since the Emperor or Son of Heaven was the 'pole' around which everything revolved. The poetic names for the

countless gates, palaces, and lesser buildings within the Palace or City (many of which Trinket was able to recite by heart, thanks to his period in residence as the eunuch Laurel) are here translated according to Arlington and Lewisohn, in *In Search of Old Peking*.

FOREIGNERS Foreigners are more in evidence in the Third Book. There are Jesuit

fathers of various nationalities, there are Russians and Dutch, not to mention the various non-Han ethnic groups of Asian origin, that have already begun to play a prominent role in the Second Book (Mongols, Tibetans, etc.). Foreigners of European origin are often referred to as 'red-haired devils' (at first this was

XL

used of the Dutch, but later of all nationalities). All Chinese have black hair and brown eyes, and any variation in pigmentation seemed extreme. Hence Trinket

(the archetypal Chinese xenophobe and Han chauvinist) remarks that Russians all

have red hair and green eyes. For him, as for so many Chinese in the aftermath of foreign imperialism, it was of paramount importance to ensure that 'these foreign devils will never be able to monkey around and make fools of us!'

(Chapter 21) In our own day, foreigners are still called devils (e.g., in Hong Kong, where gwailo-old devil-is a common, indeed almost affectionate term for a

foreigner) and big'noses (dabizf).

FOUR GENTLEMEN OF THE RESISTANCE Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, Lii

Liuliang, and Zha
Yihuang.

GRAND CANAL (yunhe) This great waterway, parts of which are said to date back over two thousand years, connects Peking and Hangzhou. It was the Mongol conqueror Khubilai Khan who extended it north to Peking at the end of the thirteenth century.

GRAND CHANCELLOR (daxueshi) This was the title given to a select number of high-ranking officials in the Imperial Court, who together formed a sort of Imperial Cabinet. These Chancellors were often 'attached' to one of the principal halls in the Palace.

HUA, MOUNT The School of kungfu named after Mount Hua, the western of China's Five Sacred Mountains (just east of the old capital Chang'an). This is one of many links between and Louis Cha's earlier novel, *The Sword Stained with Royal Blood* (Bixuejian), written in 1956. One of the principal characters in *Royal Blood* is Yuan Chengzhi (the son of the historical Ming general and patriotic hero Yuan Chonghuan). Yuan Chengzhi (a character of Louis Cha's invention) becomes the last disciple of Mu Renqing, the Magic Ape, charismatic Master of the Mount Hua School. In the course of *Royal Blood*, Yuan Chengzhi becomes the object of the affections of two lady warriors, both of whom put in an appearance in *Deer the White Nun*, and Lady Iron Hand. Another Mount Hua adept is Gui Xinshu, the Matchless Knight, elderly father of Invalid Gui.

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HUNDRED FLIGHTS, The Art of the A kungfu technique of evasion taught Trinket by his Shifu the White Nun.

JESUITS The historical Emperor Kang Xi's encounters with his Jesuit advisors and his excursions to test their cannon are well documented. A whole section of the great eighteenth-century Jesuit encyclopedia edited by the French Father Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description de la Chine* (in English, *A Description of the Empire of China*) is devoted to a graphic description of one such excursion. In Du Halde's words, the Emperor '... went himself with several Governors of Western Tartary ... to see the Experiment' Pleased with the results, he

subsequently gave Father Verbiest'. . . his vest furred with Martin'skins of great value, and also his Gown that was under it...' (vol. 1, p. 263). The Jesuits were also invaluable in the negotiations that produced the Treaty of Nerchinsk (see below). They provided the Manchu Court with a great deal of useful technical expertise in other fields, such as watch'making, astronomy, mathematics, and map'making, as well as producing a huge number of translations

into Chinese of Western works of learning. And last but not least, they offered the Emperor and his entourage the opportunity to sample some of the delights of

Western music, art, architecture, and landscape gardening.

KANG These heated bed'platforms, usually built out of brick, were (and are) very

popular in northern China.

KUNLUN SCHOOL This was the school of 'precision kungfu' to which Feng Xifan, the

Bloodless Sword, evil mentor of Zheng Keshuang, belonged.

LANE (hutong) These narrow winding lanes (Trinket's princely Residence, for example, was in Bronze Hat Lane), and the courtyard houses leading off them, constituted one of the charms of Old Peking. They often had picturesque names'

South Bean Sprout Lane, Sweet Water Lane, Hair Lane, Willow Lane, Gingko Lane.

LYRIC A conventional English term for a genre of Chinese poetry, set to irregular musical metres, that specialized in highly poignant, sometimes sentimental, themes. The singsong'girl at Trinket's Yangzhou banquet sings a famous lyric by the Song poet Qin Guan, which Trinket does not appreciate.

XLII

MANCHU HOMELAND The North'East, the present'day provinces of Heilongjiang,

Jilin, and Liaodong, amounts to a huge area, the size of the combined area of France and Italy. It was into this area that Nurhachi's ancestors had expanded during the Ming dynasty, from their original home in the Long White Mountains on

the Korean border. In the 1930s it became the Japanese puppet'state of Manchuria.

MASSACRE OF YANGZHOU This appalling episode, commonly (and euphemistically)

known as the Ten Days of Yangzhou, took place when the Manchu army entered the

city of Yangzhou in 1645, after a heroic resistance led by Shi Kefa, a Ming general. (See First Book, pp. 300'301.)

MEMORIAL Name given to any official communication addressed to the Emperor from one of his officials or subjects. Some of these memorials were public, some confidential. It is from the Emperor's marginal comments on or endorsements of such memorials ('Yes, good idea, do this!' or 'No, I don't agree!') that we can trace the day'today conduct of state affairs during the Manchu dynasty.

OUTLAWS OF THE MARSH Another name for the classic bandit novel Water Margin (see glossary for the First Book).

PALACE Apart from the Emperor's Palace, Peking had many princely palaces, and countless grand mansions, consisting of several courtyards leading out of one another. Trinket's Peking Residence was such a grand mansion. It rejoiced in the name 'palace' somewhat as one of Venice's aristocratic mansions would be called a palazzo.

PALACE GUARDS Elite regiment of Imperial Guards, a sort of Palace Bodyguard, under the overall command of Dolong. Two officers in the Guards, Zhang Kangnian and Zhao Qixian, are personal friends of Trinket's.

PALANQUIN (jiaozi) Superior (i.e. larger) version of the customary mode of transportation used by upper' class Chinese in traditional times, sometimes described as 'a box'litter'; it is a Portuguese form of a Hindi word, and the palanquin was in use throughout India,

GENERAL GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Malaya, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), and China. In this novel the word is used for any 'litter' larger than a sedan chair (here reserved for the simpler single'seater, carried by two bearers). There were rules for how many bearers a palanquin could have' sixteen for the Emperor, eight for a Prince of the Blood or a very high' ranking official, four for lesser officials.

PEACOCK'S FEATHER The peacock'feathers awarded as distinctions by the

Chinese

Imperial Court were of three kinds' three-eyed (conferred on Imperial princes), double-eyed (for lower officials), or single-eyed (as a reward for public services). They were placed in the back of the official hat, and stuck out, sloping downwards. (Ball, Things Chinese, fifth edition, revised by E. Chalmers Werner, London, 1925, p.173.)

PIBA A Chinese musical instrument with four strings, in sound somewhat resembling the mandolin, but larger, and therefore often given the conventional

English translation 'lute'.

PIGTAIL The long plait or 'queue' imposed on the Chinese by the Manchu conquerors, and regarded as a badge of slavery. Trinket has one, of course.

QING-MANCHU The Manchu conquerors called their dynasty Qing, or Clear (as their

Chinese predecessors had called theirs Ming, or Bright). Thus the two words refer to the same thing, Manchu being the ethnic designation, Qing the dynastic.

RED DUST In Chinese Buddhist parlance, the Red Dust denotes Vanity Fair, the

World and all its noise, its wealth and pollution, including the temptations of the flesh.

RUSSIANS The seventeenth century saw the first real contact between the Chinese

and their Russian neighbours. The disputes over their border continued well into

the twentieth century. The historical Treaty of Nerchinsk is also well documented in the eighteenth-century encyclopedia of Du Halde.

SEDAN CHAIR see Palanquin

XLIV

SINGSONG'GIRL This all-purpose term covers a variety of different types of women

who offered their services for hire in traditional Chinese cities. At the top level, they were skilful musicians (their preferred instrument being the four-stringed piba), they were writers and performers of lyrics, trained dancers, geisha-like courtesans, rather than simple prostitutes. Such high-level singsong-girls would be regularly invited to entertain at official banquets. They often had long-standing relations with prominent members of society, and as

the eminent Dutch expert in these matters, Robert van Gulik, points out in his study Sexual Life in Ancient China, they offered their clients not just carnal pleasure, but 'a welcome relief from the often oppressive atmosphere of the

women's quarters and the compulsory sexual relations' that characterized the typical Chinese upper-class household. (An excellent depiction of this demi-monde in nineteenth-century Shanghai can be found in the recent film by Hou

Hsiao'hsien, *Flowers of Shanghai*, itself based on a well-written novel from the last years of the Manchu dynasty.) Trinket, on the other hand, delights in using the term of abuse 'whore', and his own mother, *Spring Fragrance* (in Chinese culture, *Spring* was always the 'code'word for anything erotic, and anything to do with 'flowers' suggested sexual pleasure), belonged to a much lower category

of singing-girl. She was just a working prostitute at the brothel known as *Vernal Delights*. But even she undoubtedly had acquired certain basic non-sexual

entertaining skills as well, since her establishment was a highly successful one and functioned as a meeting-place for middle-class merchants and well-to-do low-life characters like *Whiskers Mao*.

SNAKE ISLAND This whole theme, of the dangerous heretical sect based on an offshore island in the Gulf of Bohai, and the threat it posed to the Manchu dynasty, seems to have been loosely inspired by the historical episode involving the last real military opposition to the Manchu conquest-Yuang Chonghuan, Mao

Wenlong, Kong Youde, and the *Ninety-Seven Dare-Devils of Pidao* (literally, *Hide,*

or Skin, Island), for all of which see Cha's early (and still untranslated) novel *The Sword Stained with Royal Blood* (*Bixuejian*). This episode also forms the background to several characters in *Deer the Old Whore* (who is the daughter

of Mao Wenlong); the *White Nun*, alias *Tribulation*, formerly the *Princess Royal*, and lover

(in Cha's earlier novel) of Yuan Chonghuan's son Yuan Chengzhi; and *Lady Iron*

Hand, the *Lady Warrior in the yellow tunic*.

SPIRIT TABLET (*lingpai* or *lingwei*) These tablets, usually made out of wood, represented the souls of the deceased and were placed before a coffin (except in the case of the victims of the Ming History Inquisition, where there was no coffin, and the tablets were placed by the widows in a special shrine). Robert Morrison explains the spirit tablet as follows in his *Dictionary* (1820) 'Incense is burnt before it, and a sort of worship paid to it morning and evening for forty-nine days. At the end of a hundred days the Buddhist or Taoist

priests recite certain prayers and then burn it.'

STRYELTSI The 'ambitious' or 'energetic' elements; musketeers of the unreformed

standing army of Russia, subverted by Princess Sophia.

TABOURET A large barrel-shaped item of furniture, made out of wood, stone, or

porcelain.

TAMARDY! A made-up word approximating to the sound of Trinket's favourite term

of abuse, which he teaches his friend Misty (Kang Xi) early on, and which Rang Xi delights in using himself, as an antidote to the sheer boredom of Palace discourse. The Chinese expression on which it is based (tamade), still very much

in use today, means literally '... his/her mother!', the operative verb having been (of course) omitted. In the standard dictionaries it is euphemistically translated 'damn it!' or 'blast it!'. A Yangzhou'dialect variant frequently on Trinket's lips (lakuai'mamade) is (very freely) translated here as 'hot popping momma's'. (This trademark expression of Trinket's has even been the subject of a

learned academic paper.) Terms of abuse are one of the translator's recurring nightmares. Abusing one's enemy's mother is a habit common to many cultures.

But

the cultural associations behind such expressions can be extremely complex.

TAOIST NUNS These ladies were known to follow a much freer regime than their

Buddhist sisters. Like Taoist monks, they kept their hair, and in many other ways enjoyed considerable liberty in their lifestyle. During the Tang dynasty, there were several Taoist

nuns in the capital, Chang'an, famous for their beauty and their literary talent. They were much sought after by the young literati of the time.

THREE FEUDATORIES (san fan) The Chinese umbrella term used for the three

southern warlords of the early Manchu period' Wu Sangui (overlord of Yunnan and

Guizhou, and of parts of Hunan and Sichuan, most commonly referred to in the novel as the Satrap, because of his overriding ambition); Geng Jimao and his son

Geng Jingzhong (overlords of the coastal province of Fujian); and Shang Kexi and

his son Shang Zhixin (overlords of Guangdong and parts of Guangxi). They were

all ethnic Chinese who had sided with the Manchus (in the case of the Gengs this

affiliation went back to the grandfather Geng Zhongming) and had been

rewarded

with special privileges' they were given the rank of Prince (Wu's title was Prince of the West), were allowed to marry Manchu wives, and held sway in their

domains as virtually autonomous rulers. Between them they controlled an area the

size of France and Spain combined. Their joint rising against Kang Xi (historically beginning in December 1673, and not crushed until 1681), is commonly referred to as the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories. It was the first major challenge to Manchu authority during the reign of Kang Xi, and his decision to accept the Three Feudatories' 'offers of resignation' (see Chapter 23), thereby provoking a showdown and the threat of civil war, met with considerable opposition from his own Manchu statesmen. Throughout his life he

reminisced about how shaken the war had left him, and how bitterly he regretted

the loss of life that had followed his decision . . . But he never regretted the decision itself.' (Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, p. 53) The war lasted eight years, and covered ten provinces.

TREATY OF NERCHINSK The whole Nerchinsk story is told in Du Halde's *The General*

History of China, based on Jean-Francois Gerbillon's account (he was Kang Xi's Jesuit advisor, who accompanied Songgotu and company to Nerchinsk). I quote 'It

(Chinese Tartary) contains but one Town called Merghen..., which was built by the Emperor and fortified with a little garrison. In every other part are nothing but Huts run up at pleasure. The Moscovites indeed had once a fortress

here, which they called Albazin, and the Tartars Yacsa, from a little River on which it stood,

on that part of it where Yacsa discharges itself into Saghalien oula. It was this Fortress which occasion'd the War between the Moscovites and the Emperor of

China; for the Moscovites having a strong Garrison hindered the Chinese from hunting sables in that Neighbourhood. But at length the Fort was demolished and

the Country entirely submitted to the Emperor of China by the Treaty of Peace at

Niptchou. From the Ruins of Fort Yacsa, to the Fall of the River Saghalien oula into the Eastern Ocean, is at least 400 leagues' (Watts' edition, 1741, vol 4, starting on p 147).

TRIAD CATECHISM The lines of verse exchanged by Trinket and Kang Xi in

Chapter

25 are nearly all to be found in the excellent study of Triad history and ritual by the nineteenth-century Dutch sinologist Gustave Schlegel, *The Hung League*, or

Heaven Earth League (Batavia, 1866). This study itself was made possible by the

accidental discovery by the Dutch Colonial Police of a cache of secret Triad books (in 1863, on the island of Sumatra). As the writer points out, whereas in China proper the secret society was aimed at overthrowing the Manchus, in places

such as the Dutch East Indies it was aimed against the colonial power.

TREASURE The treasure buried in Mount Luding turns out to be the great anti-climax of *Deer*. The map indicating its exact whereabouts was concealed in eight copies of a sutra, which many people went to enormous lengths to find. Having served as a motor of intrigue and adventure throughout the First and Second Books, the treasure simply fizzles out in the Third. In the end, Trinket decides not to bother with it. This can perhaps be seen as the ultimate debunking of the Martial Arts genre by Louis Cha, for whom *Deer* was a sort of Chinese Don Quixote, a pastiche of the traditional novel of Chinese chivalry, his personal farewell to the genre.

TUNGUS The Tungus were a broad ethnic grouping of the peoples of the North-East

that included the Jurchen and Manchus.

ULA GRASS One of the Three Treasures of Manchuria (the two others being ginseng

and sable fur). As explained to Trinket by the Manchu Songgotu, this grass, when

stuffed inside a person's shoes (like a sort of thermal insole), has the invaluable property (in the frozen North-East) of keeping the feet warm.

VALIANTS (xiaojiying) The Valiant Regiment was the Emperor's personal cavalry

regiment (cf. the Household Brigade), attached to the Plain Yellow Banner. It was in this regiment that Trinket was appointed Colonel before his visit to the Satrap in Kunming.

VANGUARDS (qianfengying) Regiment of crack troops (exclusively Manchu and

Mongols, with duties for guarding the Imperial Palace) frequently at loggerheads

with the Palace Guards themselves. The rivalry between Valiants and Vanguards is

reminiscent of that between the Musketeers and the Cardinal's Men in *The Three*

Musketeers, a novel much admired by Louis Cha.

WAY AND ITS POWER, The (Daodejing) The oldest of all the Taoist classics, available in countless English versions, the best being that of Arthur Waley (London, 1934).

YANGZHOU SALT'MERCHANTS The city of Yangzhou, strategically situated on the

Grand Canal, just north of its junction with the Yangtze River, owed much of its prosperity to the fabulously wealthy salt'merchants who lived there. It is supposed to have been the city where Marco Polo was appointed Governor for three

years by the Mongol Khan, in the thirteenth century. It was described by the Franciscan friar, Odoric of Pordenone, in the fourteenth century as 'a noble city ... where are to be had in great abundance all kinds of things on which Christian people live. There is a custom in this city that if any one desire to give a great dinner or entertainment to his friends he goes to one of the hostels which are established for this very purpose . . . and the guests are better served than they would have been in the entertainer's own house' (Yule, Cathay and the Way Thither, vol 2, pp. 210'211). In the eighteenth century many

splendid mansions and gardens were built in the city and its suburbs, and it was

home to the so'called Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, some of China's most talented and innovative artists. In Deer, it is the city in which Trinket was born, but is also important in the novel as a place of southern luxury and decadence, by contrast with the rigours of the northern capital, and seat of the Manchu government, Peking. Theoretically, since ancient times, the Chinese government had a monopoly on the production of salt, and issued a limited number

of licences to merchants, who became hugely wealthy through the distribution

of this vital commodity. With the decline of the Manchu dynasty in the nineteenth century, more and more illicit salt smuggling took place, and Yangzhou itself suffered severely during the Taiping Rebellion (1851'1864). But it still retained enough of its former glory to prompt this effusion from the Japanese Railway Guide for 1924' The place has always been known as one of pleasure and gaiety ... In the palmy days of Yangzhou, it was said that a man having once entered the city in search of pleasure would find himself unable to leave it until he had squandered his all' (quoted by Frances Wood, in Did Marco

Polo go to China!, London, 1995).

NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

In this book, Chinese names and place names are in general spelled according to the Chinese system known as Hanyu Pinyin, which is now internationally accepted.

(Occasional exceptions to this rule include well-established geographical names such as the Yangtze River, and the cities of Peking, Nanking, and Canton.) The following short list may help readers with some of the more difficult sounds used in the Pinyin system'

Letter

Pronunciation

c

ts

q

ch

x

sh

z

dz

zh

i

The following very rough equivalents may also be of help to readers.

Word

Pronunciation

Bo

Boar (wild pig)

Cai

Ts'eye ('It's eye', without the first vowel)

Gang

Ts'arng

Chen

Churn

Cheng

Churng

Chong

Choong (as in 'book')

Chuan

Chwan

Dang	Darng or Dung (as in ‘cow dung’)
Dong	Doong (as in ‘book’)
Emei	Er’may
Feng	Ferng
Gui	Gway
Guo	Gwore
Jia	Jeeyar
Jiang	Jeeyung
Kong	Koong (as in ‘book’)
Li	Lee
Long	Loong (as in ‘book’)
Lii	Lew (as in French ‘tu’)
Qi	Chee
Qian	Chee’yenne
Qing	Ching
Rong	Roong (as in ‘book’)
Shi	Shhh!
Si	Szzzl
Song	Soowg (as in ‘book’)
Shun	Shoon (as in ‘should’)
Wen	as in ‘forgottew’
Xi	Shee
Xiao	Shee’ow (as in ‘shee’cow’ without the ‘c’)
Xing	Shing
Xiong	Sheeoong
Xu	Shyeu (as in French ‘tu’)
Yan	Yen
Yi	Yee
You	Yo’heave’ho
Yu	Yew tree (as in French ‘tu’)
Yuan	You, Anne!
Zha	Jar
Zhe	Jem!

Zhen	‘㊤㊤’
Zhi	Jim!
Zhou	Joe
Zhu	Jew
Zhuang	Jwarng
Zi	Dzzz’
Zong	Dzoong (as in ‘book’)
Zuo	Dzore

CHAPTER 20

In which Princess Ning castrates her Groom and ‘commits Suicide’, and Viscount

Trinket rescues the Wrong Girl; he meets the Peerless Consort and hears her sing; a Confrontation takes place between General Bash’em, the Satrap, the White

Nun, and the Peerless Consort; and Trinket secures Safe Passage back to Peking

for himself and his Entourage

Fire Alarm in the Qardens of the Princess

Later that evening, having partaken of his dinner, Trinket strolled over to the Princess’ apartment in the An Fu Gardens. She was overjoyed to see him again. ‘Where on earth have you been all this time!’ she cried impatiently.

Trinket made up some cock’and’bull story about the Satrap having detained him

with slanderous accusations about the Emperor. The Princess was only being married off to the Satrap’s son, so the old man had insinuated, because the Emperor hated her so much.

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The filthy fat turtle!’ she exclaimed. ‘I’ll pull his beard out!’

‘We all know it’s not true’ Trinket reassured her. ‘Of course the Emperor loves you. And there are lots of good’looking men just itching to marry you. That old turtle’head the Satrap doesn’t know how lucky he is to have you marrying into his family! I almost thought of telling him I’d-’ . ‘You’d what”

‘I’d like to marry you myself!’

‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ cried the Princess, beaming happily. ‘Let’s do it! Let’s go back to Peking straight away, and I’ll tell my brother I won’t marry anyone but you!’

She threw her arms around him and gave Trinket a big kiss, which he was only

too
happy to return.

The old turtle got quite scared when he thought I might tell on him. He even gave me a couple of Russian pistols.'

He took out the pistols, primed them, and invited the Princess to fire them off into the garden. She took aim, and there was a terrific explosion. She shot a branch clean off a tree.

'Fantastic!' she cried, her tongue popping out of her mouth.

'Let's keep one each,' suggested Trinket generously.

'No no!' cried the Princess. 'It would be such a shame to separate them! They look so cosy, cuddled up together in that lovely case. They'd be lonely apart!'

These thoughts of conjugal togetherness and bliss only made her realize the more
forcefully that marrying Trinket was out of the question. It was pure fantasy' the Emperor would never change his mind. Her lot was cast. Trinket put his arms
around her and did his best to comfort her, whispering all sorts of naughty nothings in her ear. She blushed fiercely, and burst out spluttering with laughter. He untied her sash and loosened her gown, then threw an embroidered
cover over her naked body.

'I wonder why the Traitor's men are taking so long" he thought to himself. They still haven't set the place on fire! If they burst in now, they'll find her naked. That should be fun to watch!'

He sat on the edge of the bed, gently stroking her face, listening out for the slightest sound from outside. The Princess' breathing grew slower and heavier.

'I think I'm going to ... fall asleep. . . . You can . . .'

Trinket could hear the watchman sounding the night watch in the grounds. He was
beginning to grow impatient, when suddenly

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there was a great crashing of gongs, and several voices began yelling at once'
'Fire! Fire!'

The Princess sat up with a jolt and clutched Trinket round the neck.

'What's happening?"

Tamardy turtle'head!' cried Trinket. 'He wants to set us on fire! He wants us both dead! So we won't betray his secret.'

'What are we going to do?"

'Don't you worry. You know you can count on your faithful Trink. Leave this one to me.'

Trinket extricated himself from her embrace and went to the doorway, to secure

the best escape route when the men came bursting in.

'Fire! Fire! Quick, save the Princess!'

He heard voices echoing through the grounds, and could make out a dozen or so

figures racing across the garden. They must be the Satrap's men, who had hidden

themselves inside the grounds ahead of time.

'It's nothing serious, Princess,' he called out. The old turtle was probably just hoping to catch us together in bed!'

The Princess shuddered.

'You stay under the covers, and don't move,' ordered Trinket. 'I'll stand guard outside the door. If there's a real fire, I'll carry you out.'

'Darling Trinket! You're so good to me!'

Trinket stood in the doorway and shouted into the garden'

'Is there anyone out there' Quick, save the Princess!'

He was answered at once by one of the Satrap's guards'

'Lord Wei, a fire has just broken out, and our master has sent the Young Prince to protect Her Royal Highness.'

The next instant Trinket saw men with lanterns in every corner of the garden.

Coming towards him he identified the figure of Wu Yingxiong, the Little Traitor himself. He had clearly been put in charge of the search for Hatiemo, the missing Mongol envoy.

'So they've sent him to find Hatty-it must be a very important assignment. That proves they really are plotting with the Mongols and the Russians.'

'Is all safe in Her Highness' apartment?" He could hear Young Wu's voice.

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'Lord Wei is there,' answered one of the guards.

‘I am most obliged to you, Lord Wei,’ said Wu.

‘What for?’ mumbled Trinket silently to himself. ‘For having a quick cuddle with your princess’ The pleasure’s all mine!’

His own Imperial Guards could now be seen rushing into the garden, roused from their beds, some of them only in their shirtsleeves. Trinket stationed them around the building. Zhang Kangnian tugged him by the sleeve.

There’s something funny going on here, my Colonel’ he muttered.

‘What do you mean’ asked Trinket.

‘Well, the minute the fire alarm was sounded, the Satrap’s men came swarming over the walls and began searching the entire garden. They were obviously out there ready, lying in wait. Some of our people put up a bit of resistance, but there’s simply no stopping them.’

The Satrap must think we’re onto him,’ said Trinket. This makes it all the more obvious that he’s planning a rebellion.’

Zhang Kangnian registered an appropriate level of shock.

‘Anyway,’ continued Trinket, ‘tell your men not to interfere with their search. Let them get on with it.’

Zhang gave the necessary orders.

Trinket went up to the Little Traitor.

‘I must congratulate you, sir’ he commented. ‘You’re even smarter than the great strategist Sleeping Dragon, from the time of the Three Kingdoms!’

‘You’re making fun of me,’ returned a somewhat puzzled Wu.

‘Not at all’ protested Trinket. ‘Your timing is quite brilliant! By some stroke of genius you seem to have worked out exactly when the fire was going to break out, so you had your men all dressed and ready to save the Princess in the nick of time.’

Wu flushed.

‘It was pure luck actually! We had no idea this, . . . er, fire thing was going to happen. As a matter of fact we were on our way back from a bit of a banquet being held by my brother’in’law, Xia Guoxiang, when we saw the flames.’

Trinket nodded.

‘Of course. That proves I was right. You are smart. You’re even smarter than Sleeping Dragon. Fancy going to "a bit of" a banquet at your brother’in’law’s with a fully equipped fire brigade in tow . . .’

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Wu flushed again. His alibi had been totally transparent.

The fire danger is extreme at the moment’, he mumbled rather lamely. ‘I thought it best to be on the safe side.’

‘I see. Next time you’re at a party, why not take a few regiments of builders, bricklayers, plasterers, and joiners with you as well. You never know. They might come in handy if you ever get called out to do a spot of impromptu construction work.’

Wu laughed ruefully, and turned to his aide’de’camp.

‘Go and tell the commander of the fire brigade that Lord Wei is not too pleased with his work. He’d better do things right, or I’ll break his legs.’

‘But what would you do with him then?’ quipped Trinket.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, where would you employ an officer with broken legs? Unless of course you’re planning to open another prison that specializes in broken legs and amputations. . . .’

This obvious reference to the fate of Trinket’s unfortunate friend Yang Yizhi brought a nasty scowl to Young Wu’s face. So Trinket knew all about Lu Yifeng and the unpleasant things that went on in the Black Hole. . . .

Presently the Satrap’s guards reported that the fire had been successfully brought under control. Trinket watched them carefully, but could not work out what secret code they were using (if any). All he could tell was that Young Wu was displeased with the way the operation was proceeding-presumably because they

had failed to locate Hatty. Then suddenly a guard came rushing up to say that the fire had broken out again, and was spreading towards the very courtyard they

were standing in. The Young Prince was advised to leave at once. Trinket noticed

that the guard, as he spoke to Wu, crooked the thumb and index finger of his

right hand and held them against his knee' that was clearly the sign that the search for Hatty was about to be called off.

'Lord Wei' said Wu, 'since the fire seems to be spreading this way, I'm afraid we must advise Her Highness to leave.'

Trinket understood. The only premises left to search were the Princess' own private quarters. Something about their sneaky way of carrying on provoked Trinket to one of his reckless fits of bravado. He proceeded to crook the thumb and first finger of his right hand and wave them in front of Young Wu's face. Wu

started, as did his guards.

'Lord Wei. . .' stammered Wu. 'What are you trying to-'

'Don't you understand the signal' laughed Trinket.

'Signal' Wu tried to remain calm. 'What signal' Oh, of course, you mean money'

Her Highness wants money if she is to agree to move"

'You crafty little turtle'head of a traitor!' thought Trinket to himself. He sniggered, but said nothing.

The money can be easily settled between us,' went on Wu. 'After all, we're brothers.'

'Very generous of you, my Prince,' returned Trinket. 'Would you be so good as to

go in there now and settle this little financial matter with Her Highness yourself' After all, you're virtually husband and wife already.'

He was thinking to himself'

'That way you can see for yourself that the Big Mongol isn't in there.'

Wu hesitated a moment, and then nodded. He pushed open the door and walked on

into the Princess' outer room. From the door leading into the inner apartment he called out'

'It is your subject Wu Yingxiong. I have come with some of my guards to save Your Highness. The fire seems to be spreading this way. We must advise you to leave.'

A ladylike little cough of protest could be heard from within.

‘I may not be her husband yet,’ thought Wu to himself, ‘but we are after all betrothed, and in circumstances like these I can surely be forgiven for entering her room. No one else would dare go in, and we must complete the search!’

He pushed open the inner door and strode on in.

A Strange Mutilation, and an Attempted Suicide

Trinket and the various guards waited outside. Minutes went by, and all was silent.

Still more minutes went by. The guards began to exchange little looks and knowing smiles, all thinking one and the same thought ‘the loving couple’s first face’to’face encounter, the hugs, the kisses . . . Trinket himself began to feel more than a touch of jealousy. He was certain that Young Wu’s intentions were far from romantic; but with someone as insatiable and unpredictable as the Princess you could never tell.

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Suddenly there was an ear’piercing scream. It was the Princess.

‘Vile monster! No I won’t let you have your way with me! Never! Out of my sight!’

More looks and stifled giggles from the guards. So their master had not been able to wait!

‘Leave my clothes alone! You ... you ... Get out! Help! Rape! Rape! Help!’

Giggles turned into laughter. Wu really was rather an oaf, they were all thinking, not to be able to wait until his wedding day. The Imperial Guards watched Trinket carefully, waiting for a sign to intervene on the Princess’ behalf (though if the truth be known they thought this was a matter best left to the young couple to sort out between themselves). Trinket for his part was becoming quite agitated. What if the rascal had actually tried to use violence on the Princess’

‘Come on out of there, sir!’ he cried. ‘Don’t offend Her Highness.’

‘Help’

Another scream from the Princess, even louder and more urgent this time. Trinket

got quite a fright. Beckoning to his men, and crying ‘To the rescue!’, he burst into the outer room. He was followed by a few of his own guards and some of the

Satrap’s. The inner door into the Princess’ bedroom was wide open, and they

could see her lying on the bed, her pale legs poking out at the bottom of the bed from under her snow'white quilt, her bare arms protruding at either side. Under the bedclothes she was obviously stark naked. Young Wu was naked too.

But

he was not on the bed. He was lying face down and motionless on the floor, and smears of blood were clearly visible on his lower body. He had a dagger gripped in his hand. The scene was enough to strike terror into the heart of Trinket and the guards. The Satrap's men hurried over to ascertain whether the Young Prince

was still alive, and were relieved to find him breathing, though unconscious.

'He was trying to . . .' blurted out the Princess. 'He's a foul creature!

Disgusting! Who is he anyway' Lord Wei, have this vile beast arrested and killed

at once!'

'But Your Highness, this is your husband'to'be, Young Prince Wu!' replied Trinket.

'He can't be! Not him! Impossible! The way he behaved! He stripped me naked, then he took off all his clothes and tried to rape me! Kill him, the monster!'

The Palace Guards were filled with angry indignation, that the sister of their Emperor should have been defiled in this way, her chastity violated (little did they know ...). The Satrap's guards for their part stood there looking decidedly sheepish. Some of the smarter ones took the opportunity to have a quick snoop around for Hatty. But there was no sign of him.

Suddenly one of them who had been ministering to Young Wu gave a great cry.

'His Highness has been . . . his private parts are . . .'

In the heat of the moment the men had at first taken the blood on Wu's limbs to

be evidence of his recent activities with the virgin Princess; but as time went by and the blood continued to flow, they realized that he was himself seriously hurt. Horrified, they hurried to apply balm to the wound.

'Wu Yingxiong has committed an outrage on Her Highness' barked Trinket. 'He is

to be detained and questioned, and the matter reported to His Majesty!'

The Palace Guards leapt into action. None of the Satrap's men resisted, though one of them pleaded somewhat feebly with Trinket to let them take their master

back to the Satrap's palace for medical attention. Trinket was adamant, and

ordered everyone out of the Princess' bedroom. They all trooped out, carrying Young Wu with them, and leaving Trinket alone with the Princess. All of a sudden

she gave a crafty smile, and beckoned to Trinket. He went over to her bed. She threw her arms around him and whispered in his ear'

'I chopped his dong and balls right off!'

'You did what!' cried the horrified Trinket.

The Princess breathed into his ear, and went on'

'First I pointed that gun thing at him, and made him take all his clothes off. Then I bashed him on the head with the gun'handle, till he passed out. Then I cut off those disgusting things of his. So! Now he'll never be able to be my husband-just my pathetic little eunuch slave!'

Trinket did not know whether to burst out laughing, or panic completely.

'You've really gone and made a mess of things now!'

'What do you mean' You're the one I love! Anyway, I made it sound like rape. Didn't you hear me screaming"

Trinket nodded.

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Then we're in the clear' she went on. 'When the Satrap finds out what I've done,

he'll be angry, but he'll be too ashamed of his son to do anything about it.'

'But you must have a good story, and stick to it very carefully' said Trinket, his imagination working overtime. 'Listen, this is the way it happened. He tried to rape you, he took all his clothes off, he had the dagger in his hand, you resisted, he slipped, and he-'

The Princess buried her head in the quilt and let out a little peal of laughter.

'That's it!' she murmured. 'He did it! He chopped off his own dong by mistake!'

Trinket communicated this version of events to his guards. There were a few startled laughs, and a lot of muttered comments to the effect that Wu had dealt himself an appropriate punishment for his own barbaric behaviour. Those of the

Satrap's men who had stayed behind listened shamefaced.

Other members of the contingent sent by the Satrap meanwhile went through the

motions of putting out the 'fire', and then returned to report the whole disastrous episode to their master. A doctor was sent for urgently to see to Young Wu's wounds. The Imperial Guards for their part made sure that a vivid retelling of the story made the rounds of Kunming's tea-houses and wine-shops. The Satrap lost no time. He hurried over to the Princess' quarters, and kowtowed

outside her door, humbly apologizing for his son's terrible misdemeanour.

Trinket stood beside him, pulling a long face.

'I'm afraid he has really gone too far this time.'

'I know, I know!' grovelled Wu. 'I'm absolutely counting on you to put in a good word for me with the Princess.'

'Of course I'll do my best' replied Trinket. 'But we both know how difficult Her Royal Highness can be.'

He called from the door'

'Your Highness, Satrap Wu is here. He's come to apologize for his son's crime, and to beg for mercy.'

A moment of total silence passed. Then there came a sudden thud, something like

the sound of a stool hitting the ground. Trinket and the Satrap looked at each other in horror.

'No, Your Highness!' one of the Princess' maids cried out from within. 'No! How

could you think of doing such a terrible thing!'

The thought that the dishonoured Princess might have succeeded in doing away

with herself drained the last drop of colour from the Satrap's face.

'If she has taken her life' he was thinking secretly to himself, 'my hand will be forced! I shall have to declare an open rebellion at once-and I am not ready yet!'

The voices of women sobbing reached them from the inner room. A maid came rushing out'

'Lord Wei! Come quickly! Her Highness has hung herself!'

After a moment's hesitation Trinket went on in, to find seven or eight of the maids weeping dramatically around the bed. The Princess' eyes were closed, her

breathing was faint, and there was a clearly visible red mark round her neck.

One end of a cord was hanging from a beam, the other end was strewn on the bed,

while a stool lay on its side on the floor.

‘Clever little slut!’ thought Trinket to himself. ‘Nice bit of stage’ management! Excellent kungfu!’

He stood by the bedside and gave her a discreet pinch on the upper lip. She let out a barely audible squeal and slowly opened her eyes. Then, listlessly (but audibly) said’

‘I... I don’t want to go on living. . . .’

‘Your Highness,’ pleaded the loyal Viscount Trinket Wei loudly, ‘your life is so precious, you must try to look beyond this moment of despair. Satrap Wu is outside at this very moment, down on his knees, begging you for forgiveness.’

‘Just tell him to take that horrible son of his away and kill him!’

Without the maids noticing, Trinket reached under the covers and gave the Princess another pinch. She fought the temptation to laugh and instead dug a fingernail hard into the back of his hand, moaning’

‘I just want to die! How can I ever look the world in the face again’”

From outside the Satrap indistinctly heard the sound of the Princess’ voice and heaved a huge sigh of relief. At least she was still alive! But what had she got left to live for, he reflected, now that his son’s conjugal equipment had been physically removed! What a young idiot the boy had been! How could he possibly hush the whole thing up now’

Presently Trinket emerged from the inner room, shaking his head gravely. The Satrap hurried forward.

‘How is Her Highness’” he mumbled.

‘Alive,’ replied Trinket. ‘But determined to kill herself. And once she’s set her mind on something, we all know what she can be like. I’ve told her maids to keep a close watch on her, and not to let her out of their sight. I’m worried she may try to take poison next, sir.’

The Satrap’s face darkened. He nodded.

‘Yes, yes. We must take the utmost care to stop anything like that from happening.’

Secretly he was thinking to himself’

‘Our only hope is that the Princess may still be too young to understand what has happened, too innocent to know the value of what my son has lost, and of what she will be deprived of as a result!’ The poor, deluded Satrap-little did he know. . . .

He next broached with Trinket the possibility of keeping the news of his son's unfortunate mutilation a secret from the Emperor. After all, His Majesty was so busy, he argued, it would be an act of loyalty to spare him (and the Empress Dowager) the gruesome details and the inevitable distress that such news would

cause. Trinket indicated that he was quite amenable to this idea. But how, he asked, were they to silence all the other witnesses'

'I'll think of something,' replied the Satrap.

The Satrap had indeed already started thinking of a way to resolve this problem.

He was plotting to lay an ambush for Trinket and his entire party on their way home-his own men, disguised as robbers, would lie in wait for them in some lonely part of Guangxi Province. That way he could dispose of the lot of them. Dead men tell no tales. The blame for their deaths would fall on the Provincial Governor of Guangxi, who would be taken to task for not having maintained law

and order in his domain. That particular governor was a certain Sun Yanling, who

had married the daughter of Kong Youde, a former general serving the Manchu cause. The daughter was held in great favour at Court, and had even been granted

the status of a minor princess on account of her father's services. It would fall to her to sort the whole thing out.

Needless to say, Trinket was totally unaware of what was going through the Satrap's mind, and attributed his long silence to a more general concern lest the news of his son's disgrace should leak out.

The two of them now went to consult with the physician who had been examining

the extent of Young Wu's injuries.

'His life is in no danger' reported the doctor. 'But as for his ... I fear that.

..'

The Satrap nodded and commented 'At least he is still alive!'

....;. ."

He gave orders for his son to be taken home, and continued to occupy Trinket in

conversation, fearful that he might try to interrogate Young Wu. Only when his son had left the An Fu Gardens did the Satrap take his leave.

Trinket for his part began to reflect on what Young Wu himself might say once he

regained consciousness. But in the circumstances it was highly unlikely that his version of events would be believed by anyone-even by his own father.

Returning to his quarters, he learned from his Triad Brothers that the brothel 'rape', and the 'killing' of the fake Hatty, had all gone according to plan; they could now proceed to Peking with their Mongol witness, who would be made to testify to the Satrap's mutinous intentions, and to his sinister plan to create an anti-Imperial alliance with the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Russians. Trinket reflected that in view of recent developments, it would be prudent not to send the party off to Peking there and then. The Satrap might suspect that he was reporting to the Emperor on his son's misdemeanours.

Altogether it had been an extremely hectic night. The Triads were just about to leave Trinket, and go on their way, when a distraught Captain Zhao of the Palace Guards came knocking on Trinket's door, bearing the most astonishing tidings'

'Someone has tried to murder the Satrap!'

An Attempt on the Satrap's Life

'Is he dead?' cried the startled Trinket through the door. 'Who did it?' The last thing he wanted was that Captain Zhao should discover him entertaining Triad visitors in his apartment in the dead of the night, so he went outside to speak to him.

'He's still alive,' replied the captain. 'He was only slightly wounded. The person has been arrested. It turns out to have been one of the Princess' maids.'

'Which one?' enquired Trinket. 'What would one of the Princess' maids want to kill the Satrap for?'

Zhao said he had no idea, and Trinket sent him off to try and ascertain more details.

Just as Zhao was about to leave, Trinket's other friend from the Palace Guards, Captain Zhang Kangnian, arrived to report that the maid they had arrested was someone called Ah Kor.

Trinket nearly fainted when he heard Green Girl's name.

'Why . . . why should she want to do such a thing?'

'The Satrap has taken her back to his palace for questioning, to find out who was behind it' was all Zhang could offer by way of reply.

Trinket was utterly devastated at the thought that his darling had been apprehended. Captain Zhao suggested that perhaps this maid had wanted to strike

a blow on behalf of her injured mistress the Princess, and Trinket clutched at this straw.

‘Yes! That must be it! We would never have chosen a lovely girl like that to murder the Satrap.’

For a moment, Trinket had forgotten that he was talking to two Captains of the Guard, not to his Triad friends. The two captains looked at one another in bewilderment. Had their commanding officer taken leave of his senses’

‘The Satrap will most probably have the maid quietly put to death’ commented Zhang. The last thing he wants at the moment is a lot of fuss.’

‘No! She mustn’t be killed!’ Trinket’s voice was trembling. ‘If she dies, I die too! I’ll stab that traitor of a turtle myself!’

Zhang and Zhao exchanged another startled glance. Had their Colonel sent the girl himself? Had he given orders for the Satrap to be killed, in a fit of anger at the Princess’ disgraceful treatment? Neither of them dared say a word.

Trinket seemed to read their thoughts.

‘Don’t worry, this has nothing to do with us. But what are we to do’

The two captains were hugely relieved to learn that he was not behind the attempted murder of Satrap Wu. Trinket then sent them to call on the Satrap with

his visiting’card, and to request that he release the maid (for whose wicked deed he offered no excuses) back into the custody of the Princess, who would herself make sure that she was properly punished. They set off reluctantly on this mission, thinking to themselves that it would have been far better to wash their hands of the whole business and leave the maid to die.

Trinket now went to call on the one’armed White Nun (or Sister Tribulation, to use her proper nom de religion). He found her in the midst of her meditations. When she had finished he approached her and said’

‘Shifu . . . have you heard the news about . . . Green’ Ah Kor’

‘What news’ What are you in such a state about’

‘Shifu! She. . . she went to kill the Satrap. . . and she’s been caught!’

Trinket saw a steely light flash in Sister Tribulation’s eyes.

‘Did she succeed’ Is he dead’

‘No. He’s still alive. And she was captured by the Satrap’s men!’

Tribulation sighed.

‘Useless creature!’

At first Trinket was astonished to see her so unconcerned for the welfare of her own disciple. Then'

'I understand!' he cried. 'You've got a plan to save her, haven't you'

Tribulation shook her head.

'No. I haven't got anything of the kind.'

She may not care about her, thought Trinket, but I do! I care about her a lot!

'Don't you see' he cried. The Satrap's going to kill her! In fact, he's probably killed her already. And then he plans to find out who sent her!'

'It was me,' said the nun calmly. 'I sent her. Let him come and find me, if he has the courage!'

In a way this did not surprise Trinket. After all, she was the daughter of the last Emperor of the Ming, and it was Satrap Wu who had betrayed the Empire into the hands of the Manchus. It was only natural that she should hate him to the very core of her being. Had she not already herself tried to kill the Manchu Emperor, on Wutai' But he was surprised that she should have sent an inexperienced fighter such as Green to carry out this mission. Was she deliberately sending her to her death' He did not dare voice this doubt. Instead he said'

'I know Green would never betray you, Shifu.'

'Really'

The nun closed her eyes.

Trinket left her there, and walked back to his own apartment. Dawn was breaking,
but it was still too early for captains Zhao and

Zhang to have returned. He paced anxiously up and down the hall, from time to time sending one of the guards to find out if there was any news, but to no avail. Finally the suspense was too much for him. He selected a few cavalry guards and set off at their head in the direction of the Satrap's palace. When he came to the Temple of Dharma Wisdom, a mile or two from the palace, he tethered his own horse and sent the other men ahead post'haste to scout out

the
situation.

Half an hour or so later he heard the sound of clattering hooves, and Zhang Kangnian came galloping up.

‘Captain Zhao and I conveyed your message to the Satrap. He refused to receive us. Captain Zhao is still there waiting.’

Trinket stamped his foot angrily.

That dirty turtle’head has a nerve!’

Zhang tried to point out to his superior that it was nothing out of the ordinary for such an eminent person as the Satrap (the second most powerful person in the land after the Emperor, after all) to refuse to receive a couple of junior officers.

‘I shall call on him myself!’ cried Trinket. ‘Come with me!’

Trinket would not be dissuaded. He vaulted onto a horse, and galloped to the Satrap’s palace. The Satrap’s guards welcomed him and went hurrying on ahead to announce his arrival.

At the Satrap’s Palace

Two of the Satrap’s top officers came out to receive Trinket’ General Xia, and Brigadier Ma Bao. Xia was married to the Satrap’s daughter and was commander’in’chief of the Satrap’s army. He bowed politely to Trinket.

‘Viscount Wei, I think you must have heard the news of the attempt on Prince Wu’s life. He is seriously wounded, and hopes you will forgive him for being unable to receive you in person.’

‘I thought he had escaped unharmed!’ exclaimed Trinket.

‘Indeed not. His Highness received a sword wound in the chest,’ replied Xia, speaking in a tone of subdued gravity. The blade entered to a depth of some three or four inches.’

‘But that’s terrible!’ cried Trinket.

General Xia frowned.

‘It is too soon to know whether His Highness will live. We have not wanted to cause a disturbance, and have withheld the

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news from the public. Instead we have let it be understood that His Highness

escaped unharmed. But since you are his close friend, sir, we considered it imperative to tell you the truth.'

'I must go in and call on His Highness,' said Trinket. 'I insist.'

Xia and Ma exchanged glances.

'Follow us! This way, sir!'

The two officers led the way to the Satrap's private apartment. Xia announced that Viscount Trinket had come to visit and they heard a muffled groan from within the canopied bedstead. General Xia drew aside the curtain and they saw the Satrap frowning and clenching his teeth with pain. His covers were still spattered with blood, and his chest was heavily bandaged. Blood continued to seep through the bandages. Two physicians stood by the bedside, both the picture of gloom.

Trinket had not been prepared to see Wu so badly wounded. In that instant his anger evaporated, and was replaced by a feeling of urgent concern' not for the Satrap (he did not care a fig whether the fat villain lived or died), but for Green. The Satrap's death would make it even harder to rescue her.

'Your Highness, is the pain very bad' he mumbled.

Wu groaned and stared lifelessly in front of him.

'I'm . . . done for. ... Go and fetch that useless son of mine and . . . kill him! This is all his doing!'

General Xia dared not say anything in reply. He let down the curtain and led Trinket out of the room.

'That our great Prince should die like this!' he lamented aloud. 'After all he has done for his country! After a lifetime's devotion! It is so unjust!'

'Lifetime's devotion my twat!' Trinket expostulated silently to himself. 'He lived like a dog, and he deserves to die like a dog!'

Aloud he said'

'General Xia, I think the Prince will certainly live.'

'How can you tell, sir''

‘Because I can read men’s futures in their faces. His face speaks of a great future. I can tell that one day he will be raised to a height even greater than his present one.’

General Xia’s face darkened when he heard these words, and he hastened to protest that his master had already been raised so high by the great kindness of His Majesty that he could never hope to be raised any higher. Yes, thought Trinket, that’s true enough’

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the only way he can get any higher is by rebelling against the Throne, and becoming Emperor himself! Which you and I both know is exactly what he is planning to do. Which is why you reacted the way you did just now. You were scared that I might know too much. Ha, I think I’ll try and give you another little scare!

‘You too have a face that speaks of great things to come. After all, when he, the Lord and Master, rises, it only makes sense that the man married to his daughter the Princess should have his share of glory.

As he said this, Trinket started walking out of the room. Xia was aghast. The palms of his hands went clammy with fear.

‘Could it be that our confidential plans for the rebellion have leaked out’ he wondered to himself. ‘Or is this young whippersnapper just talking a load of rubbish’

Outside in the corridor Trinket asked him’

Tell me, has the would-be assassin been captured’ What sort of person was it’ Who was behind it’ Some Ming Loyalist’ One of the Mu Family bravos’

‘It’s a woman,’ replied General Xia. ‘Her name is Ah Kor. Someone said she’s in service with the Princess-but I find that hard to believe. I think you are right, she is most probably one of the Mu Family, pretending to be a maid.’

This gave Trinket a visible shock.

‘I see what they’re up to,’ he thought to himself. ‘By passing it off as the work of the Mu Family, and not connected with the Princess, they think they can

get away with killing her. This is looking even worse than I thought.’

‘Has she already been . . .’ Trinket hesitated. ‘Put to death’

‘We are waiting for His Highness to recover. He will want to look into this personally, and decide who was behind the plot.’

Trinket breathed a little more easily. He continued’

‘I should like to visit this young lady myself. I shall be able to tell at once if she is a genuine maid in the Princess’ service.’

‘I hardly think that is necessary, sir,’ countered the general.

‘On the contrary’ I am sure His Majesty will want a full report from me when I

return to the capital,' insisted Trinket. This seemed to work at first, and General Xia mumbled' 'Of course, of course.' But he did nothing. 'What's the matter' Come on. Bring her out here smartish for me to have a look at!

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His anxiety on behalf of his beloved was driving him to forsake all semblance of politeness. After a great deal more bantering exchange, he managed to pressurize

Xia into going in and consulting with his master the Prince. Xia returned after a long interval of time, to report that Prince Wu was still asleep, and that rather than wait indefinitely for him to wake up, he had decided to take the initiative himself.

'So, if you will come this way, sir, I can take you in to see the young woman now.'

The Assassin'

Trinket followed Xia down several walkways until they reached a garden. Between

forty and fifty of the Satrap's crack troops were there, heavily armed, patrolling the place. General Xia presented an official tally and demanded to be let through. The soldiers made way for the two of them, and General Xia led Trinket into a passageway that had been created in the side of an artificial rockery. Presently they came to a large metal door, guarded by two more soldiers. The rockery was, it transpired, masking the entrance to the Satrap's secret jail. There were three metal doors, one after the other, and as they passed through them they descended deeper and deeper underground. Finally they

came to a little room, separated from the rest of the subterranean compound by a

heavy metal grill. Through the grill, it was possible to distinguish the form of a woman seated on the ground, holding her head in both hands and quietly sobbing

to herself. The only light in the room (and it was a very dim one) came from a couple of oil lamps on the walls.

Trinket hurried up to the bars, grasped them in his hands, and gazed intently at the woman.

'Stand up, you!' cried General Xia. 'You have a visitor-an important visitor!'

The woman turned to look, and the lamplight fell on her face. She and Trinket

exchanged a quick glance, and each of them let out a gasp of surprise. She rose to her feet, and as she did so the shackles on her hands and feet made a melancholy clanging sound.

‘What are ... you doing here’ she asked.

To Trinket’s utter astonishment he saw that the woman before him was not Ah Kor at all. She was not Green Girl-but the Little Countess, Mu Jianping!

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IV

Struggling to compose himself, he turned to General Xia.

‘Why have you got her chained up in here’

‘Why, are you acquainted with this woman, sir’ replied the general. ‘Is she one of the Princess’ maids’

He was beginning to sound as bewildered as they were.

‘Is this the one who tried to kill the Sa. . . I mean, Prince Wu’ asked Trinket.

‘That is correct. But what we want to know is, who put her up to it’

‘So they were all wrong,’ thought Trinket to himself. ‘It was the Little Countess who did it. She had a good motive, after all. The Satrap killed her father.’

‘Tell me,’ he asked the general, ‘did she herself say that her name was Ah Kor, and that she was a maid in service with the Princess’

‘As a matter of fact, when we captured her she refused to say anything. Somebody

else recognized her as the Princess’ maid. What do you say, sir’ Is she or isn’t she’

Trinket was thinking.

The Little Countess is married to me too. I have a duty to rescue her as well! I mustn’t be partial.’

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘She is one of the maids. In fact, she’s Her Highness’ favourite maid.’

As he said this he gave the Little Countess a wink.

‘What sort of nonsense did you think you were up to, trying to murder His Highness Prince Wu’ Are you crazy’ Do you want to get yourself killed’ Who sent

you’ Come on, confess, it’ll be easier for you in the end.’

This provoked a spirited response from the Little Countess’

‘That great fat traitor the Satrap is hated by every self-respecting Chinese man and woman in the land! He betrayed our country to the Tartars! Anyone with Chinese blood in their veins would be happy to kill him! My only regret is that I didn’t succeed!’

Trinket put on a little show of anger.

‘You shameless hussy! Have all your years of service in the Palace taught you nothing’ Aren’t you afraid to die”

‘And what about you” retorted the Little Countess. ‘What about all your years in the service of those Tartars’ Have you no shame”

Trinket advanced towards her and cried’

‘You must confess! Who sent you here’ Who else is in this plot with you”

As he advanced, with his back to the general, Trinket was secretly gesticulating and grimacing in such a way as to suggest to the Little Countess that she should somehow implicate General Xia himself in the plot. She tumbled to the idea very quickly.

‘It was html’ she cried, pointing at Xia. ‘He sent me!’

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ shouted Xia angrily.

‘How dare you lie!’ protested the Little Countess. ‘You sent me to kill the Satrap. You said he was an evil man and that everyone wanted him dead. You said that with him out of the way you could . . .’

She was not quite sure of Xia’s rank, and hesitated.

‘Could become even more rich and powerful” Trinket suggested helpfully. ‘So no one would ever scold him and beat him again”

‘Yes, that’s it!’ cried the Little Countess. ‘You said you’d had enough of being treated like that. But you didn’t dare do the thing yourself.’

The general began shouting angrily at the Little Countess, but she paid him no attention.

‘You’d better be careful,’ said Trinket. ‘Do you have any idea who you’re talking to’ This is the Satrap’s son’in’law, General Xia.’

As he said this Trinket secretly stuck his thumb up, to let her know that she was doing a grand job.

‘That makes sense. He told me that when the Satrap was dead, he would be made

Prince of the West. He said he'd make sure I escaped safely, whether I succeeded in killing the Satrap or not. He'd make sure I came to no harm. That's what he said. And now he's locked me up in here. General Xia, I'm waiting for you to stick to your side of the bargain.'

'Any more of that wicked nonsense and I'll beat you till you're all blood and bruises!' roared General Xia in a rage. 'I'll beat you to death!'

He had more or less figured out what the two of them were up to. Somehow he had to put a stop to it, before it got out of hand. He turned to Trinket.

'You surely cannot believe the story this stupid little maid has made up''

Trinket shook his head pensively.

'I don't know. It seems a great deal for her to have made up on her own. We all

know how difficult the Satrap can be. I shall have to wait until he is better and see what he himself has to say about all this.'

This really seemed to put the wind up Xia.

'I beg you, sir, don't mention any of this to Prince Wu. You know how highly he regards you.'

Trinket smiled. Clearly the general was now well and truly rattled. It was tempting to add more fuel to the flames.

'On the contrary, I think it's only right for me to advise the Satrap that the main threat to his person is to be expected from within his own ranks. He is far too heavily guarded and protected for an outsider to get anywhere near him. Of course, if the slightest word of this got out, if you were once suspected, the other high-ranking officers would just love a pretext to bring you down. The safest thing for you to have done would have been to have kitted the girl as soon as she was caught. But it's a bit late for that now. After all, now 7 know about it too. And killing me might be a little trickier, given that I've got a few thousand guards of my own posted outside.'

A bit more of this sort of intimidation, and General Xia seemed convinced that his entire life and future lay in Trinket's hands. Trinket finally came to the point.

'So' there's only one way out of this. I'll do you a huge favour by taking on the responsibility myself. Just hand the girl over to me, and I'll take her back to the Princess. You can say the Princess wants to question her personally about this affair.'

Then, sotto voce to the general'

‘I’ll have her killed myself. I’ll put it out that she refused to confess, and died under torture. I think that should take care of things nicely.’
General Xia was too intelligent not to realize what Trinket was up to.
‘Damn you, you little rat!’ he was thinking to himself. ‘I know perfectly well that the only thing you want is to get her safely out of here. And you have the nerve to make it look like you’re doing me a favour. I just wonder how you come to know her in the first place’
‘Are you quite sure she is one of the Princess’ maids’ he asked out loud. ‘When I questioned her, she seemed to know nothing about the Princess.’LI

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‘She did that on purpose’ returned Trinket. ‘She didn’t want to involve her mistress in this.’

‘Very well then’ said Xia. ‘Your plan does seem the best, and I’ll go along with it. But I shall need something official in writing from you.’

‘Sorry’ said Trinket with a cheeky grin. ‘Don’t know how to. Can’t write a thing. Tell you what, though, I’ll give you this.’

He extracted from his jacket pocket one of the guns that the Satrap had given him.

‘Give your boss this. He’ll know it’s from me. That should be official enough.’

General Xia sent for a couple of jailers to let the Little Countess out of her cell, and to undo her shackles; but he made her keep on the handcuffs. Leading her by a chain attached to the cuffs, he conducted her to the main entrance of the palace, where he handed the chain (and the key for the handcuffs) to Trinket.

‘Be careful now, sir’ he said loudly. ‘You can take her back to the Princess for questioning. But be sure she doesn’t escape.’

Trinket smiled.

‘Don’t you worry! I’ll be back tomorrow to enquire after the Prince’s health.’

The general bowed as Trinket departed.

Story behind a Story

Trinket escorted the Little Countess back to the An Fu Gardens. When they had reached his apartment he closed the door and burst out laughing.

‘So tell me, dear wife, tell your husband what on earth has been going on’

She blushed a deep crimson.

‘Haven’t you got anything nicer to say to me than that’

She held out her hands.

‘Get me out of these horrible things first!’

‘I think I’d better cuddle you first’ retorted Trinket. ‘If I undo those, you’ll never let me.’

So saying, he put his arms round the Little Countess’ deliciously slender waist.

‘You’re bullying me again!’ she cried angrily.

‘Very well, I won’t bully you then. Why don’t you bully me, instead.’

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He held his cheek to her face and pressed it gently against her lips. Then he took out the key and unlocked her handcuffs, and they sat down side by side on the bed. He asked her to tell the whole story.

‘Leader Hong and Madame Hong’ she began, ‘were very grateful for the package you

sent them. They gave me some of the Antidote, and I was able to clear the poison

out of my body. They sent the Deputy Red Dragon Marshal to bring me to you. They

said they knew that you’d be missing me so they wanted me to-’

She hesitated, just long enough for Trinket to put in’

To marry me!’

‘No!’ she cried. ‘Not at all! Madame thought that my being so far away might be making your mission harder to accomplish. That’s all.’

Trinket could see she was on the verge of tears, and softened his tone.

‘Very well. I believe you. But what about you’ Did you miss me too’

The Little Countess turned away, and as she did so nodded her head almost imperceptibly.

‘What about you and the Deputy Red Dragon Marshal’ What were you two up to,

trying to kill the Satrap”

‘We arrived in Kunming three days ago. I ran into my brother and Shifu Iron Dragon Liu outside the town.’

‘Oh, I had no idea they were here!’ exclaimed Trinket.

‘Yes, they are. And Blue Tiger-Ao Biao-and my brother’s arms Liu Yizhou are here

too’ said the Little Countess. ‘Shifu Wu was too ill to travel. They’d made a plan to murder the Princess Ning.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Trinket in some consternation. ‘What would they want to do that for? What has she ever done to harm the Mu Family?’

‘The idea was to provoke the Emperor into punishing Satrap Wu’ then the Satrap

would be forced to come out into the open and declare a revolt against the Throne.’

These people are more cunning and ruthless than I thought!’ reflected Trinket.

‘I’ve been thinking all along about how to get at the Satrap, and never spared a thought for the Princess’ safety!’

‘So what did you do?’ he asked.

‘I was to pretend to be one of the Princess’ maids, and get close to her. Once I’d killed her, they would come in and rescue me. But the Deputy Red Dragon Marshal was concerned for your safety, as the Princess’ escort. So I thought I had better consult with you first. When Iron Dragon Liu got to hear of this, he drew a sword on the Deputy Marshal and killed him there and then!’

The Little Countess was shaking with emotion as she recalled these events. Trinket tried to comfort her.

‘Don’t be afraid. It was very sweet of you to think of me.’

She began sobbing, and great tears coursed down her cheeks.

‘But then . . . when you saw me again . . . the first thing you did was to start bullying me. . . .’

Trinket took her hand and administered himself a slap in the face.

‘What a horrible creature I am! Bad boy!’

Slap! Slap!

‘Stop!’ cried the Little Countess, tugging her hand away. ‘Don’t do that!’

He took her hand again, and this time used it to tap himself lightly on the cheek.

‘I am a bad boy, I am! I should have rescued my little wife much sooner from the clutches of the wicked Satrap!’

‘But you did rescue me in the end!’ said the still tearful Little Countess. ‘And now we must think of a way of rescuing my brother and Iron Dragon Liu.’

‘Were they caught too’ said Trinket in some alarm.

‘The day before yesterday,’ she began, ‘the house where we were staying was surrounded by the Satrap’s men. They were too many for us. Brother Ao was killed. My brother, Iron Dragon Liu, and I were taken prisoner.’

Trinket sighed.

‘It’s very sad that the Blue Tiger is dead. But tell me, if you were taken prisoner, how were you able to get anywhere near the Satrap’

‘I wasn’t! I wish I had, but how could I possibly, with all those chains on’

Trinket was more perplexed than ever.

‘So where have you been since then’

‘First I was kept in a darkened room. Then today I was moved to that black hole of a dungeon where you found me.’

Trinket sensed that all was not well. He had clearly fallen for some ruse of General Xia’s. But exactly what was going on he could not fathom.

‘So the Satrap’s wounds were not inflicted by you’

‘Of course not. I’ve never set eyes on him. Tell me, do you think he’s going to die’

Trinket shook his head.

‘I don’t know. Did you tell them who you were’

‘No. I didn’t tell them anything. The officer interrogating me got angry, and asked me if I was dumb. Remember, you once said I was dumb’

Trinket lent over her and kissed her gently.

‘Yes, my little dumb girl, and I still want to carve a turtle on your pretty little face.’

The Little Countess felt a strange sense of pleasure at Trinket’s words, and there was a glow of affection in her eyes. But she did not turn to look at him.

Trinket was still brooding on the significance of what had happened. Why would

General Xia have wanted to pretend that the Little Countess was one of the Princess’ maids’ Unless he was testing him out, to see if Trinket knew her. That must be it. And now he had recognized her, and Xia would have every reason to believe that Trinket himself was involved with the Mu Family. He’d fallen right into the trap.

For all his instinctive cunning, Trinket was a child by comparison with seasoned

plotters and schemers such as the Satrap and General Xia. As he thought about the danger he was in, he broke out in a cold sweat.

‘You stay here for a while,’ he said to the Little Countess. ‘I must go and see what I can do about rescuing your brother and Iron Dragon Liu.’

At His Wits’End ,

Trinket made his way to the western wing of the compound, and summoned his Triad

friends to a meeting. He briefed them on the latest turn of events. They too suspected some sort of plot on the part of the Satrap.

‘Perhaps he has seen through the way we "killed" Hatiemo” suggested Father Obscurus.

‘But how did the Satrap know where to find the Mu Family” asked Butcher Qian.

‘I bet it’s that weasel Liu Yizhou’ Trinket speculated aloud. ‘He’s one of them, but he’s got a grudge against me, and he’s a sneak and a coward. I bet he told them.’

‘You’re probably right. But Master, how could the Satrap ever suspect you of being involved with the Mu Family’ So far as he’s concerned, you’re the Emperor’s trusted envoy.’

Butcher Qian frowned and scratched his head as he attempted to puzzle this one

out.

‘If you ask me,’ put in Tertius, ‘it’s all a coincidence.’

‘What do you mean” asked Trinket.

‘Someone else really did try to kill the Satrap. It probably was that maid of the Princess’. Why else would everybody be saying so”

‘You may be right there,’ said Trinket. ‘Ah Kor has gone missing. She’s probably being held by the Satrap’s men as well.’

‘So’ continued Tertius, ‘they knew you would come for Ah Kor, and they substituted the Mu girl. That way they could hand her over to you, without giving up the real would’be assassin. They’ve put you in a very tricky situation.’

Trinket slapped his thigh.

‘Yes, I’m sure that’s it. You’re certainly a smart one, Tertius, to figure it all out like that. Popping mamma’s! They probably had no idea I even knew the Little Countess! This is going to be very hard to explain to the Satrap.’

‘You’ll have to brazen it out, Master,’ went on the subtle Tertius. ‘Just tell the Satrap that you’ve been given special orders by the Emperor to do undercover work, which means fraternizing with the Mu Family. . . .’

Trinket burst out laughing.

‘Great idea! But will he fall for it”

He had been about to say that Tertius’ plan was pretty much what the Emperor had indeed once asked him to do (on the occasion when he had released Shaker Wu), but thought better of divulging to his Triad friends too many of the convolutions of his own complicated existence.

‘Even if he doesn’t believe you,’ said Butcher Qian, ‘he’ll have to go along with it. And once we’re out of his part of the world, who cares what he thinks anyway”

‘There’s one thing I find most upsetting in all of this,’ went on Trinket. ‘The

Mu Family knew I was escorting the Princess, but they went ahead with a plan to murder her. That doesn't seem a very honourable thing to do. If Shaker Wu were

here today, I hardly think he'd approve of what they did.'

The subtlety of Tertius was once more brought into play.

'They probably worked it out this way' since your loyalty to the Emperor and the

Tartar cause is only a pretence, therefore you would not take their planned assassination of the Princess amiss. Your real loyalty is to the cause. We all believe in the same cause. We Triads may have had our differences with the Mu Family in the past, but in the end we're on the same side' we cannot stand by now and not go to their aid.'

There followed a debate on the possible ways of extricating the Young Count and

Iron Dragon Liu from the Satrap's clutches. Nothing seemed to present itself as a feasible plan.

'Let's wait until I have been to speak with the Satrap,' said Trinket. 'Then we'll see how the land lies.'

The Triads dispersed, and Trinket was left on his own to brood on the complex twists and turns of recent events. Perhaps the Green Girl had never tried to kill the Satrap' Perhaps she had never been captured' Perhaps it was all empty rumour' He made his way to the White Nun's quarters, and asked her where Ah Kor

was.

'Has Satrap Wu let her go' was the Nun's reply. 'Does he know the truth'

'Know what truth' asked Trinket. There was something peculiar about the way the

Nun had spoken. Her voice was trembling. She said nothing for a moment or two.

Then'

'How badly was the Traitor wounded'

'Badly. I saw him a little while ago. He was still unconscious. He may well not live.'

There was the faintest trace of a smile on the Nun's face. Then she frowned.

'He must be told.'

Trinket wanted to ask what it was that Wu Sangui needed to be told, but there was something about the intensely serious expression on the Nun's face that did

not encourage further questions. He left her alone in her room, and went out to enquire if anyone else had seen Ah Kor leave the An Fu Gardens. But no one recollected having seen her. He made his way back to his own

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room, exhausted, and after exchanging a few words with the Little Countess, fell asleep.

The Peerless

Trinket called on the Satrap the following day to enquire after his health, and was received by his second son, who informed him that there had been no change in his father's condition' the Satrap was sleeping and could not be disturbed. Further enquiry elicited the information that General Xia was out and about in the city with a battalion of soldiers, maintaining law and order and dealing with any signs of possible unrest. On the subject of the Satrap's eldest son, and his unmentionable wound, Trinket received the vaguest possible reply.

Trinket sensed a growing suspicion and hostility emanating from the Satrap's camp. This was going to make it harder than ever, if not altogether impossible, to secure the release of the remaining members of the Mu Family. As for the Green Girl, to try and rescue her now would probably provoke an all-out attack from the Satrap's men, and might lead to his own premature demise in the city of Kunming.

The following day, Trinket was discussing the deteriorating situation with his Triad friends, when the arrival was announced at the outer gate of an elderly Taoist nun, with a personal letter for him. Trinket asked one of the Triads to open the letter, which was written on yellow paper, and read it out to him. It began'

'Ah Kor is in serious trouble-'

'What!'

Trinket jumped up in alarm. The Triads knew nothing of his own involvement with the White Nun and her beautiful disciple. He must tread carefully.

Those are the exact words with which the letter begins,' said Tertius, who had read them out. The rest seems to make very little sense, and it is not even signed at the end. It just says that you are to go with the bearer of the letter, if you wish to discuss how to rescue this person.'

Trinket hurried out to the main gate, in one of the side-rooms of which he found

the nun waiting patiently for him, seated on a bench. She rose to her feet and bowed.

‘Who sent you here’ asked Trinket.

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‘Please follow me, sir’ replied the old lady. ‘All will become clear.’

‘Where to’

‘If you will just follow me, sir. I really can’t say.’

‘Very well.’

Trinket ordered a horse and carriage, but the old nun begged him to travel with her in her simple cart, so as not to attract undue attention. Apothecary Xu, Butcher Qian, and other Triads insisted on following at a discreet distance, fearful that this might be a trap set by one of Trinket’s adversaries.

They left the city by the west gate and were soon in the countryside, which grew more and more lonely and desolate. Trinket began to have misgivings.

‘Where are we going’ he asked.

‘We’ll be there soon’ replied the old nun, inscrutable as ever.

A mile or two further on they changed course and began heading north down a narrow track, just wide enough for their simple cart. Finally they arrived outside what seemed to be a tiny hermitage.

‘Here we are’ said the old nun. Trinket alighted from the cart. Above the entrance hung an inscription, of which he was able to decipher the first word ‘Three.’ Glancing over his shoulder, he spotted his Triad Brothers lurking in the distance. Somewhat reassured, he walked in with the old nun.

The interior of the hermitage was spotlessly clean and immaculately tidy. In the

centre of the courtyard were several camellia bushes and a Judas tree, while a statue of the Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin, gazed down on them from the main hall

directly ahead. It was a fine figure, with a feminine, if slightly austere, charm. Trinket was favourably impressed.

The old nun led him to a side’room on the east side, and served tea. As Trinket raised the lid of his cup, the most delicious aroma assailed his nostrils. The brew was a wonderful pale green colour, and he immediately recognized it as a fine blend of Dragon Well tea from the Hangzhou region. These must be well’heeled nuns, he thought to himself, to be able to afford such expensive tea in this remote corner of the south’west. Next the old nun came in carrying a lacquer tray on which was an exquisite white porcelain bowl filled with an assortment of snacks’ pine’nut candies, a piece of walnut cake, slices of dried peach, rose’petal flavoured cookies, candied almonds, green bean’cake, lotus pastry, and arbutus berries preserved

in
cassia honey. These were all choice Suzhou delicacies, the sort of thing Trinket was only too familiar with from his own childhood in the southern city of Yangzhou. The Madame at Vernal Delights regularly served her customers with such things, and from time to time the young Trinket had managed to nibble one or two when no one was looking. Seeing them once again in this far-flung region was like being reunited with a gang of old friends!

‘Old Trink’s beginning to feel quite at home!’ he chuckled to himself in delight.

The old nun withdrew and left Trinket alone in the room. Clouds of sandalwood incense smoke drifted from a little bronze censer on the table. Trinket recognized the exact variety of sandalwood he had encountered it once in the Empress Dowager’s palace. The thought brought him to his feet with a start.

‘Oh no! Disaster! Not her’ Don’t tell me the Old Whore’s here! That means big trouble!’

At that very moment, he heard soft footsteps outside the door, and a woman came in. She brought her hands together in the traditional Buddhist salutation, and bowed to her visitor.

‘Welcome to my simple hermitage, Lord Wei,’ she said. Her voice had a clear, gentle ring to it, and she spoke with a discernible Suzhou accent.

She looked like a woman of about forty years of age, and was wearing a pale yellow nun’s habit. The statue Trinket had seen in the main hall was of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, but this nun had lustrous long hair in the free manner of a Taoist nun. She also had the most wondrously luminous eyes and exquisitely curved brows. As Trinket gazed at her, he thought to himself that he had never in his life set eyes on such a ravishingly beautiful specimen of feminine humanity. He rose to his feet and stood there with his tea cup still in his hands, riveted to the spot, gaping open-mouthed at this apparition, incapable of either speech or movement.

The lady smiled.

‘Please be seated, sir.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ mumbled Trinket incoherently. His knees went all wobbly, and he half sat, half collapsed into his chair, spilling his tea all over himself in the process.

The lady seemed not the least bit put out. It was as if she had watched this happen a thousand times before—this disabling effect

she had on men. Countless times she had seen grown men totally unmanned by her

stunning beauty. This time it was just a fifteen’or sixteen’year’old youth who had been conquered. She smiled again.

‘For such a very great and important man, sir, you seem dreadfully young. But then there was the famous Gan Luo in ancient times, who was made Prime Minister

when he was still only a boy of twelve. And I am sure you are in no way his inferior.’

‘Nor you, ma’am,’ replied a confused Trinket. ‘I mean, you’re not inferior to the fabulous beauties of olden days, ma’am.’

She raised a silken sleeve to mask the smile that was spreading across her face. The enchantment of that smile soon gave way to an expression of great seriousness’

‘Alas, that the beauty with which nature endowed me should have served only to

bring suffering! To myself, and to many other sentient beings. Here, beside my lonely lamp and beneath the gaze of the ancient image of our Lord Buddha, I strive to make amends for the follies of my past. Alas! A thousand beatings of the wooden fish, a thousand chantings of the sutras are not enough to redeem the

smallest part of the karma handed down from my former days!’

Her eyes reddened, and Trinket could see tears stealing down her cheeks. He had

no idea what it was she was talking about. But he was reduced to pity by the mere sight of this beautiful woman and by the spectacle of her grief, which seemed to plumb the very depths of human despair. Without understanding what the

cause of her sorrow was, he could feel himself being carried away by an indescribable welling of compassion that surged throughout his being. An irresistible impulse took hold of him, to sacrifice himself for her, to die if need be on her behalf. He rose to his feet and began beating his chest.

‘Who has treated you cruelly, ma’am’ he proclaimed heroically. ‘Who has caused

you to suffer’ Tell me, and I will avenge you! Lay all your troubles on my shoulders. I will wipe out the wrong done to you, or else I will sever this head of mine from my body and present it to you as penance!’

As he was describing with such high'flown eloquence this most improbable sequence of actions, he raised his right hand, and brought the edge of the palm down with a chopping motion on his neck. His speech and gesture both breathed an exaggeratedly knightly air. At any other moment in our hero's life the whole thing would have been nothing more than a contrived performance, not something to be taken seriously. But on this occasion, extraordinarily, for the very first time, Trinket really meant it.

She gazed at him. Then she sobbed'

'Your gallantry is more than I can ever be worthy of!'

Suddenly she fell to her knees and began kowtowing to him, knocking her head repeatedly on the ground before him.

'No, ma'am!' cried Trinket. 'You mustn't!'

He also fell to his knees, and began knocking his head in rhythm with hers.

'You are a beauty descended to this mortal earth from fairy realms,' he began. 'You are the Goddess of Mercy reborn. I beg you to accept my humble service.'

'I shall die of shame!' she mumbled almost inaudibly.

She took hold of him by the arms and gave him the gentlest and chastest of embraces. Then the two of them rose to their feet.

Trinket could see the tears glistening like pearls on her cheeks, and hurried to wipe them away with the sleeve of his gown.

'Don't cry!' he comforted her. 'Whatever it is that is troubling you, together we will find a way to put things right! I promise we will!'

She was easily old enough to be his mother. But there was something so tender and feminine about her, something so fragile and ethereal about the way she spoke, something so captivating about her whole manner-it was enough to melt his boyish heart.

Tell me' Trinket continued. 'What is your trouble'

'Lord Wei,' she replied, 'I am so deeply grateful to you for coming to me so

soon after you received my letter.'

'Yikes!' cried Trinket suddenly, slapping himself in the face as he spoke, as if to wake himself from some dream. 'Of course! The letter! Ah Kor!'

He stared at her again, and in that instant the truth dawned on him.

'You're her mother, aren't you!'

'You are very clever to have guessed, sir,' she mumbled. 'I would never have told you of my own accord.'

'It was easy. The two of you look so alike. But my sister's in arms . . . she's beautiful all right, but she isn't half as beautiful as you are!'

She flushed. The pink glow made her usually pale, lustrous

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[ace more beautiful than ever. It was like a delicate smear of rouge on a piece of white jade.

'Did you call her your sister's in arms?' she enquired softly.

'Yes,' replied Trinket. 'We are disciples of the same Shifu.'

He told the whole story' how he had first encountered Ah Kor how they had both

travelled to Kunming with their Shifu, Sister Tribulation, the White Nun. He even described in detail his own feelings of adoration towards Ah Kor, and the low regard in which (alas!) she held him. He refrained, however, from going into

the details of the White Nun's past as Princess Royal, and said nothing of their shared determination to strike against the Satrap.

When he had finished his tale, the nun (who had listened carefully to every word

he said) gave a little sigh.

'Alas! In a woman's beauty so often lie the seeds of calamity! Women know nothing of the greater good; and men are so hastily led astray!'

'No, ma'am!' cried Trinket, shaking his head vehemently. 'I've heard the story'tellers say the same thing, but it's not true. They always lay the blame at the woman's door. But I say it's the men, the wretched, despicable, worthless men-Emperors, generals, whatever! They're the ones at fault! Take Satrap Wu' people say that he would never have betrayed his own Emperor to the Manchus if

it hadn't been for the Peerless Consort, the beautiful Chen Yuanyuan, the woman

he was so crazy about. But I don't see it that way. It was his own fault! If Satrap Wu had been a better man to start with, if he'd been loyal to the Throne, twenty Peerless Consorts would never have been able to lead him astray! Tamardy!

It was his fault, everything was his fault, the foul turtle'head!

The lady bowed to Trinket several times.

Thank you, my lord, for your generous words. You speak on behalf of a much wronged woman.'

Trinket hurriedly returned her bow. Then'

'But. . .' he stammered. 'You ... oh my goodness! That's it, isn't it! You're her, aren't you! You're the one! Of course! You're the Peerless One! Peerless! How could there be anyone else in the whole world as beautiful as you! Forgive me! I must be going crazy, I just don't know what's going on, I don't understand

any of this at all. If you're the Satrap's Peerless Consort, what are you doing here in this hermitage' And how could ... Green ... Ah Kor ... be your daughter"

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There were too many unanswered questions in his head.

'Yes' replied the woman, 'I am Chen Yuanyuan. It is a very long story. After all the gallant things that you have said, I cannot possibly hide the truth from you. For twenty years I have been reviled by all my fellow countrymen. I have been held to blame for our country's defeat, for our national disgrace. There are only two great men of distinction alive, two famous men of letters, who understand the truth. One is you. The other is the great poet, Wu Weiye.'

Needless to say, Trinket knew next to nothing about Chen Yuanyuan's past, and

whether or not she had indeed been to blame for the falling of Peking to the Tartars and their subsequent conquest of China. All he knew (now that he had seen her for himself) was that she was the most beautiful woman in the world. That was argument enough for him. And he also knew that he loathed Satrap Wu. So

why not blame everything on him' There was also a sufficiently powerful logic in

that. But at least he was honest enough to disown any claims to being a great man of letters!

'Actually I'm afraid I can't read or write' he confessed. 'You'd really better not make the mistake of calling me a Great Man of Letters. Doctor Dog Fart

would
be a far better title for me.'

She smiled.

'You are a young man of courage and wisdom. That's what counts.'

Hearing such words of praise from such a gorgeously attractive woman sent Trinket into a swoon. He could hardly believe his ears.

'Come with me' said Chen Yuanyuan. 'I want to tell you the whole story myself. In my own way.'

She led him out of the room, down a little cobbled path, to her private chamber.

The Ballad of the Peerless Consort

Her chamber was bare apart from two mats (of the kind used for meditation), a long calligraphic scroll on the wall, and a piba mandolin which hung next to it.

'Please be seated' said Chen Yuanyuan.

When Trinket had lowered himself onto one of the mats, she took down the piba and sat down on the other mat, cradling the instrument on her lap. Pointing to the calligraphy on the wall, she

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explained that it was a long ballad written for her by the famous poet Wei Wuye.

It was called the 'Ballad of the Peerless Consort'.

Today is a very special occasion' she continued. 'Ours has been such an important meeting. I should like to sing the Ballad for you, if you would like to hear it.'

That would be wonderful' said a delighted Trinket. 'But I hope you'll explain it as you go along. Otherwise I won't have the faintest idea what it's all about. Don't forget, Doctor Dog Fart's not very strong on the book'learning, I'm afraid.'

She smiled again.

'You are too modest.'

She tuned the strings of her instrument and plucked a few notes.

‘I haven’t played this piece for a long time. You must forgive me if I go astray from time to time.’

‘Don’t worry’ replied Trinket. ‘I’d be the last person to notice.’

She began with a few slow, gentle introductory measures on the piba. Then she sang

‘Twas when the Son of Heaven forsook the world,
That General Wu stormed through the Pass of jade;
The soldiers all for grief in white were clad,
But he alone at beauty’s flight did rage.

She explained this first verse for Trinket’s benefit.

‘You see, when the last Son of Heaven, or Emperor, of the Ming dynasty, Chong Zhen, died, General Wu, the one people today sometimes call the Satrap, though

they should really just call him Prince of the West, joined forces with the Manchu Tartars to take Peking away from the rebel commander Li Zicheng, the one

they call General Bash’em. Li and his rebel army had taken control of the Capital, the last Ming Emperor was dead, and Li was already setting himself up as the new Emperor. The combined forces of General Wu’s Chinese troops and the

Tartars defeated Li at the famous Battle of the Pass. The Chinese soldiers were all dressed in white, in mourning for their dead Emperor; but the song says that

Wu was not really fighting against Bash’em and for the Emperor- he did it all for love of me! Because Li, General Bash’em, had stolen me from him.’

Trinket nodded.

‘I don’t blame him! I’d have gone over to the more beautiful as you. I’d have done exactly the same thing myself!’

There were tears in his eyes.

‘Dear boy,’ she was thinking to herself, ‘you are saying that just to humour me.’

Then she studied his face carefully, and could tell that he was being perfectly sincere. He meant it. She was deeply touched.

She continued

The fair one’s grief is not my song’s refrain. , . ‘

The rebels rioted, the Emperor stood in disarray;

Wu swept it all away, he purged the mob,

And when the mourning ceased, he saw once more his love.

‘That part just tells how General Wu put down the rebels. It was easy, because Bash’em’s men were behaving so badly. Not very flattering for General Wu.’

Trinket agreed.

‘The next part is about me.’

She began singing again’

When first they’d met, she’d sang for him, A palace lute’girl promised to the
General’s bed. She waited for him’, then the great man came, With all a mighty
soldier’s lacquered pomp and state. Her name was Chen Yuanyuan; a Suzhou
girl,
Fairest of the fair she was, and soft as softest silk,
Dreaming of life as a General’s pampered bride, With countless servants
waiting
at her beck and call.

The music had become wistful, the accompanying strains on the piba slow and
melancholic, as if a gentle breeze were ruffling the surface of a lotus pond.

‘That verse,’ explained Chen Yuanyuan, ‘makes me sound like one of the great
beauties of ancient times. The comparison is not deserved.’

Trinket shook his head.

‘No. It’s just wrong.’

She stared at him with incomprehension.

‘How could those great beauties of bygone days,’ continued

beyona

Yuanyuan seemed more than a trine

‘You mock me, my lord!’

‘No I don’t!’ he protested. ‘Everyone knows that Suzhou girls are the prettiest.
And the way they talk is just irresistible!’

She smiled, and when she smiled she flushed slightly. Her eyes gleamed, and
her

lips trembled. For a moment her grief seemed to vanish, and her exquisite

feminine presence filled the room again with its magic and charm. Trinket was in an ecstasy of delight. She began to sing again'

When first the Emperor's barge took her from home,
She little knew the cruel fate that lay in store!
Deep in the palace, all alone, she wept,
Her tears of bitter grief bedewed her silken robe.
For all his regal power and majesty,
Her fragile beauty lay neglected, quite forlorn;

Locked in her chamber, desolate she lay,
Learning new melodies to please some unknown guest.

At this point Chen Yuanyuan sighed.

'I came from the dust of the world, I must not pretend otherwise.'

'What do you mean' protested Trinket. 'You mustn't talk in riddles!'

'I mean, I began life as a singsong'girl, in a Suzhou whorehouse.'

'Brilliant!' exclaimed Trinket, giving his knee a resounding slap.

'It was my wretched fate,' said Yuanyuan, in an almost injured tone. 'I see nothing brilliant about it.'

'Don't you' cried Trinket joyfully. 'I do! It means that the two of us are kindred spirits! You see, I came from the dust of the world too.'

Yuanyuan stared at him from out of her limpid eyes, bright and lustrous as two large pearls. She was unable to follow his meaning, and thought to herself that he had simply failed to understand what she had been saying.

'I was bom in a whore'house myself,' said Trinket. 'But mine was in Yangzhou.

My

mum was a singsong'girl in a place called

Vernal Delights-that's a famous whore'house in Yangzhou, in case you don't know.

Of course, she was never a great beauty, like you.'

Yuanyuan seemed very puzzled.

'I think you're still making fun of me.'

'No, I'm not' protested Trinket. 'I know I ought really to have fetched my mum from Yangzhou and set her up in style in Peking. But then, she always seemed to

enjoy life in the whore'house, and she'd probably just have been bored stiff in Peking.'

'Well, it's nothing to be ashamed of, to have been born in a whore'house' said Yuanyuan. 'And it's very commendable that you should be so honest about it.'

‘Oh, I don’t tell most people. Certainly not Ah Kor. I’ve never told her. She’s got a low enough opinion of me already.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Yuanyuan. ‘I promise I won’t tell her. Anyway. . . her own mother was hardly a model of chastity.’

‘It certainly would be much better if you never mentioned it to her,’ said Trinket. ‘I know how much she despises singsong’girls. She once called them the dregs of the dregs.’

Yuanyuan hung her head

‘Did she really say that’

‘Don’t you start getting all upset!’ Trinket hastened to add. ‘She wasn’t thinking of you, I’m sure.’

‘No,’ said Yuanyuan darkly. ‘I’m sure she wasn’t. You see, she doesn’t even know I’m her mother.’

‘What do you mean’

Yuanyuan shook her head. She looked away for a moment and gazed into the distance, before continuing slowly’

‘Let me explain. The Chong Zhen Emperor’s Queen was from the Zhou family. She came from Suzhou like me. But the Emperor was besotted with one of his concubines called Tian, who fought with the Queen for his affections. The Queen’s father had the idea of buying me out of a whore’house and introducing me into the Palace, in the hope of drawing the Emperor away from the Tian concubine-’

‘Brilliant idea!’ put in Trinket. ‘So that was the end of her!’

‘Not at all. Quite the contrary. All that happened was that the Emperor became more and more melancholy, more and more detached from affairs of state, and in the meantime he lost all interest in his women altogether. I was left to moulder away in the Palace harem ("deep in the palace... locked in her chamber"), until

eventually

the Queen got rid of me, and sent me back to her father's
'That's outrageous!' cried Trinket. 'I'd heard that the Chong Zhen Emperor
couldn't tell a good man from a bad one, and I know that he had one of his best
generals cut to pieces, Yuan Chonghuan. But I never realized he couldn't tell a
good woman from a bad one either!'

He shook his head and clicked his tongue, in a gesture of utter disbelief.

'Listen to the next part of the song,' said Chen Yuanyuan. 'It tells the story
of how I met General Wu. The Queen's father gave me to him, after I'd been
rejected by the Emperor. Then, almost at once the General had to set off to
guard the Pass, and he left me behind in the Capital. But while he was away,
Bash'em the rebel came storming into Peking. . . .'

She began singing again'

The guests drank wine; the goblets sped; the sun
Set red; who listened to her song of woe' And yet
The General chose her, youngest of them all,
His burning gaze all but deflowered her flowerlike face.

No sooner had he freed the bird from out .'
Its gilded cage, than they were roughly torn apart.

His marching orders needs must be obeyed.
,

Their brutal parting broke her tender loving heart.
The lovers pined, their yearning made more fond
By absence; then one fateful dawn the rebel hordes
Rode storming into town. The catkins fluttered
,

Through the air, a tattered omen of ill to come.

With these words, the accompanying strains on the piba died away, and she
stared

silently across the room. Trinket, thinking that the song had come to an end,
applauded enthusiastically.

'Oh, what a wonderful, wonderful song!' he cried.

'If only that had been the end!' replied Chen Yuanyuan. 'If only I had died
then, and that had been the end of the song . . .'

Trinket blushed.

'What an idiot Trinket is!' he thought to himself. 'Of course! General Bash'em
looted Peking, and that was the end of the Emperor-he hanged himself from a
tree

on Coal Hill. But it wasn't the end of the Peerless Concubine. She lived on!'

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owU.y. i nen when the Emperor didn't want me, I was given to General Wu.
Then

Bash'em took me away from General Wu. Then in the end General Wu got me back
from Bash'em. I wasn't a woman. I was a piece of merchandise. I went to the
strongest buyer.' She started singing again'

He sought his Fair Beloved everywhere;

With all his might he sought, and in the end he found.

They called her forth, her tangled clouds of hair

Hung down; her mothlike brows stared startled and askance.

The torches blazed to greet her on the field,

Her face still streaked with rouge. With serried pipes and drums

They marched toward the mountains of the West,

Their chariots rolled over the passes, and on to Gold Ox Road.

Ten times the flowers saw the winter's frost,

Ten years her fame and beauty spread throughout the land.

She met the dame who taught her once to sing,

Together they recalled the golden days of old. , ' ,

Two swallows in the nest' the one had grown.....' , ' ,

To be a phoenix, perching proud on highest branch. , , , ,

They gazed into their goblets, sighed at the passing

Of the years, she with her man who vowed he would be king.

With these last words, she fell silent again. This time Trinket did not dare to
ask if she had finished. He wasn't going to make a fool of himself a second
time.

'I travelled west with General Wu, and he was made a Prince. When my old
girlfriends in Suzhou heard my news, they were all dreadfully jealous. I was the
lucky one, they all said. They were still ordinary singsong'girls, working in

the whore'house.' She started singing again'

; Fame, nought but fame' the powerful strove to give

Her countless pearls; they caused her nought but bitter woe. She drifted o'er mountains and valleys, wasting away, Railing at the wind for spoiling autumn's golden blooms, Watched yet another spring come in, with yet

More flowers; beauty is the downfall of the realm, or so we've heard.

Can women break the heroes of this world'

Oh no! 'Tis they who break themselves, by passion fooled!

Tears welled up in her eyes. She ceased plucking the piba.

'The poet could see into my heart,' she sobbed. 'He knew my grief. I was cursed throughout the land, they all blamed me for what happened. But really it was the

men and their rival passions that tore this land of ours apart!'

'Exactly!' declared Trinket. 'What could a frail woman do against the Tartar horde'

He began fantasizing to himself about what a superb performing duo the two of them would make in the tea'houses of Yangzhou. She could sing, while he would be

the impresario, throwing in the occasional remark by way of appreciation or emphasis. . . . Even as he was thinking this, she had begun singing again'

Her beauty now lies hidden in a glade,

She whom the mighty loved with burning passion's fire.

A thousand miles of sorrow, a thousand strings

Of singing pearls; kingfisher'feathers whirling in the dance;

There ends my song, a tale of beauty in high places.

The river ever eastward flows, never to return.

On the word 'flows', her voice trailed off on a magnificent, long, slow cadence, and the tumultuous piba accompaniment almost drowned the vocal line, a raging

torrent of music, rising to a passionate crescendo of its own, until it too gradually died away, like one of China's mighty rivers wending its way slowly but ineluctably from the snowcapped heights of the Himalayas and the westernmost

peaks of Sichuan, down the endless valleys of the heartland, eastwards to the infinite waters of the ocean. Then there was silence. She gave a deep sigh.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. 'Forgive me,' she sobbed, 'for making such a display of myself!' She stood up and hung the piba back on the wall. That last part of the song tells of my life with General Wu, the man I loved, the one who

rose to become Prince and Satrap, and who has always wanted to be more. I tried to warn him. I told him that ambition would destroy him. But whatever I said only made him the more angry. So now I have retired to this secluded hermitage, to repent of my life's errors. All I ever wanted was for everyone to live in peace! I just wanted to end my own days peacefully. . . . And now this has happened to my Ah Kor! The poor girl!' She broke down sobbing once again.
I Ht UttK AMU I Hh LAULUKUN

Revelations

Trinket had been so carried away by the song that he had once again quite forgotten the original purpose of his visit. But at this mention of Ah Kor he started up.

'What has become of her' Did she really try to kill the Satrap' Why' Didn't you say that he is her own father'

Even as he said this, he was thinking to himself' 'If she really is the Satrap's daughter, now she'll never have any time for me at all!'

'When she was two years old,' replied Chen Yuanyuan, 'she vanished in the middle of the night. Since that time I have never set eyes on her. The Satrap searched the whole city, but there was no sign of her. I wondered at the time if perhaps-

Suddenly she flushed, and turned away from Trinket.

'You wondered what' he asked.

'I wondered if perhaps one of the Satrap's enemies might have taken her away.'

'With all those guards posted all over the place protecting her, it would have to have been someone with extraordinary kungfu.'

'Yes,' replied Chen Yuanyuan, 'that's true. The Satrap was very angry. He had two captains of his own guard executed, and the Prefect of Kunming dismissed. They searched for days but never found her. He would have had even more people

put to death, but I managed to talk him out of it. There's been no news of her for more than twelve years now. Often I've thought to myself. . . that maybe she

was . . . dead.'

'No wonder she told me her name was Chen!'

Chen Yuanyuan suddenly turned towards him.

'She said that' How did she know''

'Probably it was whoever ran away with her that told her' suggested Trinket.

Yuanyuan nodded slowly.

'Yes. But why didn't she say her name was-'

'Wu' hazarded Trinket. That's not much of a name to be proud of nowadays.'

Yuanyuan was gazing out of the window and seemed not to have heard.

'What happened then' asked Trinket.

'I never stopped thinking about her. I kept hoping that one

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day I'd see her again. Yesterday when I heard that the Satrap had been wounded,

I hurried to the palace. I found out that it was true. Someone had tried to kill him. But he wasn't even wounded.'

'Not wounded!' cried Trinket in amazement. 'You mean, when I went there he was faking it''

'Yes. He pretended to be seriously wounded, so as to put the would-be assassin off guard. He thought that way he stood a better chance of catching whoever it was.'

Trinket was utterly at a loss.

'So they've all been having me on!' he muttered to himself. 'What an idiot I am! I should have realized. He must have suspected me of being involved after all!'

‘I asked him what kind of person they suspected,’ continued Chen Yuanyuan.
‘He

said nothing, but took me to a side room, and there I saw a young woman,
bound

hand and foot in chains. I knew straight away that it was her. My daughter. She
looked just like I did as a girl. When she saw me, at first she was silent. Then
she simply said ‘Are you my mother?’ I just nodded, and pointed to the Satrap.
‘And that’s your father.’ She became very upset. ‘No he’s not! He can’t be!’ she
cried. ‘He’s a traitor! He killed my dad, and I’m going to kill him and be
revenged!’ The Satrap asked her who her father was, and she said ‘I don’t
know.

My Shifu just told me that one day, when I saw my mother, she would tell me!’
Then the Satrap asked her who her Shifu was, and she refused to say. She only
implied that it was her Shifu who had sent her to kill him.’

Trinket was beginning to piece together something out of all of this. So deep
was the White Nun’s hatred for the Satrap, it seemed she would not have been
content just to kill him. She had actually gone to the lengths of stealing his
daughter, had trained the girl in the Martial Arts, and had then sent her to
kill her own father. Such revenge would be sweet. Trinket walked to the
window.

‘That explains a lot,’ he thought to himself. ‘Shifu never really liked Ah Kor.
She taught her lots of moves, but never the real innermost secrets. She never
gave her the Inner Force. That’s why Ah Kor’s kungfu is such a hotch’potch of
styles. That’s why Brother Simple couldn’t tell which School she belonged to
when he watched her fighting. Shifu didn’t want to let her into her Iron Sword
School as a proper disciple. She made me her true disciple.’

The thought of the sheer bitterness of the White Nun’s plot set him shivering.

‘Her Shifu had clearly been plotting this for a very long time’ said Chen
Yuanyuan. ‘If Ah Kor had succeeded in killing the Satrap, she would have taken
vengeance for her Shifu. And even if she didn’t succeed, the Satrap would have
learned that his own daughter had tried to kill him, which would have caused
him
the most unbearable pain.’

‘But surely you can do something to explain the whole thing’ said Trinket.
‘Can’t the three of you somehow be reunited’

‘If only we could!’ sighed Yuanyuan.

‘Surely the Satrap can’t hold her to blame’ said Trinket. ‘She was taken away

from her parents when she was only two years old. She didn't even know whose child she was.'

'He insisted that she couldn't be his daughter, or she'd have recognized him; and even if she was, she deserved to die for trying to do such a wicked thing. As he said that, he rubbed the tip of his

nose.

'Does he always do that' asked Trinket, smiling.

'Don't you know' Yuanyuan's voice trembled. 'That's his way of giving the command to kill. Every time he does it, somebody dies.'

'Aiyo!' cried Trinket. 'Do you mean . . . he's killed Ah Kor!'

'Not yet' said Yuanyuan. 'First of all he wants to discover the identity of the person that sent her. And he wants to know who her father really is.'

'But we must think of a way of rescuing her, quickly!' cried Trinket. 'He might start rubbing his nose again at any moment!'

'That's why I took the risk of asking you here. The Satrap will show you a certain amount of respect, as the Emperor's envoy. Ah Kor is pretending to be one of the Princess' maids. If you say the Princess wants her maid back, I hardly think the Satrap will refuse your request.'

Trinket was tapping his forehead with a crooked finger.

'Drat! Drat! Idiot! I fell for it!' he muttered to himself. Then'

'The trouble is, I've already tried that. It seems he was one move ahead of me. I asked him to hand over a girl, and he did. The only trouble is, it was the wrong girl. It wasn't Ah Kor at all!'

He told Yuanyuan the whole story.

'General Xia had obviously been warned' he commented. 'He must have known all along. He even made a big thing of letting the Satrap's guards know what was going on. I can't go back now and ask for the same favour all over again.'

Chen Yuanyuan frowned. , 'It seems they set a trap for you.'

Trinket stamped his foot on the ground.

'If they so much as lay a finger on Ah Kor, I'll fight that villain even if I have to die fighting!'

Chen Yuanyuan drew herself up to her full height and made a solemn bow.

'My daughter will be eternally grateful. But how do you-' 'I'll take a party of men, break into the Satrap's palace, and

kill him myself! I'll rescue her, or my name isn't Trinket Wei!'

Chen Yuanyuan went up to him and placed her hand gently on his shoulder.

'Trinket Wei, I'd like you to think of me as your own aunt.'

Trinket was ecstatic at the idea.

'You're a brave boy' she continued, 'but you must be careful. Even if you did succeed in breaking in, the Satrap would probably

kill Ah Kor first'

'So what do you suggest, Auntie" asked Trinket.

Chen Yuanyuan thought for a moment.

'Ah Kor must recognize the Satrap as her father. However hard'hearted a man he

may be, he will stop short of killing his own daughter.'

An Extraordinary Qathering

As they were talking, suddenly they heard a voice shouting outside' 'Recognize that traitor as her father! Never!' The door'curtain was drawn aside, and in strode the figure of a tall, elderly monk, holding a steel monk's staff in his hand. He struck the ground firmly with the staff and the metal rings on its handle and tip clanged loudly. The monk had a square'cut face, grizzly white moustaches that spread down his neck, and deepset eyes that flashed like lightning. He was altogether a fearsome sight, standing there in the doorway, with straight back and tensed loins, rising up out of the ground like a mountain, poised and strong as a tiger or lion.

Trinket started back a few steps, and almost took shelter behind Chen Yuanyuan.

She, however, seemed overjoyed by the monk's unannounced arrival.

'It's you!' she said breathlessly.

'Yes' he replied. 'It's me.'

He was no longer shouting, and his whole expression had softened. The two looked

into each other's eyes, and there was an expression of loving tenderness in their mutual gaze.

'Who is this old bonze" thought Trinket to himself. 'Could it be her lover' Or one of her old customers from the Suzhou whorehouse days' Surely not. A monk

having it off with a singsong'girl- that's disgusting! Wait a minute, though. Trink was once a monk, and he seems to remember a certain little trip to a whore'house....'

'Did you hear what we were saying just now" asked Chen Yuanyuan.

'Every word' replied the monk.

'We must thank heaven and earth' she went on, 'that the girl is still. . . alive. . . .'

She let out a great sob and buried herself in the old monk's arms. He stroked her hair gently and comforted her.

'Don't fret. We'll rescue her, come what may!'

There was an even deeper note of tenderness in his manly voice. Chen Yuanyuan continued to sob her heart out, clasped in his bosom.

Trinket was both alarmed and afraid at this strange turn of events. He stood there motionless, thinking to himself

'Since the two of you are carrying on as if I was dead, I might as well pretend to be dead.'

'Will you really rescue her" asked Chen Yuanyuan.

'I'll do everything within my power.'

Chen Yuanyuan wiped away her tears.

'But how"

The monk frowned.

'Come what may, she must never call that scum her father.'

'You're right,' replied Chen Yuanyuan. 'I was wrong. I was just thinking of a way to keep her alive. I'm sorry.'

'I understand. I don't blame you. But she must never acknowledge him as her father. Never!'

It was clearly a subject on which he held extremely strong views. But he still spoke quietly, even though there was a stern authority in his words that would have commanded absolute obedience from an army of thousands.

These last words of his were no sooner spoken than they heard the sound of boots clomping on the ground outside. A voice could be heard laughing.

CHAP I tK W

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‘So my old friend is in town, and has not deigned to come and see me!’ There was no mistaking the Satrap’s voice. Trinket and Chen Yuanyuan looked aghast towards the doorway. The monk seemed unperturbed. His eyes blazed more fiercely than ever. Suddenly there was a blinding flash, and the blades of two swords came slicing through the curtain hanging in the doorway, ripping it apart to reveal the figure of the Satrap, standing there sniggering. The next instant, a great cloud of dust, plaster, and splinters of wood flew through the air, and iron mallets smashed holes in all four walls of the room. Through the holes could be seen armed members of the Satrap’s guard, some with bows flexed and arrows strung at the ready, others with spears raised. Every weapon was aimed into the room. One command from the Satrap, and the three of them would become human hedgehogs, bristling with arrows and spears. ‘Come out here, Yuanyuan!’ barked the Satrap. She hesitated, half stumbled towards the door, then came to a halt, shaking her head. ‘No, I won’t!’ Turning, she pushed Trinket gently but firmly by the shoulders, in the direction of the door. ‘Go on, off you go. This has nothing to do with you!’ Trinket was touched by her concern, but cried out in protest ‘No, I won’t gd! Hot popping momma! If you’ve got the guts, Wu, you can kill us all.’ The old monk shook his head. ‘Both of you can go now. Leave this to me! What have I got to lose’ I’m supposed to have been dead for twenty years!’

Chen Yuanyuan walked over and took his hand.

‘No. I shall die with you.’

‘If you’re so brave, Auntie’ cried Trinket, ‘how could I possibly abandon you!

Here I’ll stay, and here I’ll die, by your side, if it has to come to that!’

Trinket Wei!’ snarled the Satrap, dispensing with any form of title as he glowered at the boy and raised his right hand angrily. ‘This man is a rebel. You are guilty of conspiring with a known traitor, and when I’ve killed you, the Emperor will thank me for it!’

He turned to Yuanyuan.

THE DEER AND I Hh CAULDRON

‘Come on, what’s got into you’ Come out here with me for goodness’ sake!’

She shook her head.

‘What rebel’ cried Trinket. ‘What traitor’ You are blackening the name of this holy man!’

‘Silly boy!’ returned the Satrap, half in anger, half mockingly. ‘You obviously don’t even know who he is, this holy monk of yours! He’ll happily let you go to your death in ignorance, and you’ll end up in Hell not even knowing who sent you there!’

‘He shall know now!’ declared the monk. ‘My name is Li Zicheng. Always has been,
and always will be!’

Trinket was aghast.

‘You mean . . . you’re General Bash’em! But he’s supposed to have been dead for years!’

That’s right. Now off you go, young friend! I’ve fought many a battle, and lived more than seventy years, and I have no intention of sending a little Tartar minion like you to his death. So go!’

As he spoke these words, there was a sudden flash of light, and a figure vaulted down from the ceiling, descending immediately towards the Satrap’s head. The Satrap shouted angrily, and four of his guards drew their swords and rushed to his aid. The intruder flicked a sleeve at the four men, which sent them reeling backwards, at the same time bringing the edge of a palm smashing down into the

small of the Satrap's back. The Satrap lost his footing and went crashing into the room. The intruder leapt after him, close as a shadow, and chopped a right hand into his shoulder. Wu gave a loud groan and collapsed onto the floor.

Now

the intruder pressed a palm flat on the crown of the Satrap's skull, and cried to the guards'

'Shoot your arrows!'

The guards were paralysed with fear.

'Shifu!' cried Trinket in delight. The acrobatic intruder was indeed his most recent Shifu, the White Nun, Tribulation. She had followed Trinket to the hermitage and hidden herself on the roof, creeping under the eaves with her superb kungfu skills, without being detected by the guards massed round the building.

Tribulation stared at the old monk.

'Are you truly Li Zicheng, General Bash'em'

'I am.'

'We were told that you had been killed on Nine Palace Mountain in Hubei. But you are still alive!'

CHAPTERED

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Li nodded.

'And is Ah Kor really your daughter'

Li sighed and glanced at Chen Yuanyuan. Then he nodded again.

'I should have known!' snarled the Satrap angrily. 'Only a treacherous rebel like you could have spawned a creature like her!'

Tribulation kicked him in the small of the back.

'Both of you are traitors and rebels! Both of you are the scum of the earth!

There's nothing to choose between the two of you!'

At this Li raised his metal staff and thumped it down on the floor, shattering one of the green tiles into several fragments, and crying out as he did so'

'And what sort of scum are you, nun' How dare you stand there and say such things"

Trinket was greatly heartened by the arrival of his Shifu. Even as fierce a figure as Bash'em Li no longer struck fear in his heart.

'How dare you say such things to my Shifu' he cried.

Even as he was speaking, there was a sudden whoosh at the window and three spears came hurtling towards the one'armed Nun. She swivelled round in the nick

of time, flicked two of the spears with her left sleeve, and sent them ricocheting back out of the window. The third spear she caught in her right hand. Hideous groans could be heard from outside as two of the guards slumped

dead to the ground, transfixed through the chest by their own spears. The tip of the third spear was by now aimed at the Satrap's back.

'Steady now!' stammered Wu to his men. 'None of you move! Everyone take a few

paces back!'

His guards obeyed. Tribulation gave a wry smile.

'Well, this is certainly a unique occasion! Here, in this tiny hermitage, we see gathered together in one place the most notorious rebel of all time, and the most despicable traitor in the whole of history!'

Trinket could not resist the opportunity'

'Not to mention the most fabulous beauty, and the most invincible Shifu, of all ages past and present!'

Tribulation's usually stern face betrayed the faintest glimmer of a smile. The two men's faces were expressionless. They were both seasoned warriors, with dozens of campaigns behind them. But each was desperately trying to think of a

way out of his present extraordinary predicament.

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'So what do you plan to do with us then" cried Li.

'Do with you" replied Tribulation coolly. 'Kill you of course.'

Chen Yuanyuan spoke at last.

'Are you my daughter's Shifu"

'I took your daughter away' replied Tribulation, her voice still chilling. 'I taught her certain skills in the Martial Arts. I had one single purpose' that she herself would be able to kill this monster!'

As she spoke she applied a little more pressure and dug the tip of the spear half an inch or so into Wu's flesh. He let out a grunt

of pain.

‘I don’t understand’ Chen Yuanyuan said to the Satrap. This Shifu does not even know you. What grudge does she have against you’ You have done her no wrong!’

Tribulation looked up and gave a little laugh.

‘Done me no wrong’ Trinket, go on, tell her who I am. Then these two men will at least know why they have to die!’

‘My Shifu’ Trinket explained, ‘is the Princess Royal, Princess Changping, daughter of the last Emperor of the Ming.’

The three others-Wu, Li, and Chen Yuanyuan-all let out a gasp of astonishment.

Then Li burst out laughing.

‘Excellent! In that case, yes it’s true, I caused your father’s death. And I’d far rather die at your hands than at the hands of this

foul traitor!’

He took a couple of steps forward and drove his staff into the floor. It went a good foot into the ground. Li now took hold of his monk’s robe with both hands and ripped it open, exposing his great

hairy chest.

‘Go ahead!’ he cried. ‘Kill me! I should far rather die at the hands of a Chinese Princess of the Ming Royal House, than at the hands of a foul traitor, a despicable lackey of the Tartars!’

All her life Tribulation had hated Li and the terrible things he had done. She (like most other people) had always believed him to have died in Hubei, a hunted

man, encircled by government troops. She had never for a moment imagined that

the day would come when she would have a chance to avenge her father’s death in

this way. Strangely, now that he was before her, she found herself rather

admiring his courage.

‘You are a brave man, sir’ she said calmly. ‘Today I am going to kill your foe first, and see to you later. That way, you will die having at least seen him die first.’

CHAPTER 20

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Li clasped his hands together gratefully.

‘Thank you, Your Highness. I am most obliged. I am overwhelmed. I have longed

for his death more than you can ever imagine.’

Wu Sangui meanwhile was still groaning in abject terror. Tribulation did not wish to dispatch him there and then. That would be too swift and painless an end

for such a villain.

‘Come’ she said to Li, ‘your dream is about to come true. Kill him yourself.’

‘I thank you, Your Highness!’

Li bent down and addressed Wu’

Traitor! At the great battle of Stony Valley, you defeated me- by joining forces with the pigtailed Tartars. Now it is your turn to taste defeat! You are at the Princess’ mercy. But to kill you like this in cold blood would be too cowardly a thing to do.’

He turned to Tribulation.

‘Your Highness, I beg you to release him. Let the two of us fight it out between us fairly.’

Tribulation raised the spear in the air.

‘Very well. We shall see who dies first.’

The Satrap uttered a series of pathetic groans from where he still grovelled on the ground. Then all of a sudden he leapt up, seized hold of Li’s staff, and swung it at the nun’s midriff.

‘Vile worm!’ she spat, and with a flick of her left sleeve she countered the oncoming movement of the staff, stopping it dead in mid’air, and projecting as she did so a surging wave of Inner Force that left Wu stunned and gasping for breath. His arm hung paralysed at his side, the staff fell to the ground, and Tribulation held her spear’point menacingly at his throat. By any normal standards Wu was a ferocious enough fighting man, but on this occasion he was up

against an adversary with a devastating mastery of Inner Force kungfu. He was totally outclassed. He was like a child. He staggered backwards, his face ashen’pale, the spear’point all the time grazing his throat.

Li stooped to retrieve his staff. Tribulation swung round with the spear and

placed it in the Satrap's hands.

'Go to, fight-if you are man enough! And fight fairly!'

Wu let out a cry and, aiming the spear at Li, rushed into the fray. Li swung his staff wildly at the oncoming weapon.

And so the battle commenced' a strange battle of giants, fought in the cramped confines of a tiny meditation cell, in that secluded

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hermitage. Tribulation drew Trinket to one side, and stood between him and the

two combatants, for fear that he might be grazed by a passing blow.

Memories

As the two men fought, Chen Yuanyuan herself retreated to a corner of the room,

and closed her eyes in sheer terror. A host of memories began flashing through her mind.

. . . She would never forget the day the Emperor came to her at dusk and told her how beautiful she was. And the next day he kept away from Court, and stayed

with her in the bedchamber and made her sing for him. He prepared her make'up

for her, and painted her eyebrows. He promised to make her his Consort and then

one day his Queen. She was to be the first among all his ladies. He had seemed so young, he would laugh so happily. Then suddenly he would grow strangely sad.

He was the Emperor, but for her he was no different from the other young men she

had known, the ones who used to come and see her in the whore'house in Suzhou.

For three days they were inseparable. Then early on the fourth day, she awoke, and there beside her on the pillow she saw this white, bloodless face, sunken'cheeked, forehead caught in a tight frown. Even in his dreams he was sad.

How did an Emperor come to be so sad, she had asked herself'

That day he went to Court, and when he returned at midday, his face was whiter

than ever, his frown tighter. He flew into a temper with her, said she was leading him astray, distracting him from important affairs of state. He said it

was wrong for him to waste his time with women. He had decided to turn over a new leaf. So he had ordered his Queen to send her away, out of the Palace. He called her a wicked seductress, and said that during the three days he had spent with her, the rebel Bash'em Li had taken three more cities.

She was not especially upset, or surprised. Men are all like that. Whenever things go wrong, they find a woman to take it out on, to blame. She could see he was really scared of this Bash'em Li, whoever he was. It was making him quite ill. She still remembered wondering what sort of an amazing person this rebel must be, to have made the Emperor so afraid. . . .

Chen Yuanyuan opened her eyes, and there he was in the hermitage cell, the amazing rebel, swinging his staff at the Satrap. 'And each time somehow the Satrap succeeded in dodging out of his way. 'Look at the Satrap!' she mused silently to herself. 'He may be old, but he's still so strong and agile. He's been keeping himself fit all these years, waiting for the day. . . waiting for his chance to move on the Capital and make himself Emperor.'

A new wave of memories engulfed her.

. . . After leaving the Palace, she had gone to live with the family of Queen Zhou. One evening there was a big banquet and she was called out to sing for the

guests. That was when Wu saw her for the first time. She remembered it so clearly' his bright eyes in the candlelight, staring at her across the table, burning with desire. She knew that look. She'd seen it so many times in men's eyes. First they looked, then they pounced, stripped her naked, and had their way with her. But on that occasion things had been rather different. After all, it was a very grand banquet. . .

'Why, just now' she reflected, 'when that boy stared at me, he had the same look

in his eyes. I'd know that look anywhere! What a silly notion though! A little boy falling for me, at my age! Ah! Men, old men, boys-in the end they're all the same!'

She looked up and glanced at Trinket. He was totally absorbed in watching the two older men locked in their life'and'death struggle. Wu was on the offensive now, constantly harrying Li with his spear.

Chen Yuanyuan sank once more into her memories.

... He had asked for her. The great General Wu said he wanted her for himself. He spoke to the Queen's father. Then after only a few days the Emperor ordered

him to take his soldiers and go and guard the Pass, to stop the Manchu army

from
attacking the Capital. And after that everything happened too quickly! Bash'em
Li came riding into Peking, the Emperor hanged himself from a tree on Coal
Hill.
Bash'em's men had captured her, and carried her in front of their commander.
The
great hairy brute! There she was in his presence, he had her for his own, the
very man who had haunted her Emperor in his worst nightmares!
Even when he'd finished sacking Peking, he was still extremely busy, mostly
having people's heads chopped off, loyal ministers put to death. His soldiers
went berserk, pillaging and looting, holding
rich men to ransom, slaughtering perfectly innocent citizens. But every night,
when Bash'em came home to be with her, he was happy. He was always
laughing. She
still remembered how he used to snore dreadfully. It always used to wake her
up
in the middle of the night. Such a hairy man! His arms, his legs, his chest, all
hair! She'd never seen a man like that before!

Wu had already decided to surrender to him. But then he heard that Bash'em
had
taken her, and he lost control. In a fit of rage he decided to go over to the
Manchus instead, and lead them in through the Pass. That was the line in her
song 'But he alone at beauty's plight did rage.' Bash'em led his men out to
battle, and the two sides fought at Stony Valley. The Manchus (with Wu's help)
routed Bash'em. They say the ground was awash with blood. There were
corpses
strewn for miles and miles around. People still said it was all her doing, that
she was to blame for their deaths, tens of thousands of them. But what did she
ever do? Was she responsible for all those men dying?

Bash'em fled back to Peking, a defeated man. He still managed to set himself
up
for a short while as Emperor, but soon had to flee again, this time into the
West, taking her with him. Wu trailed them. Bash'em was still full of spirit and
fight, still his old laughing self. His troops grew fewer and fewer, things
looked more and more desperate, but he never lost heart. That was the sort of
man he was. He used to say that he'd started out with nothing, so if he ended
up
with nothing, what would he have lost? There were three achievements in his
life
that he felt proud of: first, he'd driven the Emperor to take his own life;
second, he'd made himself Emperor (even if only for a few days); and third,
he'd

made love to the most beautiful woman in the land. He had such a crude way of talking. He always said it was the third achievement that meant the most to him.

Wu had always had his heart set on being Emperor too. He'd never said so, but she knew it was true. The trouble was, he was too afraid. He was always dithering. He would think of making a move, but then lose his nerve. If he managed to live through today, one day he probably would be Emperor. Perhaps it would not be in Peking, perhaps it would be here in Kunming, and only for a single day. When the Ming Pretender fled to Burma, it was Wu who chased him and had him put to death. People still said that she had the blood of three Emperors on her hands' Chong Zhen, the last real Emperor of

the Ming; die young Ming Pretender, who called himself the Yong Li Emperor, even though he never really ruled the land; and Bash'em, who called himself the first (and last) Emperor of the Shun dynasty.

But what had she ever done wrong' How had she harmed anyone' She had never said a word against anyone . . .

The sounds of the fierce struggle in the hermitage continued all around her. They were old men, but they could still both of them move nimbly enough if they had to. Yuanyuan had always hated the sight of men fighting. She retreated once more into her memories.

... After Bash'em's defeat, when his men had all left him, one night he lost track of her too. Wu's men had found her, and took her straight to their commander. He was overjoyed to see her again. He told her that everyone called

him the Big Traitor, but he had done it all for her sake. He wanted her back so badly. And she was worth every bit of it. That's what he had said. She couldn't help being moved. What did she care if he was a Big Traitor or a Big Hero' He loved her. He'd do anything for her. No one else had ever loved her like that. She thought they could have a quiet life together at last. She didn't want to be Lady This or Princess That. She just wanted to stay with him. She didn't want to

be passed around any more, from one man to the next.

. . . They had lived in Kunming for a few years. Then he was made a Prince, and needed a real lady to be by his side on important occasions. His wife had died and he needed a new one. He sent his brother to her, to break the news. It ought

by rights to have been her, the brother explained, but everyone knew all about her, her history, where she'd come from, who she'd been with. The new Manchu

Emperor himself would have had to give his approval, and if Wu had put her name

down, the Court was bound to have been scandalized. Of course she understood. A

Prince can't have a singsong girl for his lady. She didn't want to make things hard for him. She just said that was fine, he should find himself some other woman who was more proper for the position. He even came to apologize to her

about it himself.

Who cared about being a Grand Lady with a title? But somehow she knew that something had ended. That was when she decided to move out of his palace, so that he could marry his new woman.

I Ht DEER AND THE CAULDRON

And that was when she first saw Bash'em again. Suddenly, out of the blue, he'd just popped up. He'd become a monk. He gave her the fright of her life. She thought he was dead, she'd even been quite sad about it for a while. And there he was in the flesh, alive and well! He said he'd become a monk as a disguise. And anyway, he'd never have been able to shave the front of his head like other people had done, and wear a Manchu pigtail. He was too proud for that. He said

he'd never forgotten her, not for one day. He'd already been hanging around in Kunming for three years, waiting for a chance to see her again. And there it was.

What should she say? He loved her. Did he love her more than Wu? She didn't know. He stayed with her night after night, and in the end she became pregnant

with his child. After that she knew she couldn't go on seeing him. It would be too dangerous. So she went back to the palace. She told Wu she'd missed him terribly. She wanted to stay with him. Wu was so pleased to see her again. He said he'd never been happy with his new lady. Eventually she'd had the baby, and

probably Wu never suspected it wasn't his.

The little girl had been taken away from her when she was just two years old. It happened in the middle of the night. She just vanished. She was heartbroken. But

she felt certain it must have been the girl's real father who'd sent one of his men to get her. After all, she was his daughter. He must have been so lonely all

on his own. The girl would have been someone to keep him company. She never realized. . . that it wasn't like that at all. . . .

Suddenly something wet landed on her arm. She stretched her hand up to the light. It was a drop of blood. The fight was still raging, and now she saw that Wu's face was covered in blood. The blood must have come flying across the room from his face.

Wu was out of breath. There was fear in his eyes. Then suddenly he brandished his spear and brought the tip swinging down towards Chen Yuanyuan, until it almost grazed her breast. She let out a little gasp. Did he mean to kill her? There was a resounding clang as Bash'em blocked the spear with his great metal staff. Wu seemed to be out of control. He kept trying to lunge at Chen Yuanyuan with his spear. Bash'em let out a great bellowing roar and threw all his strength into another blocking move.

Trinket was hiding behind Tribulation. He was greatly alarmed at this latest turn of events. The only explanation he could think of was that Wu was maddened with thoughts of jealousy.

CHAPTER 20

Tribulation had perceived Wu's true intention. 'He's a crafty villain. He knows he can never get the better of Bash'em, so this is his ruse.' It was certainly working. In his determination to defend Chen Yuanyuan, Bash'em Li had quite lost his footing. Wu suddenly switched direction again and brought his spear down on Bash'em's shoulder. Bash'em's right hand was now powerless, and his staff fell from his grasp. Wu closed in on him and his spear's point found its way to Bash'em's chest. 'Surrender!' he cried wildly. 'Very well,' gasped Li. 'I surrender!' He sank slowly to his knees.

Trinket was hugely disappointed, having assumed that Li had more in him than that. But even as he was having the thought, Bash'em had tumbled beyond reach of

Wu's spear, retrieved his staff, and was advancing on his foe once more, sweeping his staff through the air. He struck Wu on the leg, then closed in and

struck him first on the shoulder, then finally a resounding blow on the top of his head.

What Trinket did not know was that this had always been the hallmark of Bash'em's strategy' to secure a moment's respite by feigning surrender, and then

to launch a counter'attack. In the early days of his rebellion, back in the seventh year of the reign of Chong Zhen, in the seventh month, he and his men had been encircled at Xing'an County, a remote mountainous corner of Shaanxi Province. They were surrounded on all sides by government troops. His soldiers

had no rations, their horses no provender, disaster was staring them in the face. So he surrendered, and was taken into the Imperial army. No sooner was he

out of the mountain passes, than he raised the standard of rebellion once more. The sheer cunning and ferocity of the combat between the two old men caused Tribulation to reflect to herself that it was small wonder China had come to such a state, if it was at the mercy of men such as these.

Li's staff was about to spill the Satrap's brains, when suddenly Chen Yuanyuan threw herself between the two men, crying' 'Kill me first!'

Bash'em was flabbergasted. Wounded as he was in his right shoulder, it was all he could do to divert the onward motion of his staff. It smashed loudly into the wall.

'Yuanyuan!' he cried angrily. 'What are you up to''

This man and I were man and wife for twenty years' she replied. 'Once upon a time. . . he was very good to me. He was kind. I can't just let him die like this!'

'Out of my way, will you!' bellowed Bash'em. This is the man I hate most in the whole world! My hatred is as deep as the ocean! It is thicker than blood! Nothing is going to stop me from killing him!'

Then kill me too!' cried Yuanyuan.

Li heaved a great sigh.

'You still love him, don't you!'

She was silent. What she was thinking was'

'If he were about to kill you, I'd do the same to save you!'

Doing a Deal

The guards who were massed outside, seeing their Prince lying on the floor and in dire straits, cried out in alarm and began to surge forward. One of their commanders shouted

‘Release the Prince, if you value your lives!’

The voice of General Xia, the Satrap’s son-in-law, could be heard above the others, calling out

‘We have your friends here! Hurt a hair on the Satrap’s head and they will all die!’

What he said was true. Trinket looked out and saw the Young Count, Iron Dragon

Liu, and other members of the Mu Family; several Triads, including Xu, Gao, and

Obscurus; and Zhao and Zhang, the two captains of the Imperial Guard, together

with several other guards, all with their hands tied behind their backs, and each one under the beady eye of one of the Satrap’s men, and with a knife at their throat.

Trinket pulled out his trusty dagger and poked it in the small of the Satrap’s back.

There’s no sense in us all dying, Satrap! Let’s do a deal.’

The Satrap groaned.

‘What do you mean, deal’

‘Set all those people free, and my Shifu will spare your life.’

Bash’em protested.

‘You mustn’t trust a word this old man says! He’s a vile Traitor! His promises are worthless!’

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But Tribulation had no desire to see so many people killed, and resigned herself

to the fact that she 'would have to kill the Satrap some other day.

'Very well,' she concurred. 'Give the order to set them free and I will spare you.'

'And don't forget Ah Kor!' cried Trinket loudly. 'Take in the criminal!' shouted General Xia. Two of the Satrap's guards brought in a young girl. Sure enough, it was the Green Girl, Ah Kor, and she too had her hands bound behind her back and a knife at her throat.

Trinket!' cried Yuanyuan. 'You must act now if you are to save my daughter!' Trinket was strangely flattered that she should turn to him in this hour of need, rather than to her husband or her lover. One look at Ah Kor's lovely face, and another at her mother's, and his heart melted in him.

'I'll do it on one condition . . .'

He was now looking from Chen Yuanyuan to Bash'em. 'I'll do it if you both promise I can have her as my wife.' Tribulation looked at him angrily.

'How can you spring such tricks on us at a time like this!' But Chen Yuanyuan was a good deal less surprised by Trinket's terms. She had only known him a short while, but she had already formed a shrewd estimate of his character.

'Very well. I agree.'

'What about you' Trinket said, turning to Bash'em, who was still scowling angrily. He was about to give Trinket a good mouthful of abuse when he saw the

look of entreaty on Yuanyuan's face. With a snort he muttered'

'Oh, all right. I'll go along with whatever she says.' Trinket let out a delighted little squeal of laughter. The Satrap finally rose to his feet.

'Very well. I agree to Lord Wei's deal.'

'I want you to bring your son and the Princess Ning along as well,' added Trinket. 'I want you to escort us personally out of Kunming, and I want your son

to come with us all the way to Peking. Their wedding will take place there. That way, if you suddenly change your mind and send your men after us (you know, start rubbing your nose and that sort of thing), we'll simply cut your son's throat. And that way, if anyone is killed, it'll be all of us.

We'll all go trooping off to see old Lord Yama together in Hell-the Little Traitor, Princess Ning, and me. That should be a jolly little excursion, don't you think"

The Satrap had to give Trinket credit for being smart. He gave the order for General Xia to summon his son and the Princess. Xia reported that Young Wu was

in fact already waiting outside in a sedan chair. His wound had still not healed sufficiently for him to be able to walk.

Wu now gave the order for all the prisoners to be set free. He turned to

Trinket'

'You and your Shifu must follow close behind me. I will escort you out of the city. That way you will be sure that I will stand by my word.'

So Trinket and the Satrap left the room, followed closely by Tribulation. As he passed Young Wu's sedan chair, Trinket raised the curtain and peeped inside. Wu

Yingxiong was white as a sheet, slumped limply against the inside corner of the sedan. Trinket laughed. 'How's life treating you, sir'

'I can't complain . . .' stammered the young man. 'And you' 'Oh, I'm fine!' quipped Trinket.

When they reached the entrance of the hermitage, they found the road choked with

countless soldiers and horses, stretching in every direction, as far as the eye could see. Trinket complimented the Satrap on the turn'out. As they moved forward Wu warned him not to say anything indiscreet to the Emperor on his return to Peking. If he did, he himself would be obliged to reveal that the Emperor's young favourite was a friend not only of the treacherous Mu Family of

Yunnan, but also of the notorious rebel Bash'em Li. Trinket for his part managed

to extract from the Satrap the promise of a hefty bribe. He kept on suggesting the different forms this bribe might take, partly to keep the Satrap busy (just in case he might be thinking of changing his mind about their deal, and rubbing

his nose again), partly to create the sort of bond (between briber and bribed) that would be hard for Wu to shrug off in the future. Trinket's motive was not deciphered by the Satrap. He took the boy's words at face value, and sent off General Xia at once to fetch the astounding sum of five hundred thousand taels of silver, and a load of presents in kind, for Trinket to distribute on his behalf once the boy arrived back in Peking.

The two of them mounted their horses and rode off side by side. Tribulation followed close behind them, also on horseback.

Wu reflected to himself that it was probably better that things had turned out this way. Supposing he had killed them all, he would only have been obliged to show his hand and launch his long'planned rebellion at once. And he was not ready for that. He had not yet put the finishing touches to the Grand Alliance he was nurturing with the Mongols, the Tibetans, the Russians, and the Mystic Dragon Sect. A precipitate move now could spoil the whole enterprise.

They went first to the An Fu Gardens, 'which were located a couple of miles outside the city; once they'd collected the Princess, they set off. Trinket checked his party. Ah Kor was there, as were his Mu Family friends, the Triads, and all of the Imperial Guards. He made a few polite parting remarks about entertaining the Satrap when he was next in Peking, and the two went their separate ways, the Satrap stopping briefly at the Princess' sedan, and then whispering a few instructions to his own son.

Departure from Kunming

Although the Satrap's soldiers were now at a safe distance, Trinket still felt a little uneasy.

'I don't trust the Satrap one bit. The sooner we're a long way from Kunming the better.'

So they set off at a smartish pace and did not let up until they had put a good three or four miles between themselves and Kunming, and could see no sign of the

Satrap's troops behind them.

Bash'em was talking to Tribulation'

'I am deeply grateful to you for letting me live.'

Even as he said this, he was taking a dagger from his waist, and offering it to her, handle first.

'Do know!' he said.

'This man,' thought Tribulation to herself, 'is my father's murderer! My father must be avenged! But how can I kill him like this in cold blood, when he is not even putting up a fight.'

She turned and looked at Ah Kor.

'So she is your daughter.'

'No, I am not!' cried Ah Kor.

'Don't be so silly!' retorted Tribulation. 'Your own mother says that you are!'

She sounded angry.

'Of course he's your father' put in Trinket. 'And you heard him and your mother promise you to me.'

Ah Kor could contain herself no longer. She dealt Trinket a sharp blow on the bridge of his nose, and his face was soon covered in blood.

'Aiyo!' cried Trinket. 'You're trying to murder your own husband!'

'Come on now, both of you!' scolded Tribulation. 'That's no way to behave!'

Ah Kor took a few steps back; her face was all swollen and red with weeping.

‘You’re not my father!’ she cried, pointing angrily at Bash’em. ‘And she’s not my mother.’ Then she pointed at Tribulation ‘And you’re not my Shifu! You’re all bad, bad-all of you! I hate you all!’

Suddenly she broke down and sobbed again. Tribulation sighed.

‘In a way you’re right. I’m not really your Shifu. I stole you from Satrap Wu’s palace. It wasn’t a good thing to do. ... Go on. Go your own way. You can leave us. But don’t say they’re not your parents.’

Ah Kor stamped her foot.

They’re not! They’re not! I haven’t got any parents! I haven’t got a Shifu!’

‘You’ve got me!’ put in Trinket. ‘At least you’ve got a husband.’

In a fury, Ah Kor picked up a stone and hurled it at him. He ducked, and she ran off down the road.

‘Hey!’ cried Trinket. ‘Where do you think you’re off to’

She stopped and turned around.

‘One day,’ she cried angrily, ‘I’ll kill you, with my own hands!’

Trinket could only stare after her.

All of this had put Tribulation in a very melancholy state. She made a gesture to Bash’em, and rode off silently.

‘Father-in-law,’ said Trinket, ‘it seems my Shifu has decided not to kill you. You’d better be on your way, quickly.’

Bash’em for his part felt an indescribable sense of oppression at the outcome of his encounter with his former lover and his daughter. He glared at Trinket, who retreated from him terrified. Finally Bash’em spat on the ground and went striding off down a country lane.

Trinket shook his head sadly. If Ah Kor had rejected her own parents so vehemently, there was little chance she would accept him. The Triads Xu and Gao had been standing right behind their Lodge Master, armed and ready for any

sudden move from Bash'em.

'He hasn't changed!' muttered Xu. 'Ever the rebel hero!' 'He scared the life out of me!' said Trinket, popping out his tongue. Then 'So, is that Hatiemo fellow with us'

'Of course!' replied Xu. 'We wouldn't forget someone as important as that.'

'Excellent. Keep a good eye on him. We don't want him escaping on the way back to Peking.'

And so they set forth on their way back to the Capital. Trinket exchanged a few words with the Young Count Mu and the old Mu Family Shifu, Iron Dragon Liu. The

Mu Family were feeling very crestfallen at having been saved by the Triads from

their dire predicament. This would do no good to their prestige and ranking in the Resistance movement. Iron Dragon muttered something about Liu Yizhou, Fang

Yi's pale-faced lover.

'Was he the one who betrayed you' asked Trinket. He had never liked the man.

'Of course it was him!' Iron Dragon could hardly speak, he was so angry. Wisps of his white beard trembled in the air. 'Is he still at the Satrap's' asked

Trinket. 'Probably,' replied the Young Count. 'Shifu Liu sent him ahead to scout for information, and he was captured by the Satrap's men. That same evening the

house we were staying in was surrounded. No one apart from young Liu knew where

we were.'

'Lodge Master Wei,' continued the Count in a serious tone, 'from this day on the

Mu Family will for ever be loyal followers of the Triads. And now I think we must part company.'

'I think we should stay together,' Trinket demurred. 'We are still in the Satrap's territory, and there is safety in numbers. Let's part ways once we're across the Yunnan border.' The Count shook his head.

'It's a kind thought. But we really must be going.' He couldn't bear the thought of being beholden a moment longer to the Triads for protection. The Little Countess had been walking at the very back of the party. She took a step or two off the road, and spoke to Trinket.

'I must go now. Take care of yourself.'

'You too,' replied Trinket. He lowered his voice. 'Don't go back to the island. I miss you, all the time.' She nodded.

'I miss you too.' Trinket handed her his reins. 'Here, take my horse.'

Her eyes reddened as she took hold of the reins, vaulted into the saddle, and set off after her brother.

CHAPTER 21

In which Trinket and Party make
their way to the Province of
Guizhou, and thence to Peking;
there is Singing on the River, and
Tales are told of Taiwan; Two
Elderly Jesuit Fathers prove their
Skill at the Art of making Cannon;
Devoted Doublet pieces together the
Map; and Trinket is put in
command of a Naval Expedition
In the Mountains

After several days of travelling, the city of Kunming was well and truly behind them, and there was no visible sign of the Satrap's troops following them. They felt they could finally begin to relax a little.

One evening, as they were approaching the county town of Qujing, they saw four riders galloping towards them. One of them leapt from his horse and announced to the vanguard of Trinket's party that he was carrying important military intelligence for the Imperial Envoy Lord Wei. Trinket immediately summoned the man

before him. He was a diminutive, scrawny, swarthy fellow. Trinket was about to interrogate him when Butcher Qian called out from behind him'

‘Aren’t you Brother Kuang’

The man bowed.

‘At your service, Brother Qian!’

Trinket glanced at Qian, and Qian nodded back, muttering ‘He’s one of ours.’

Trinket escorted the man to the back, where the only others present were Triads.

Butcher Qian introduced him to Kuang as their Lodge Master, whereupon Kuang clasped his hands together and bowed, pronouncing the words of the Triad oath’

‘By Heaven my father and Earth my mother, I will overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming! Brother Kuang Tianxiong of the Red Fire Lodge greets Lodge Master Wei and Brothers of the Green Wood Lodge.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Brother Kuang,’ replied Trinket.

Butcher Qian had run into this man a few times in Hunan in the past, on Triad business. He now proceeded to introduce him to his fellow Triads, including Brothers Li Lishi, Tertius Qi, Feng Jizhong, Apothecary Xu, Obscurus, and Gao Yanchao. The three men accompanying Kuang were also members of the Red Fire Lodge. This was the Lodge responsible for the Province of Guizhou, which they would be entering in a few days. It was reassuring that the local Brothers should have come all this way to welcome them.

Trinket enquired after their Lodge Master Gu, whom he had last seen at the great gathering in the north. Kuang conveyed his Lodge Master’s best wishes to them all, and the admiration of his Lodge for what they had achieved. Lodge Master Gu also wished to warn them that they should change their plans and travel by a more easterly route, through southern Guangxi, bypassing Guizhou Province altogether. This came as something of a shock to Trinket and his friends.

Kuang went on to say that Lodge Master Gu was still looking forward to seeing them, but that the meeting would now have to take place in Guangxi Province.

‘Why there’ asked Trinket.

‘We have information that Satrap Wu has dispatched a large detachment of cavalry to Xuanwei, and other parts of eastern Yunnan, with a view to ambushing your party.’

CHAPTER 21

They all gasped with horror when they heard this.

‘That turtle just doesn’t know when to give in!’ cried Trinket. ‘Doesn’t he even care if he puts his own son’s life in danger?’

Kuang briefed him on what they had gleaned of the Satrap’s plans. These were to

send a sizeable contingent of crack fighters to apprehend ‘a certain dangerous woman Shifu’, and then to make off with Young Wu, the Tartar Princess, and Lodge

Master Wei, having killed all the others in cold blood. The pass beyond Qujing at Songshao had already been closed and no one could get through. They themselves had made their way by small mountain tracks, and had travelled day

and night, to forewarn Trinket of the dangers he faced.

Trinket thanked them profusely. The four of them did look truly done in, and were red-eyed from lack of sleep. Trinket consulted with his comrades. Butcher Qian enquired of Kuang how many men the Satrap had sent.

‘He couldn’t get his own troops up from Kunming in time; so he sent a message by

carrier pigeon with orders for troops from northern Yunnan and southern Guizhou

to be seconded for this mission-about thirty thousand in all.’

There were cries and curses all round at this. Trinket’s entire force amounted to only two thousand men-only a fraction of the enemy’s strength. They were well

and truly outnumbered.

‘Whereabouts in Guangxi does Lodge Master Gu want us to meet up?’ asked Qian.

‘He has sent one of his men ahead to make contact with Lodge Master Ma of the

Clan Lodge in Guangxi. If Lodge Master Wei agrees, the three Lodge Masters can

meet in Lucheng. That’s in western Guangxi, a long way from here, and hard roads

all the way. But at least the place is not patrolled by the Satrap’s troops. And

the Clan Lodge Brothers of Guangxi will be there for us if need be. It should be safe enough.'

Trinket was greatly relieved to hear this.

'Good. We'd better head towards Lucheng then. But that fat turtle of a Satrap has got it coming to him one day soon!'

He gave the order for the party to set off in a new direction, and head towards the south-east, into the mountainous province of Guangxi. Brother Kuang and his

friends were to be carried in a comfortable conveyance, so that they could rest after their exertions. Knowing that the Satrap was still after them, they hurried forward

with a new sense of urgency, camping out every night in the open, not wishing to

alert the local officials to their presence.

A few days later they reached Lucheng. Lodge Master Ma Chaoxing of the Clan Lodge, Lodge Master Gu Zhizhong of the Red Fire Lodge, together with leading members of both Lodges, were gathered there to greet them. That evening Lodge

Master Ma presided over a banquet. The local Triads were pleased to learn of the

recent turn of events in Kunming, and the consequent loss of prestige of their traditional rivals in the Resistance, the Mu Family.

When the feast was ended a detachment of Red Fire Lodge scouts returned to report that the Satrap's men had learned about Trinket's changed route, and were

already in hot pursuit. They had reached the Guangxi border, but had not dared

to cross over. They had sent back to Kunming for instructions as to whether or not they should penetrate into Guangxi disguised as brigands.

Lodge Master Ma laughed.

'Guangxi is outside the Satrap's jurisdiction. If he were to send his men in here, it would be as good as an open declaration of rebellion. He probably thinks that by disguising his men he can shift the responsibility for whatever happens onto the shoulders of the Princess Kong Sizhen-but it will never work!'

He was referring to the daughter of the general Kong Youde, who had himself died

soon after the Manchu conquest. Later, during Kang Xi's reign, the Princess

had
been showered with honours, and she continued to control Guangxi Province,
which
had been her father's fief during his lifetime.

They all rested a day in Lucheng. Trinket still felt they were too close to Yunnan for comfort, and was for moving further east. The following day he said farewell to Gu and the Red Fire Triads, and set off with his party eastwards into Guangxi, accompanied by Ma and the Clan Lodge Triads.

A Number of Familiar Faces

After several days on the road, they finally came to central Guangxi, sufficiently far away from danger for the members of the Imperial Guard (including Trinket's old friends, Captains Zhang and Zhao) to feel that they could begin indulging again in their usual practices of extortion and trouble-making. When they arrived in the city of Liuzhou, the local Prefect, knowing that the party included an

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Imperial Princess, entertained them lavishly. The troops were back in their element, and went out on the town.

During their third evening in Liuzhou, Trinket was engaged in conversation with

Lodge Master Ma and other Triads, when Captain Zhang Kangnian came up in a great

fluster, demanding urgently to see Colonel Wei. He would say nothing more, but

looked extremely ill at ease. Trinket saw that his left cheek was swollen, and that on the right side he had a black eye. He had obviously been in some sort of a brawl, and had come out of it somewhat the worse for wear. Trinket left his Triad friends (not wishing to humiliate a Guard in front of them), and drew Captain Zhang into a side-room. As soon as they were alone, Zhang informed Trinket that their friend Captain Zhao Qixian was being held in custody.

'What a bloody cheek!' cried Trinket angrily. 'Who was it? One of the Liuzhou guard? One of the Yamen constables? What did he do? Kill someone?'

Trinket was thinking to himself that, for a Palace Guard to have been arrested, it must have been something extremely serious. A shamefaced Zhang confessed that

their friend had been apprehended in a gambling den. Trinket roared with laughter.

‘Tamardy! You mean he’s been nabbed by some local gamblers! That’s rich!
The two

of you lost a lot of money, I’ll bet!’

Zhang nodded. It transpired that at the end of a long (and disastrous) gambling session, Captain Zhao had provoked trouble by abusing the operators of the den

and accusing them of cheating, despite the fact that they had let him off very generously.

‘Not a very River and Lake sort of thing to do!’ commented Trinket.

‘That’s an odd remark,’ reflected Zhang silently to himself, ‘seeing that we all work in the Palace, and neither you nor I nor

Zhao have anything to do with the River and Lake fraternity at all.

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Confusion such as this was becoming only too common on Trinket’s part, as he sought unsuccessfully to manage his complex identities.

Anyway, as a result of Captain Zhao’s abusive behaviour, he and Zhang and five of their friends from the Guard had been knocked unconscious by a strange dishevelled old fellow, a large man, who had leapt to the defence of the gambling establishment, at the same time saying all manner of insulting things about the

Emperor. The man had used devastating kungfu on them. When Zhang recovered

consciousness, he found himself lying on the ground, with his friends sprawled around him. The big fellow was standing with one foot on Captain Zhao’s head, demanding that they each pay a thousand taels of silver. If they didn’t come up with the money within four hours, he would start selling them off as meat, in medium-sized chunks, at ten taels a pound!

‘What sort of a fellow is he’ asked Trinket, intrigued.

‘He’s huge, he’s got fists bigger than rice-bowls, and his face is covered in whiskers. He’s dressed in rags, like a beggar.’

Clearly this was some River and Lake figure, thought Trinket to himself, and dealing with him would require appropriate River and Lake measures (and a certain amount of money, no doubt). It suddenly occurred to him that he had the

very people for the job. He disappeared for a moment and returned with a bag full of money and a couple of officers from the Valiant Regiment. Captain Zhang

was dismayed. How was Colonel Trinket going to deal with such a deadly fighter

aided by only these two men’ Zhang could not know that beneath their uniforms,

these men were none other than those redoubtable warriors, our old friends Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta (the scrawny one), who had accompanied Trinket throughout his trip to Yunnan, dressed as officers in the Valiant Regiment of Household Cavalry. They had kept a very low profile for fear of complicating life unnecessarily for him and for themselves (and, no doubt, for the indulgent reader as well). They had spent most of their time indoors, and had stayed well out of trouble. When Trinket told them he had a special mission for them, they were only too pleased to be involved in some action at last.

In the Qambling Den

Zhang led Trinket, the Doctor, and Fat Dhuta to the gambling den, where play was in full swing. Trinket strode boldly into the room, while Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta stood in the doorway, awaiting his orders. Zhang skulked behind them.

There were four men playing around a large table. Captain Zhao and the five other Palace Guards were still lying motionless on the ground. The man sitting to the right of the table (East in gambling parlance) was a big, hairy fellow, certainly the kungfu beggar described by Zhang. To his left, in South position, was a

handsome young gentleman or sum uuuu Q1^ , """"", ,
Trinket recognized him at once as Li Xihua, a man he had once met in Peking, a

young fighter of supreme skill. On that occasion, Li had been involved in a staggering display of kungfu virtuosity, involving the Helmsman Chen Jinnan himself, who had been obliged to use his Blood'Curdling Snatch on Li's ankle. Trinket was more than a little surprised to see him again in these outlandish provincial surroundings. Opposite the beggar, in West position, was a man of sixty or so, dressed like a peasant, a sour'faced, glum'looking individual, whose expression suggested that he had sustained heavy losses at the table. In North position was the oddest'looking character of them all, a short, fat individual, round as a meatball, dressed in a luxurious silken jacket and gown. His face was all squashed together, as if someone had literally pounded it into a ball. He was totally engrossed in the game.

'I wonder if Li Xihua remembers me' wondered Trinket silently. 'Probably not. After all, it was such a long time ago, and I'm all dressed up in these official clothes. But I'd better watch my step with him.'

'Good evening to you all, friends!' he announced cheerfully. 'I wonder if I could join you for a round or two'

As he approached the table, Trinket saw large piles of money on ^-somewhere between five and six thousand taels in all. And the largest pile of all was stacked right in front of the sour'faced peasant. Despite his glum expression,

he was clearly by far the biggest winner. Odd.

The short round man in the silken gown tapped his dominoes with his stubby fingers. Then suddenly he let out a startling cry. It was evident that he suspected the sullen Peasant sitting on his right of cheating. There was a heated exchange between the two of them, during which Li Xihua and the old Beggar (who had both retired from the game) sat on the sidelines quietly chuckling. As the game progressed, Trinket could see that the Peasant was actually using a clever system of marking. Meatball went on losing more and more

heavily, until finally he was cleaned out altogether and had nothing left to bet with. The blood had gone rushing to his face, so that it looked like one huge, crimson, bloated blood vessel. He began rummaging through all his pockets with

his podgy hands, without finding anything, and seemed about to despair, when suddenly he caught sight of Captain Zhao lying on the ground.

That creature must be worth a few hundred taels! I'll bet him!

He promptly lugged Zhao up onto the table. The unfortunate Captain had had his

Vital Points well and truly immobilized, and was incapable of offering even the slightest resistance.

'Wait a minute!' barked the old Beggar. 'I'm the one who arrested these guards! What right do you have to bet with them?'

'Just lend him to me, will you?' grovelled Meatball.

'And if you lose' What will I get back?'

A strange expression came into Meatball's eyes.

'I have no intention of losing-'

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'And supposing your luck doesn't turn?'

'Oh, there are plenty more guards in town-I'll get hold of another one for you.'

'I'm not so sure. . . .' muttered the Beggar, but he nodded his head all the same.

'Come on, you!' Meatball urged Trinket. 'Throw the dice for me!'

Trinket turned to the cheerless Peasant.

‘You shuffle the dominoes, would you’ Same as last time.’

The Peasant made a great racket shuffling the thirty-two bone dominoes, and then

proceeded to divide them into piles. Trinket was astonished to observe how all his old cheating marks had been secretly erased, and no new ones were as yet visible in their place. If the two men had still been playing for money, it wouldn’t have mattered so much. But since the stake was now his old friend Captain Zhao, Trinket felt the need to intervene.

‘Why not just play with dice!’ he suggested to the two of them.

Meatball shook his fat round head till it wobbled like a spinning top.

‘I much prefer playing dominoes!’

‘But you’re obviously not much good at it.’

Meatball reached out, grabbed Trinket by the chest, yanked him up into the air, and began shaking him up and down.

‘Nobody calls me a bad player! Nobody’

Trinket felt the bones rattling in his body. Then a voice from behind him cried

‘Put him down! You can’t do that to him’

It was Fat Dhuta, who had suddenly made himself visible. Meatball still had Trinket suspended from his right hand. He pulled a face.

‘Why not’ And what the hell are you doing here anyway”

Doctor Lu replied on behalf of Fat Dhuta

‘Just put him down! He’s somebody important. You really mustn’t offend His Excellency . . . Mr Wei!’

Meatball gave a great whoop of joy.

‘Mr Wei! You mean this is Mr Wei! Tamardy! The very man I’ve been looking for!

Fantastic!’

And so saying he went running towards the door, still suspending Trinket in mid-air and making for the street. Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu barred his way.

‘Come on, Skinny’ said Doctor Lu, addressing Meatball. ‘Now that you know who he

is, show a little more respect. . . . Put him down!’

‘If he was the Great Leader himself, I still wouldn’t put him down! Not till he

gave me some of the Antidote!’

‘Stop talking such rubbish! What would you want the Antidote for now’ cried Fat

Dhuta.

‘You don’t know anything.’ cried Meatball. ‘Out of my way! Unless you want a fight!’

Trinket was following this strange conversation as best he could from his position in mid’air.

‘So Meatball must be Fat Dhuta’s long’lost brother’in’arms, Thin Dhuta. The one

they sometimes call Lump’of’Flesh. He’s certainly fat and short and grotesque!

Makes sense, I suppose. ...’

He recalled that day in the Palace, in the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity, the Fake’Empress Dowager’s compound, when a fat spherical creature had come hurtling

naked from under the bedcovers, and escaped from the Palace carrying the ‘Old Whore’ under his arm. (He’d been moving too fast on that occasion for Trinket to

get a good view of his features, which is why he hadn’t recognized him this time in the gambling den.)

Fat Dhuta had once told Trinket the whole story about him and Thin Dhuta’ how

the two of them had been sent overseas on an important mission by the Great Leader, and were delayed on the way back, with the result that the Leopard Embryo Pills they’d taken had developed a violent toxicity-the originally fat member of the duo had grown into a tall, skinny beanpole, and the thin one had

become a spherical dwarf. Afterwards, they had both taken the Antidote, so Fat Dhuta said, but it had been too late to reverse the process. Meatball’s current obsession with the Antidote seemed

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a bit futile-unless he wanted it for the Old Whore! Yes, that must be it! He wanted it for that vile slut of a lover of his!

‘Hey, you!’ Trinket yelled. ‘If you want that Antidote, you’d better put me down smartish.’

At the mention of the word ‘Antidote’ Meatball’s entire physical sphere started to tremble like a jelly. He put Trinket down and stretched out his left hand.

‘Give!’

‘What, just like that’ When you’ve just been so rude to me’ After everything you said”

Meatball, or Thin Dhuta as he really ought to be called from now on, lunged forward and poked Trinket in the small of the back.

‘Quick!’ he cried. ‘The Antidote!’

His fat palm was now bearing down on Trinket’s Great Mallet point. A little more pressure, and Trinket’s Heart Meridian would be in serious trouble. It would be fatal.

‘Leave him alone!’ yelled Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta simultaneously. And at the exact same moment, three other hands sought out Thin Dhuta’s pumpkin head. The

Beggar’s palm pressed down on his Hundred Meetings point, on his crown; Li Xihua’s hand pressed on his Jade Pillow point, on the back of his head; and the surly Peasant shot his hand out at Thin Dhuta’s face and pressed two fingers-his index and middle fingers-into points just above one of his eyelids. These were lethal points, and it would only have taken a slight jab for the Peasant to rip out his eye’ball.

Thin Dhuta was extremely short. He was half Trinket’s height. With all these hands descending on him from above, he was totally outmanoeuvred. Doctor Lu and

Fat Dhuta could tell that each of the three men possessed highly developed kungfu skills. If they were all three to press home their concerted attack, they would certainly make a messy pulp of Thin Dhuta’s fat head.

‘Hold back!’ the two of them cried in unison.

‘First you do some holding back, Fatso!’ demanded the Beggar. ‘Get your hands off Mr Wei.’

‘If he gives me the Antidote!’

‘If you don’t let go of him,’ continued the Beggar, ‘I’ll have to teach you a lesson.’

But before he could carry out his threat, Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta stepped in. They soon had both the Beggar and Li Xihua immobilized.

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A second later, the Peasant snatched his hand from Thin Dhuta's face and transferred his attentions to Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta. They could each feel one of his hands poking them in the

small of the back.

The seven of them-Trinket, Thin Dhuta, Li Xihua, Doctor Lu, Fat Dhuta, the Peasant, and the Beggar-rang the changes, taking it in turns to control and to be controlled. Then for an instant they were all motionless, like an array of clay dolls. Strictly speaking, Trinket was only ever on the receiving end of control. But then, he was the only one who knew what the fuss was all about. None of the others knew of Thin Dhuta's liaison with the Old Whore.

'This is all such fun!' he cried. 'Hey, Fatso, go ahead, kill me, who cares! Who cares if you get killed either, for that matter. The only pity would be if the Antidote disappeared with me... Then a certain lady friend of yours might be very upset. She'd probably start falling apart, bit by bit. First chunks of her hair would fall out, and then she'd go completely bald. Then she'd-'

'Stop!' cried Thin Dhuta.

'Then her face would collapse into a skull-'

Suddenly a voice could be heard from the doorway.

'Here they are! Take them all prisoner!'

They all turned to see a flash of steel, and realized that they were surrounded. They felt their points freeze, and then one by one, they sank immobile to the ground.

A Surprising Intervention

Trinket saw that one of the new arrivals in the gambling den was his darling Green Girl, and was about to cry out to her in delight, when he recognized two of the men with her as Bash'em Li Zicheng (her natural father) and the man who

was in Trinket's eyes the most loathsome, foul creature in the entire universe-her so-called fiance Zheng Keshuang. The third man, who had replaced his long sword in its scabbard and was standing there arms akimbo, sneering at them all,

was Feng Xifan, the Bloodless Sword, Zheng Keshuang's sinister mentor. It was his deadly blade that had immobilized every one of them, even Captain Zhang Kangnian.

Thin Dhuta, when he was sitting on the ground, was hardly any shorter than he was standing up. That tends to be the way with spherical objects.

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‘Who the blazes are you’ he yelled. ‘Who gave you permission to close my Sun Gate and Spirit Hall points’

‘I am impressed!’ sneered Feng. ‘At least you know which points they are! Excellent kungfu!’

But Thin Dhuta was not impressed by Feng’s sarcasm.

‘Open them, and I’ll challenge you to a proper fight! Sneaking up on people like that is not a very brave thing to do.’

Feng sneered yet again.

‘And what a brave little thing you are! Lying there on the ground, like a beached ball! Brave little ball!’

‘I’m sitting, not lying! Haven’t you got any tamardy eyes in your head’

Feng prodded Thin Dhuta on the shoulder with his left foot, and he rolled over onto his back. But the sheer weight of his great fat bottom brought him rolling back into a sitting position.

Zheng Keshuang burst out laughing.

‘Look at this roly’poly toy, Ah Kor! Isn’t it a scream!’

‘He’s weird,’ was her reply.

‘So, my dear’ continued Zheng Keshuang, ‘you said you wanted revenge on the little brat. Shall we torture him, or kill him outright’

‘Yikes! Little brat-that has to be me!’ thought Trinket. ‘But what does Green want to be revenged on me for’

‘The very sight of him makes me mad!’ said Green, grinding her teeth. ‘Let’s just kill him and be done with it!’

There was a swishing sound as she drew her sword and advanced on Trinket.

‘Don’t kill him!’ cried a chorus consisting of the Two Dhutas, Doctor Lu, the Beggar, Li Xihua, and Zhang Kangnian.

‘Dearest sister’in’arms,’ pleaded Trinket. ‘What have I ever done-”

‘First, let’s get one thing straight’ I am not your sister’in’arms, you obnoxious little brat!’ snapped Green. ‘All you ever do is think of new ways of offending me, new ways of disgracing me. . . .’

She raised her sword and swung it with all her might at his chest. A cry of dismay rose from Trinket’s immobilized friends and supporters. But then to their utter amazement they saw the sword rebound. Trinket was wearing his magic waistcoat, and not even Green’s blade could get through that. She looked stunned.

‘Stab him in the eyes!’ cried her valiant paramour, Zheng Keshuang.

‘Good idea!’

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She raised the sword again and this time lunged at his face.

Suddenly, a diminutive figure came hurtling from a darkened corner of the room.

It wrapped itself protectively around Trinket and took the full impact of the oncoming blade directly on its shoulder. The figure then retreated with Trinket back into the corner of the room from which it had come, at the same time extracting Trinket’s dagger from his boot.

It was a figure of slim build, clad in the uniform of the Valiants. The face was so heavily caked in mud that it was impossible to discern the features. Whoever it was, the spectators were deeply impressed by this act of blind devotion, and the skill with which it had been executed. Feng drew his sword again, and advanced slowly on Trinket and his little saviour. Then suddenly he began swinging the sword through the air, describing a blinding series of figures. A great clang rang out and, to his own (and everyone else’s) utter astonishment, the sword (Feng’s famous Bloodless Blade) snapped clean in two’ Trinket’s adamantite dagger had shattered it. At the same moment blood began spurting from

the unknown Valiant’s shoulder.

Feng Xifan’s cadaverous face darkened, and he grunted as he . threw the pieces of his broken weapon to the ground, and pondered his next move.

Trinket laughed out loud.

‘Well, just take a look at the Bloodless Sword! No sword, and blood all over the place! Thanks to one of my junior officers. I think we’d better start calling you the Swordless Bloodbath!’

The little Valiant was holding his left hand pressed to his own shoulder wound, while with his right hand he massaged Trinket's chest and then the small of his back, and began releasing his points.

The Beggar, Doctor Lu, the Two Dhutas, and Li Xihua all laughed heartily at Feng

Xifan's discomfiture.

'I like it!' bellowed the Beggar. 'The Swordless Bloodbath! Suits the evil bastard exactly!'

Feng was shaking with rage and humiliation.

'Who are you?' he demanded of the Valiant. 'I'll let you live this once. I seem to have no choice. But I'm warning you, next time-'

'Who am I? I'm... I'm just...'

The Valiant's voice seemed weak, almost effeminate. Trinket suddenly recognized

the sound.

'Why it's you!' he cried in delight. 'Dear Doublet! My own dearest darling of a jewel of a Doublet!'

He removed her headgear at once, let down her hair, and wrapped his right arm

around her.

'She's my maid,' he said. 'See, Swordless, you've been defeated by my maid. . . . Not much to brag about, eh?'

Feng, angrier than ever, kicked out his left foot and sent the gambling table flying up into the air, complete with the piles of money and the recumbent figure of Zhao Qixian. Cash and dominoes were scattered everywhere. Then Feng

turned silently and made for the door. His exit was, however, blocked. Two men

stood there grimly side by side in the doorway, two Triad brothers, the taciturn Feng Jizhong and the Taoist Father Obscurus.

'Out of my way!' he yelled, pulling them away from the doorway with both hands

and crashing them into the wall. They both began spitting blood. Feng Xifan drew

a deep breath and strode on out.

Trinket came over to check that the two men were not badly hurt. Brother Feng Jizhong had received a more serious injury than Obscurus, but he made light of it. Soon further Triad reinforcements arrived in the form of Butcher Qian, Apothecary Xu (the Eight-Armed Ape), and Gao Yanchao. Green glanced at

Bash'em

and Zheng Keshuang, indicating that it was time to beat a retreat. Bash'em walked over to Trinket and thumped the ground with his monk's staff.

'Since your Shifu spared my life the other day, I shall let you off today. It's the honourable thing to do. But if you so much as look at my daughter ever again, or address a single word to her, I shall pound you into paste!'

'Isn't it the honourable thing to do, to keep your own promises' On the very same day that my Shifu spared your life, you promised me your daughter in marriage. Remember' It was a promise. It's a pretty strange kind of father'in'law who won't allow his son'in'law to even look at his own wife, or speak to her!' Green was red with fury. 'Father, let's go. Don't listen to that brat!' 'Excellent!' chipped in Trinket. 'So you've finally accepted that he is your father. About time too. . . . Well, are you going to obey Daddy's orders''

Bash'em Li raised his staff angrily into the air.

'Shut your mouth, you misbegotten toad!'

At this, Butcher Qian and Apothecary Xu, who were standing behind Bash'em, launched a joint attack. Bash'em swivelled round and blocked both their swords

with his staff. There was a resounding clang. Meanwhile Brother Gao had drawn

his sword and was standing guard over Trinket.

'Li Zicheng!' Gao cried. 'Who was it saved your life and your daughter's in Kunming' You are an ungrateful, wicked old man!'

The others present had all heard of the great bandit General Li Zicheng, the man

who some twenty years earlier had succeeded in taking Peking and proclaiming himself Emperor of China-even if it was only for a matter of days. But everyone believed him to be dead. They were amazed to hear his name spoken now.

'You' Li Zicheng'' cried the young Li Xihua aghast. 'You mean to say you're still alive! My prayers have been answered!'

There was a strange intensity in the way he said this, a tone of deep bitterness. Li Zicheng stared at him for a moment, a puzzled expression on his face.

'And who are you''

'Me' I am the man who is going to eat your flesh, you foul monster!' cried young

Li, his voice trembling with rage. 'I thought you were dead and beyond my grasp.

But Heaven has granted me my dearest wish!'

Bash'em grunted and gave a bitter laugh.

‘Many’s the man that bears me a grudge. I’ve killed hundreds of thousands in my

time. But if you really want revenge, you’ll have to fight for it!’

Green tugged him by the shoulder.

‘Come on, father, let’s go.’

Bash’em thumped his staff on the ground once more, turned on his heel, and strode out, followed by Green and Zheng Keshuang.

‘I shall be here tomorrow at this hour!’ Li Xihua called after him. ‘I’ll be waiting for you! If you’ve any courage, if you’re a true man, you’ll come and fight!’

Nobody present had the slightest doubt that Bash’em Li was a true man, and a man

of enormous courage. Despite his great age, he was still a fighter to be reckoned with. He was a living legend. One glance from him was sufficient to strike terror into the heart of most mortals.

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Beggar, Meatball, and other Combatants

Tamardy!’ grumbled Trinket, when Bash’em had left. ‘You promised me your daughter, old man! Go back on your word, and ‘ say you’re no true man’ you’re no

more than a dog’s fart!’

He helped Doublet, who was bandaging her shoulder wound.

‘Thank heavens you came to my rescue, dear Doublet’ he said. ‘It was a real stroke of luck.’

‘It wasn’t anything to do with luck,’ protested Doublet touchingly. ‘I’ve never been far away. You just didn’t know I was there.’

‘How come’ Trinket was quite taken aback.

But before Doublet could explain, there was a strangled cry from Thin Dhuta.

‘Undo my points! Get me some Antidote! Or I’ll smash your poxy little brain to bits!’

The strange noise he was making, his wild, empty threats, and the altogether

sorry spectacle he presented, stuck there on the ground, incapable of any movement except a ridiculous rocking backwards and forwards, like a fat wobbly

little ball, provoked a burst of hilarious laughter. Fat Dhuta (who was also still immobilized) begged Trinket to forgive his brother's arms for his rudeness. But Thin Dhuta wasn't having any of it.

'First he undoes my points and gives me some Antidote; then I'll be polite, then I'll do anything-I'll go down on my hands and knees and kowtow to him! But if he doesn't do the right thing, I'll smash his ugly little face in!'

Trinket was lost in thought, wondering why Meatball was so devoted to the Old Whore, why he was going to such lengths to get her the Antidote, when all of a sudden the surly Peasant rose to his feet, waved both his hands in the air and walked out of the room, dragging his slippers noisily along the ground and bidding them all farewell. They were amazed. None of them could understand how

he had managed to regain mobility. Doublet had succeeded in opening Trinket's

points by dint of some skilful and energetic massaging. But all the others were still frozen from Feng Xifan's devilish kungfu. Such was the power of Feng's Inner Force that he was able to immobilize an opponent's Vital Points by merely

touching him with the tip of his sword. He projected the force down the shaft of the blade and into his opponent's body. The ensuing

paralysis usually lasted for several hours. And yet the old Peasant had apparently shaken it off in a few moments. He must have had some extraordinary

knack (in addition to his knack for cheating at dominoes).

No sooner had he left the room, than the Beggar suddenly exclaimed

'By Brother my Earth and Sister my Heaven, I shall underthrow the Tartars and

destroy the Ming!'

This piece of nonsense was in fact a conventional distortion of the Triad password, for use in delicate first encounters, where outsiders might be present. Brother Qian was at first somewhat taken aback to hear these words from

the Beggar's mouth; but then he went on to exchange a number of secret signs with him, which confirmed that he was indeed one of the Brotherhood.

Butcher Qian and Apothecary Xu went on to open everyone's points, except for Thin Dhuta, who was still stranded on the ground, rocking and red in the face.

'Come on! What are you waiting for' Undo me!' 'Only if you promise to be

respectful to Mr Wei!’ ‘But it’s his fault. Why can’t he just give me the Antidote” The old Beggar seemed to lose his patience, and with a click of his fingers he proceeded to release Thin Dhuta’s points. Before anyone could draw breath, the Ball shot towards Trinket. The Beggar tried to intervene, but Thin Dhuta countered with some highly unconventional, and unbeatable, kungfu moves of his own devising. The Beggar used his left foot, but Thin Dhuta countered with his hand. And when he moved through the air, Thin Dhuta had all the speed and manoeuvrability of a football. None of them had ever seen anything remotely resembling this weird style of full’body ball kungfu. The fight between Thin Dhuta and the Beggar became quite a spectacle, with the little fat man ricocheting off the ceiling and bringing down an avalanche of broken tiles and dust. Finally Thin Dhuta came hurtling forwards, head down and with all his might, and when the Beggar stepped nimbly aside, he looked set to collide with the wall and spill his brains. At the very last moment, Fat Dhuta grabbed hold of one of the gambling den attendants who was crouching huddled up in a corner of the room, and hurled him between the wall and the oncoming human missile. The impact

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was such that Thin Dhuta’s head went clean through the poor man’s chest and embedded itself in the wall, creating a large dent in the masonry.

‘What the tamardy hell is going on” cried Thin Dhuta, staggering to his feet and wiping the waiter’s blood and guts from his own puffy face.

‘Still want a fight” asked the Beggar, as they all looked on aghast.

‘You’d never have been a match for me in the old days, when I was still tall!’ He shook his head sadly. ‘But the way I am now-’

So saying, he charged once more at the wall, and this time he went clean through it, carrying bits of the dead waiter with him.

Fat Dhuta went flying after him, followed by Doctor Lu, who dived head first through the hole in the wall, but managed as he did so to bid a polite farewell

with clasped hands-a piece of balletic kungfu that evinced gasps of admiration all round.

Butcher Qian and the Triads were wondering to themselves where on earth their

Lodge Master had picked up these weird associates, with their eccentric kungfu prowess. Li Xihua for his part politely clasped his hands and took his leave, through the main doorway. The Beggar released the points of the various guards, and Trinket led them away.

Triad Talk

Apothecary Xu glanced doubtfully at Doublet, and asked'

'Is she to be trusted''

'We need have no secrets from her' replied Trinket.

'She's a brave and devoted young lady,' added the Beggar. 'I think you owe her your eyes, Brother Wei.'

Trinket took Doublet by the hand.

'I'm very grateful to her.'

At these words of praise, Doublet blushed and hung her head in confusion.

Apothecary Xu took a step towards the Beggar and began declaiming'

'TVs in the lines of verses shared, That our allegiance is declared.

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To which the Beggar promptly replied'

And in that sharing of the word Is known our bond of brotherhood.

Trinket had been taught some of these jingles when he first joined the Triad fraternity. They were supposed to be easy to memorize, for the simple reason that most Triads were uneducated folk, and could read and write about as much

(or as little) as he could. He himself was even able to provide the appropriate response to the Beggar's lines'

One thing unites the brothers' band' An oath of trust throughout the land.

To which the Beggar finally replied'

Before the tablets of our ancestors I vow, That we the Brethren of Hong will overthrow The Tartar foe, And restore the Ming.

'Allow me to present myself,' said Trinket. 'Lodge Master Wei of the Green Wood

Lodge. May I know the Brother's affiliation"

'Red Banner Master Wu Liuqi of the Obedience Lodge of Guangdong,' came the reply. 'It is my great pleasure to be with the Brothers today.'

They were totally amazed and absolutely delighted to discover that this man was

none other than the famous Beggar General, Wu Liuqi, who had been doing heroic

work for the Resistance under the cloak of his official position as Military Governor in the service of the Tartar Throne. As readers will remember,* Wu's innate sense of patriotism had been greatly strengthened by his encounter in the

snow with the generous Loyalist scholar Zha Yihuang, at a time when he had himself been thrown out of the Beggars Guild and was very much down on his luck.

It was as a result of that encounter that Wu had secretly entered the Triad organization. His current position as a Red Banner Master was technically superior to that of

' See the Prologue of the First Book

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the regular Lodge Master of the Guangdong Provincial Lodge. His elevated Triad

ranking was second only to that of the Helmsman himself. But of these details, rank and file Triad members such as Butcher Qian and Apothecary Xu would have

been quite unaware. They just knew of him as a hero in their cause.

'Lodge Master Wei' continued Wu, 'your exploits in Kunming have earned our highest respect and admiration. You did well to teach that Traitor a lesson. The

Helmsman has issued orders to the Brothers of the Four Southern Provinces-Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan-to offer you what assistance they can. I

had news that you were here in Guangxi, so made my way hither.'

'I deeply appreciate my Shifu the Helmsman's concern' replied Trinket. 'And all the Brothers know of your great renown, sir.'

In actual fact this was the first time that Trinket himself had ever heard of Wu. But he could see that the others were deeply impressed, and thought he'd better say something appropriately reverent.

'It is your great renown, Brother Wei, that has reached my ears-on account of your heroic act in killing the wicked Tartar strongman Oboi! But come, between

Brothers there is no need for all this formality. Please accept my apologies for having mistreated your guards. At least it had the effect of bringing you here so that I could meet you in person.'

Trinket laughed.

'They were behaving like gutter'dogs- losing, and refusing to pay their debts. They deserved to be taught a lesson. I should thank you.'

Wu laughed out loud. The two of them went on to talk about events in Yunnan, and the fact that Trinket had uncovered incontrovertible proof of the Satrap's planned rebellion.

'Let him strike first at Guangdong!' declared Wu. 'We'll put paid to him and then carry the struggle north to Peking!'

But his immediate desire for action was aimed at Feng Xifan, whose recent behaviour had considerably upset him. He was not used to having his points closed like that. And when he heard from Trinket about Feng's encounter with the Helmsman, and the slaying of Brother Guan, his passions were truly roused.

Presently Lodge Master Ma arrived, and greeted Wu. Ma insisted that they deal with Li Zicheng. It was Bash'em after all who was responsible for the death of the last Ming Emperor Chong

Zhen. To this Trinket added that if Li was a traitor, then so was young Zheng Keshuang' they should deal with him too, and thus doubly avenge the

Helmsman.

This raised a few eyebrows. After all, strictly speaking, Zheng Keshuang was the grandson of Coxinga, and the Triads therefore owed him allegiance. Killing the Bloodless Sword was one thing; killing Zheng was quite another. Besides, the Triads knew only too well that Trinket had purely personal reasons for wanting Zheng out of the way.

Wu changed the subject, and asked for some information on the Two Dhutas. Trinket (who for obvious reasons could not go into their real background as members of the Mystic Dragon Sect) succeeded in passing them off vaguely as a couple of River and Lake characters who had somehow become attached to him. Wu went on to enquire about the morose Peasant, whose skills in unblocking points had deeply impressed him. Who was he? There was an inconclusive discussion on this point, after which Lodge Master Ma sent men out to ascertain Feng Xifan and Li Zicheng's current whereabouts, and saw to it that Feng Jizhong, Father Obscure, and Doublet's wounds were given proper attention.

Trinket put his arm around Doublet, and gave her a little kiss on the cheek. It was so like her to have followed him in secret all this way, dressed as a Valiant, and to have rescued him so bravely in his most desperate hour of need. He asked her why she had never shown herself to him before. She replied shyly

'I was worried that since you'd become such an important person you might not want me any more as your maid-'

'Silly girl! I'll always want you as my maid. Until the day comes when you want to go off and get married.'

Doublet blushed.

'That day will never come!'

The Log Rafts

That evening Lodge Master Ma threw a big party in Wu's honour, in one of Liuzhou's best sing-song houses. As they were drinking, the Triad scouts

returned
to report that Li Zicheng's party had been located on one of the log rafts on the River Liu.

Liuzhou is famous for its timber, and most especially for its high quality coffin boards. Hence the popular saying'

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Live in Suzhou (famous for gardens and pretty women); Trade in Hangzhou (famous for silk and other items of luxury); Eat in Canton (famous for dim'sum and exotic dishes); Die in Liuzhou (famous for coffins).

The logs from which the coffin boards were to be cut were tied together, made into rafts, and floated east down the Liu River. There were countless such rafts on the river, with cabins built on top of them, and Li and his companions must have reckoned it would be a smart move to hide in one of them. But they had not reckoned on the excellent network of Triad informers in the province.

Wu thumped the table.

'Let's waste no time! No more drinking tonight!' ' .! Lodge Master Ma begged him to stay a while longer and drink, while he made some preparations. In the early hours of the morning, before sunrise, Ma led them all out to the banks of the Liu River. There were two light river craft waiting for them. The three Lodge Masters-Ma, Wu, and Trinket-took their seats in the cabin of one of the boats. The skipper set off, followed at a discreet distance by a little flotilla of seven or eight smaller boats. They travelled two or three miles down river, then came to a halt. A boatman appeared in the cabin and informed them that their 'target' was on the raft immediately ahead of them.

Trinket looked out through the matting that formed the wall of their cabin, and saw another little cabin'type structure atop one of the log rafts, and within it he caught a familiar flash of steel. The water all around them was completely clogged up with thirty or forty small boats.

They're all ours,' whispered Ma.

Trinket was reassured to hear this. If each boat held ten men, that meant they were several hundred against Li and Feng. They surely had them cornered now.

At that very moment, they heard a voice from the river'bank yelling across the

water’

‘Li Zicheng ... Li Zicheng . . . Do you hear me’ Come on out! I know you’re in there!’

In the darkness, they could just make out a figure hurtling along the bank towards them. It looked like Li Xihua.

A voice boomed back from the little cabin on the raft ahead.

‘Who’s that out there’

The man on the bank leapt aboard the raft, and in the moonlight there was a chilly flash of steel as Li Xihua brandished his sword. Li Zicheng emerged from the cabin with his great monk’s staff.

‘Come to meet your death, eh’ Bored with life’

‘You’re the one who’s going to die today!’ declared Li Xihua fiercely. ‘But even when you’re dead, we’ll still have to put up with your vile ghost. . . . Do you know who I am’

‘How could I possibly know’ I have sent millions to their deaths. Come closer!’ The words were boomed out like a challenge into the darkness. Bash’em swung his

great staff through the night air. Li Xihua dodged the blow, blocking the staff with his long sword. Then he leapt into the air, bringing the point of his sword down towards Bash’em, who parried with his staff, throwing Li Xihua off balance.

He tumbled backwards, landing with one foot on the edge of the raft.

‘Steer closer’ Wu ordered the boatman. ‘I want to see more clearly.’

The boatman punted the boat forwards. Ma spoke to one of the other men on board.

‘Give the signal! Distract them while we make our move!’

The man promptly hoisted a red lantern on the mast. At this signal, boats from all sides converged towards midstream, and one after another men could be seen

diving into the water.

As their boat approached the raft, they could still make out the two figures fighting’ intermittent shadows and flashes of steel.

‘Bash’em is not a skilful fighter,’ commented Ma. ‘He relies entirely on brute force, and on that great staff of his. It’s only a matter of time before Li Xihua has him lying dead.’

Trinket could see that Bash’em was gradually being pushed back. Then he heard

Green’s voice from within the cabin.

‘Quick, Keshuang! Ask your Master to come to my father’s rescue!’

‘Shifu,’ came Zheng Keshuang’s voice, ‘will you deal with that young cur’

The door of the cabin opened, and out came Feng, his new sword in hand. By now

Bash'em had been pushed to the very edge of the raft. Another step and he would

be in the water.

'Hey you!' called out Feng Xifan. 'Baby face! I'm going to split your Spirit Terrace for you!' ,

..,' ' ..',w.. *';

He aimed the tip of his sword at this highly sensitive point on Li Xihua's back, and moved slowly forward. Li turned to block the move with his sword. Suddenly,

from the roof of the cabin, came a cry'

'Hey you! Big baby face! I'm going to split your Spirit Terrace

for youl'

A flash of steel, and a man dropped from the roof like a bird swooping from the sky, his blade homing in on Feng's back. Feng was obliged to turn back from his

attack on Li Xihua, in order to parry this new and unexpected threat. There was a confused clanging as Feng's sword met his opponent's short'sword.

'Who are you'' asked Feng.

The man laughed.

'I know who you are' Feng the Swordless Blade, the Kunlun Master. . . . Don't you know me''

By this time Trinket and his friends could see the man clearly. He wore rough trousers, a white turban wrapped round his head, a simple black cloth sash tied around his waist, and straw sandals. It was the sullen Peasant from the gambling

den, come to give Feng a dose of his own medicine.

As the two men proceeded to fight, it became clear that the Peasant's short'sword kungfu was in no way inferior to Feng's Kunlun play with the long'sword. The Peasant moved with astonishing speed, and after three fierce exchanges they could see that the two men were very evenly matched. Now they

were locked in close combat, entwined like a string of entangled pearls; now they swirled around each other, without making any physical contact.

Throughout this unexpected encounter, Bash'em and young Li Xihua were

continuing
their struggle on the side of the raft. Zheng Keshuang and Green stood by the cabin at a slight distance, waiting for a chance to intervene.

Li Xihua suddenly curled himself into a ball, and rolled swiftly forward to his opponent's feet, from which position he aimed his sword upwards at Bash'em's groin. 'Now!' he cried. 'Die!'

It was a lethal move known as the Hidden Cloud Tumble, handed down (according to tradition) from one of the famous Outlaws of the Marsh, back in the Song dynasty. Bash'em was at Li Xihua's mercy. Zheng Keshuang and Green looked on aghast. Then suddenly Bash'em let out a great booming roar, like a mighty

peal of thunder. Li Xihua was so taken aback, he let his sword fall from his grasp. Bash'em swung his left leg through the air, and sent Li Xihua tumbling backwards. In the same instant he brought his staff up against Li's chest, and pinned him to the boards of the raft. One thrust of the staff, and Li's ribs would be shattered, his entrails squashed to a pulp.

'Surrender!' boomed the old man. 'And I will spare your life!'

'Kill me!' cried Li. 'If I cannot avenge my father's death, how can I go on living in this world?'

Bash'em was just about to go ahead and strike the deadly blow, when something in

young Li's expression caught his eye, something fearless, something peaceful and

reconciled, illumined by the moonlight. He drew a sudden breath.

'I know who you are! You're the son of Prince Li Yan, aren't you' Crimson's child. . .'

Li Xihua gave a faint smile. Bash'em, once he knew that Li Xihua was indeed the

son of Li Yan, his former comrade-in-arms and trusted adviser, broke down altogether. It was a most strange and dramatic turn of events. Bash'em confessed

the remorse he felt at having killed Li Xihua's father, and finally exploded in a great wail of emotion, and began spitting blood. Li Xihua could easily have taken his revenge. But instead of raising his sword and taking the life of this defenceless old man, he declared'

'It means more to me that you should feel remorse, than that I should take your life!'

And with these words he leapt from the raft onto the rope that moored it, and from that up onto the bank. In a matter of seconds he was swallowed up in the shadows.

Bash'em staggered to the very edge of the raft, and stood there a moment, his left foot swaying unsteadily in the air. Then he tumbled into the river.

'Father!' Green cried out.

There was no sign of movement in the water. They watched in horror, sure that Bash'em must have sunk to the bottom of the river. But a moment later, his head

and shoulders re'emerged, and he stumbled through the shallow water and up onto

the bank, dragging his great staff behind him. Slowly he shambled off along the bank.

Zheng Keshuang was consoling Green, when the raft tilted violently under them

and they too both fell into the river. Triads from the local Clan Lodge now leapt into the water and severed

the mooring'rope. The raft drifted out into midstream. Feng Xifan, who had also

been thrown into the water, caught hold of a loose log and floated out on it, still pursued by the Peasant, swinging at him with his short'sword. The two men

clung to the same log. They managed to clamber onto it, and continued their fierce struggle with some difficulty as the log floated downstream. Suddenly Beggar Wu cried out'

'I know that man! He's Hu Yizhi, Hu the Gallant, Hu the Handsome, the King of

Swordsmen. What on earth is he doing here, dressed in those rags' Quick, punt after him!'

Trinket's one and only concern, meanwhile, was to save Green. She and Zheng were

soon pulled dripping from the water.

Feng and Hu the Peasant continued their desperate struggle on the floating log. The Triad boat edged closer and closer to them. Short'sword and long'sword swung

through the air again and again, until suddenly there was a great crash and the log was split in two, sending Feng Xifan, who was balanced on the very edge, toppling into the water. Hu hurled his sword after him, and Feng countered by throwing his own sword into its path. The two blades met in mid'air, giving off a series of sparks, then splashed into the river. Feng disappeared beneath the surface.

Beggar Wu called out to Hu to climb aboard the boat, and then introduced himself

and his comrades. Hu expressed his enormous sense of honour at meeting the famous 'Beggar', General Wu. He decided the time had come to tell his own story.

'All these years I have been lying low, growing my vegetables' he began. These twenty years I've been retired from Raver and Lake. I've been living in hiding outside the city of Kunming. Incognito. And all for the sake of a woman . . .'

He had first set eyes on the beautiful Peerless Consort many years earlier in the city of Chengdu. And now, for twenty-three years, Hu the Gallant, famed for his good looks and martial prowess, had been tending the vegetable garden at the

Hermitage where she had taken up residence. He fetched firewood and water for

her, he swept the courtyards, and she just took him for a simple peasant. He had

never once dared declare his love for her, convinced that she would regard him as utterly beneath her. And now he was an old man with grey hair and wrinkles.

'You have no idea how fortunate you were that day to hear her sing her ballad!' he said to Trinket. 'In all the years I was there,

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you. ... In all that time, I only ever spoke thirty-nine sein.cm'v.u *' her. And she only spoke fifty-five sentences back.'

There was something deeply touching about his fanatical way of loving. Beggar Wu

and Lodge Master Ma were both greatly moved. They were concerned that Trinket

might say something foolish and offend Hu. But curiously enough, it was Trinket

who seemed to understand Hu's feelings most, who even identified with them. After all, had he not already admitted to himself that Green, Peerless' daughter, was only half as beautiful as her mother' And was he not himself totally infatuated with Green' And was she not totally heartless towards him' Trinket said all of this aloud.

After Hu had listened to Trinket's protestations of love, he sat down and took him by the hand.

'Listen to me, my friend. Love is a very special kind of thing. There's no forcing it. You've had more than your share of good fortune. You've met Green, you have the same Shifu, you are already brother and sister'in'arms. Your fates are clearly intertwined. Don't think to yourself that the only way to be happy is to marry her, to possess her. You've looked into her eyes, you've spoken to

her; she has scolded you, she has hit you, she has struck you with her sword-all of this is proof that she has feelings about you, that you are important to her. That makes you one of the luckiest men alive.' Trinket nodded.

'I know you're right. It would be so much worse if she took no notice of me at all. I'd much rather she treated me the way she does. So long as she doesn't actually kill me . . .'

Hu sighed.

'Even that-who knows' Suppose she did kill you. . . she'd probably feel remorse afterwards, and then at night she'd have feelings of guilt, she'd see you in her dreams. ... Or else during the day she'd find herself thinking about you.'

This kind of talk was utterly beyond the comprehension of the others. If they hadn't witnessed with their own eyes his recent struggle with Feng Xifan, they would have found it impossible to believe that the man uttering these absurd sentimentalities was Hu

Yizhi the Gallant.

But Trinket understood every word, and kept on nodding as Hu spoke. 'You're absolutely right, Brother Hu. But I've always
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had this problem. If I meet a girl that I really like, I want to marry her. I can't help it. I'm just not as patient as you are. If Green wanted me to grow veggies for her, I'd do it, of course I would. But I couldn't bear to see that Zheng lout hanging around her. I'd have to deal with him. Out with my snick'a'snee-'

Hu took him to task.

'My young friend, you have much to learn. If you love a lady, then you want her to be happy. It's her happiness that counts, not yours. If what Green wants is to marry the other man, then you must do everything you can to help her do so. If someone else tries to harm him, you must defend him, you must be willing to lay down your life for him-for her sake.'

Trinket shook his head.

'I don't think I could ever be like you. I'd like to. I can see that you're a very superior kind of lover. But I know I could never be like that. I'd like to be your disciple, though!'

'No!' protested Hu. 'We are simply Brothers in the School of Love.'

Beggar Wu and Lodge Master Ma found this dialogue of theirs altogether excessive. They'd never wasted any time thinking about women-let alone prattling

on about them in this highfalutin fashion. There were good-looking wenches aplenty in the whorehouses, and if you wanted one, for goodness sake, all you had to do was shell out a bit of cash and she was yours. All this sickening talk about the School of Love! They were clearly nuts, both of them. Plain bonkers.

Hu the Gallant Peasant and Trinket by now felt like sworn brothers, and Hu proposed that they should formally seal their bond. They knelt on the deck of the boat in the moonlight and took a solemn oath of brotherhood.

A toast was drunk. Then Hu asked for leave to perform one last task.

‘Green’s mother has been ailing ever since her daughter left her. All these years the girl has never even known who her real parents were. Let me take her back for a short visit to the Hermitage. It may help to heal her mother’s illness.’

Beggar Wu was extremely dubious about this sentimental way of seeing things. He was all for resolving matters by simply killing the Peerless Consort without further ado. When all was said and

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done, in his eyes (and those of many Chinese) she was still considered to have been one of the principal causes of the fall of the Ming dynasty. And as for her daughter Green, she was clearly guilty of being unfilial towards her own mother and unfaithful to her own betrothed—namely, Trinket. However beautiful Green might be, she was obviously a bad lot. Wu suggested that he go and break her pretty little neck. It would be good riddance.

The veins were bulging on his great forehead, and he was a ferocious sight. He issued the command to row towards the boat where Green and Zheng Keshuang were being held captive. Even as Trinket pleaded with him to show mercy, the two boats drew side by side. But before Wu could carry out his threat, Trinket saw Hu leap aboard the other boat, dash into the cabin, and emerge through the rear door, clutching a human shape. He leapt onto the bank, and they could hear his voice trailing into the distance’

‘Farewell, brothers! Till we meet again!’

Exit Sir Zheng

Zheng Keshuang was brought out of the cabin by a number of Triad brethren and

transferred aboard the other boat. Trinket gave him a good punch in the face, and bawled him out for having conspired to kill Triad members, and for fooling

around with Trinket's betrothed.

Zheng had swallowed a great deal of river water, and presented a sorry spectacle. Trinket terrorized him for a while with various threats (which included cutting out his tongue), and reduced him to a snivelling wreck. Then he

turned to Lodge Master Ma'

'Brother Ma, it was your men who captured him. You deal with him.'

'Alas!' protested Ma. 'He is but a shadow of his grandfather, Lord Coxinga, the mighty hero!'

Beggar Wu was for executing him there and then.

'He'll only cause more trouble for the Helmsman when he gets back to his family

in Taiwan!'

But in the end, out of respect for his grandfather, they untied him and set him free. Wu lifted him up bodily and flung him onto the bank, where he landed with

his backside on the grass. After skidding along some way, he picked himself up and ran howling off into the distance.

The Storm on the River , ", ' i > s
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Dawn was coming. The sky was dark with clouds, and rain seemed imminent. They

could feel a few gusts of wind blowing their clothes. 'I feel a storm brewing,' said Wu. Tunt the boats out into midstream, and let's down a few cups of wine! Devilish fine way to ride out the storm!'

Trinket personally thought it sounded like a devilishly terrifying thing to do. But Lodge Master Ma told him not to be afraid. He gave orders to hoist the sails, and soon the billowing wind drove the boat scudding into midstream. The waves were growing choppy and choppy by the minute, and the boat kept heaving up and down on the river. Large quantities of water came surging into the cabin. For all that he had been nicknamed Little White Dragon (in his callow

Whiskers Mao days), and for all that dragons were supposed to be at home in the

water, Trinket was no swimmer. On the present occasion, the only thing that

recalled his nom de guerre was his face, which was white with fear. There was certainly nothing dragon-like about him, as he half mumbled, half trembled 'I can't swim!' 'Nor can I!' It was big burly Wu who had spoken. Trinket found it hard to

believe.

'It's true, damn it!' insisted Wu. 'I've only got to see water like

this and I start to go all sick and dizzy.'

'Then why did you give the order to steer the boats out into

the middle of the river?"

'That's the way I am. The more frightening a thing is, the more I want to go for it head on. Damn it! What's the worst that can happen' We all drown in the river, turn into river ghosts. Anyway, Brother Ma here is famous for his water kungfu. He'll save the non-swimmers. Won't you, Brother Ma" Ma gave a hearty laugh.

The waves were growing larger and larger, and the boat was heaving up and down

dramatically in the water, suddenly rearing into the air one minute on the crest of a particularly powerful wave, only to be tossed down seconds later, as if to the bottom of an abyss. The wind had extinguished the lanterns hanging at the poop and prow, together with all the lamps in the cabin. Boatmen struggled to hoist the sails, clinging desperately to the mast. Trinket looked out

of the cabin window, and

night but a seething white mass of waves, whipped to a terrifying fury by wind and rain. Squalls of wind-driven water came lashing into the cabin. By now he was well and truly soaked to the skin.

An especially powerful gust of wind brought down the sails, and the boat lurched

violently to one side, toppling Trinket over so that he hit his head on a low table.

Suddenly, in the midst of this howling tempest, old Wu's voice could be heard, singing for all he was worth'

Wandering by the riverside,

To whom could he his deepest grief confide'

The wind Hew the tears

On

his

face;

From the forsaken city
No matter how he strained his eyes,
No help could he espy.
His love for the ancient dynasty
Was nought but
A cause of bitterness;
The song was ended,
The banquet hall empty; ^
A myriad miles of river
Stretched from the realm of Wu
Down to the hills of Chu-
All gone,
All taken!
The rain whirled,
The clouds turned,
The cold tide eastwards curled,
And all dissolved in mist.
His mighty spirit
Wafted from sea to sky!
The song echoed far across the river, cutting through the roar of the storm. It
was a much-loved aria from the opera The Peach Blossom Fan. From the back
of the
boat, Ma applauded loudly.
'Well sung! What a magnificent voice! What a towering sound! It reaches from
the
river all the way up to the sky!'

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But before these words of his were out, a second voice rang out from further up the river'

This tale of the exiled king Will be told for ever and a day; And tears of blood
Will swell the streams with woe.

It was another powerful voice, and it too carried clearly across the water. Trinket was still puzzling over the identity of this latest singer, when he heard Ma cry out'

‘Is that you, Helmsman’ Brother Ma at your service!’

‘Is Brother Wei there’

There was now no mistaking the Helmsman's voice.

'Here I am, Shifu,' called Trinket, both delighted and somewhat taken aback. His puny little voice failed to carry at all in the storm, and it was Lodge Master Ma who informed the Helmsman of Trinket's presence, and of old Wu's.

'Excellent!' The Helmsman's reply carried clearly again across the water. 'I thought I recognized Beggar Wu's mighty voice!'

Wu called out'

'Wu Liuqi at your service, Helmsman!'

'Come, drop the formality! We are all Brothers here!'

The Helmsman's boat gradually came closer. Looking out into the pitch'black stormy night, Trinket could make out the boat's storm'lantern drawing near. Then he heard the Helmsman jump aboard. He rushed out on deck to welcome his Shifu, but could see nothing. He felt the Helmsman grasp him by the hand and draw him back down into the cabin.

'What a dreadful storm! Are you afraid''

'I'm all right, Shifu.'

Wu and Ma joined them in the cabin.

'I arrived in town, and learned that you were out here on the river,' began the Helmsman. 'I'd never have found you in this terrible storm, if I hadn't heard Brother Wu's singing.'

'My spirits were roused,' replied Wu. 'Got a bit carried away. Made a bit of a fool of myself, I'm afraid-'

'I know the aria' was the Helmsman's only comment. 'It's from The Peach Blossom Fan.'

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‘Yes. The loyal minister Shi Kefa has just drowned himself in the river. Just jumped in. Hell of a brave fellow. Manchus all over the place. Yangzhou taken, Nanking taken. No hope left. Always one of my favourite bits in the play.

Something about the storm got me singing. . . .’

‘You sing extremely well’ commented the Helmsman.

But Trinket was thinking to himself

Trust you to sing some stinking aria about a man drowning himself in the river.

Go ahead, drown! Just count me out!’

Chen Jinnan told Beggar Wu how he had first heard (or strictly speaking overheard) of his exploits from the three Loyalist scholars Huang Zongxi, Lii Liuliang, and Gu Yanwu. He had always looked forward eagerly to meeting him in

person, but knew that circumstances usually made it hard for Wu to travel to the

north.

Wu returned the compliment, quoting (with a certain humour) the common Triad

jingle’

Who’s never yet met Chen Jinnan Can’t call himself a prayer man.

‘Now I can finally call myself a proper man!’

He gave one of his big belly laughs. Chen Jinnan accepted the compliment with fitting modesty. The two men were soon deeply engrossed in conversation, oblivious to the storm still raging outside, aware only of how much they held in common, of how deeply committed they both were to the Loyalist cause, and of how

closely their temperaments and ideals coincided.

Gradually the storm was subsiding. The Helmsman asked for the latest news of the

Satrap, and Trinket reported on their recent adventure in Kunming, not without a

certain amount of embellishment. Chen Jinnan was delighted to learn that they had captured the Satrap’s Mongolian go’between, and thus had concrete proof of

his treacherous ambitions, and therewith the means to bring about his downfall.

When he was told of the alliance struck by the Satrap with the Russians, whereby

they were to be left in control of large swathes of Chinese territory in the north, in return for their support of Wu’s bid for power in China proper, he frowned and was lost in thought for a while.

‘These Russians pose a grave danger. Suppose we rid ourselves of the Tartars, only to find a still more dangerous enemy at our

door’ Suppose we chase away the wolf, only to let in the tiger’ And they have

powerful weapons. . . .’

‘Yes’ chipped in Trinket. Those red-haired Russian devils may not be much to write home about, but those guns of theirs are very nasty. I tried out a couple at the Satrap’s. They make a very loud bang indeed! Could be very tricky to deal with.’

‘How would we plan to deal with the Russian guns’ enquired Wu of the Helmsman.

The Helmsman presents an Old Hero

At this point Chen Jinnan walked over to the cabin door and called out’

‘LinXingzhu!’

A man from a neighbouring boat leapt on board and, coming into the cabin, bowed

to the Helmsman. Chen introduced him to the present company as a disciple of his, one of Marshal Coxinga’s officers in the campaign several years earlier to take Taiwan from the Dutch settlers. It was as a consequence of that campaign that he had experience of firearms. Chen Jinnan began to describe the situation as it had been’

‘The Dutch were well equipped with cannon and other weapons. So we decided to

surround them with a great earthen wall, effectively besieging several thousand of them within the city of Fort Zeelandia. Then we cut off their supply of water, until eventually they were forced to try and break out. But we refused to fight them by day. Tell how we fought, Xingzhu.’

‘It was a master’sstroke of yours, Helmsman. It was the fifteenth year of Yong Li, the first day of the second month, when Marshal Coxinga launched the fleet from Keluo Bay. He arrived at the Pescador Islands on the twenty’fourth. By the

first of the fourth month, the fleet was at Lu’er Men. Here the waters are shallow for several miles, and access to the harbour had been blocked by the Dutch, who had run a boat aground right across the harbour mouth. Our boats simply could not get in. Then, as if from nowhere, there was a strong tide that simply rushed our boats forward and we were able to land at the port of Shuizhai. Marshal Coxinga spoke to the troops, greatly raising their morale and urging them to resist the deadly fire’power of the Dutch. It was you, Helmsman,

who led our first charge. The next thing we knew, there were great

explosions all around us like claps of thunder, and a huge cloud of smoke ahead of us. Our front line fell and we all fled in panic.'

'I know the feeling,' muttered Trinket to himself.

'Just as we were all buzzing around like headless flies,' continued Lin Xingzhu, 'you cried out' "The Dutch soldiers are reloading their guns. Now's our chance! Charge!" And so I rallied my men and we charged, and sure enough at first the Dutch were unable to fire at us. It was only when we were almost on top of them

that they fired. ... I ducked and rolled along the ground out of the line of fire, but a lot of my men were shot down. We had no option but to retreat again.

The Dutch hadn't the courage to come after us. We lost several hundred men, and

our morale was pretty low, I can tell you. Those guns of theirs had us really scared.'

'So,' Trinket burst in breathlessly, 'then the Helmsman had a brilliant plan. . .'

'Yes, you're absolutely right. That evening he called me over. "Brother Lin," he said, "I should guess you studied with the Ditang School of kungfu of Fujian Province"' I told him that he was right. I had. He referred to my ducking and rolling under enemy fire. I felt a great sense of shame-

'There was no need to!' chipped in Trinket. 'I bet the Helmsman was about to praise you for it and suggest that you teach it to all the others.'

'Yes! That's exactly what he did!' exclaimed Lin Xingzhu. 'He said my Flying Squirrel Slide and my Weasel Tumble would be just the thing to bring our men right under the noses of the Dutch line. We could protect ourselves with our wicker shields; then we could tackle them with swords. He asked me if I knew any

Ditang sword moves. I told him I did, but couldn't see the use, since they mostly involved hacking at horses' legs. But he said we could hack at mens' legs instead. So that's what we ended up doing. It took me a day or two to train the men. But when the Dutch troops next attacked, they had it coming to them! We left hundreds of hacked hairy Dutch limbs on the field of battle!'

'And do you think we can use the same technique against the Russians"' asked Ma.

'Conditions will not be the same,' answered the Helmsman. 'In the first place, there are so many more Russians than there were Dutch. There were only three or

four thousand Dutch altogether. There would be ten or twenty times that number

of Russians. And

the technique would only work at close quarters, not with the sort of long-range cannon the Russians have got.'

‘So what will we do’ asked Wu.

‘As I see it, the key lies in removing their support within our own ranks, among our own people. It was the Satrap’s treason that made it possible for the Manchus to conquer our land. Now the Traitor is up to his old tricks. He’s proposing an alliance with the Russians. Get rid of him first, and we will have removed their prime source of strength.’

‘But we must not strike against him too quickly,’ put in Ma. ‘Let him first fight the Tartars, and weaken them in the process.’

‘I agree,’ replied the Helmsman. ‘But never forget that the Russians will be a lot harder to deal with than the Manchus.’

‘Of course,’ chirped Trinket. The Tartars are not really that different from us’ they’ve got black eyes, yellow skin, flat noses, they even speak the same sort of language. But those foreign devils have got red hair and green eyes and talk gibberish-no one can understand a word they’re saying.’

They continued discussing the plight of their country well into the early hours of the morning. First light was dawning and the storm had by now completely abated. Ma invited them to return with him, change into some dry clothes, and drink a cup of wine to dispel the chill after the long cold night on the river. This the Helmsman accepted as an excellent proposition.

The storm had blown their boat miles downstream, and it was almost midday before they were back in Liuzhou. As they were disembarking, Doublet came rushing up, still wet through.

‘Master, you’re . . . back!’

Her face was a picture of joy.

‘What are you doing here’ asked Trinket.

‘I was so worried about you yesterday evening on the river in that terrible storm.’

It transpired that she had even tried to hire a boat and set off in search of her master. But no one was willing to go out in such weather. Trinket took her by the hand.

‘You’re so thoughtful.’

She flushed and hung her head.

Once they reached Ma’s lodgings, and had changed into dry clothes, the Helmsman told Ma to send scouts to ascertain the current whereabouts of Feng Xifan and Zheng Keshuang.

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They all sat down to a good meal, and Trinket made a big thing of seating Lin Xingzhu, the ‘hero’ of the Taiwan campaign, in a seat of honour. He also, as a token of his esteem, presented old Wu with one of the two Russian pistols that the Satrap had given him in Kunming. (The other one he had left with General Xia as a surety, when the Little Countess was released. In his hurried departure from Kunming, he had not got round to asking for it back.) Wu loaded the pistol and fired a shot into the courtyard, shattering a slab of granite. Everyone was most impressed.

Trinket knew he must lose no more time, and had to press on towards Peking. He knelt before the Helmsman, and kowtowed. Chen Jinnan raised him, and patted him on the shoulder.

‘I’m proud of you!’ he said with a fatherly smile.

Trinket became aware, in that moment, of how the Helmsman had aged since their last encounter. His hair was greyer, and there was a careworn expression on his face. These had been trying times for him, as he rushed up and down the length of China, trying to bring together the fragmented strands of the Resistance. Trinket wanted to give him something to show his concern, but knew that the Helmsman would not be interested in anything material. His kungfu was so transcendent he had no need of magic waistcoat or adamantite dagger. Suddenly a thought came into his head.

‘Master, there is a matter I should like to speak to you about.’

The Helmsman Informed

Trinket proceeded to extract a package from his inside pocket. He untied the string, and unwrapped layer after layer of oilskin paper. Finally, from inside the innermost layer, he produced a pile of tiny scraps of parchment-the entire collection contained within the covers of the Eight Sutras.

‘Master,’ he said, ‘I wanted to give you a present, and this is all I can think of.’

Chen Jinnan was most perplexed.

‘What on earth is it’

Trinket told him the whole story of how he had collected the Eight Sutras, and the scraps of parchment which, once pieced together, would lead them to the secret treasure of the Manchus. The Helmsman listened to it all with an expression of the utmost gravity. It was impressive, the list of those who would have given

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anything to lay their hands on these scraps, and study the secret map. It included the Fake’Empress Dowager, the Emperor himself, Oboi (when he had been

alive), the Great Tibetan Lama, the one’armed White Nun Tribulation, and the Great Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect. Each and every one of them wanted the

map, and dreamed of controlling the Dragon Lines of the Manchu destiny, of finding the buried Tartar treasure. Trinket told him everything he knew, omitting only one or two details that he thought might not meet with the Helmsman’s approval (such as the fact that he had signed on with a second Shifu-

the White Nun; and had studied the Mystic Dragon Leader’s highly unorthodox kungfu style).

Chen Jinnan expressed his profound appreciation of Trinket’s gesture, but considered it safer for Trinket to keep the precious scraps until his own return from Taiwan.

‘I have to cross the Straits, and visit Prince Zheng. But it will not be long before I am back in Peking. You have brought me such good news! I had been concerned that with the passage of time our great cause was losing momentum. With every day, memories of the Ming grow dimmer, and this young Manchu Emperor, to everyone’s surprise, is proving himself to be quite a capable ruler. But the

Satrap's rebellion will change everything! And now, with this map, we hold the key! Our cause has been greatly advanced!'

Trinket was so happy to see his Master's careworn face lighten for a moment.

'When you are in Peking,' the Helmsman went on to instruct him, 'lock yourself away somewhere and piece together the map. Then memorize it exactly. And divide the pieces up again into eight lots, and hide each lot in a different place. The secret must not on any account fall into the wrong hands. We must take no chances.'

He sighed.

Trinket, this is most excellent news that you bring. If I were to die today, I should die a much happier man.'

'Shifu' protested Trinket, 'you shouldn't speak like that! I know that you have many thoughts on your mind. There are things going on at Prince Zheng's court that don't please you. . . . Am I right?'

The Helmsman seemed taken aback.

'How did you know?' He added with a sigh 'Prince Zheng has always treated me with the greatest respect and courtesy.'

Trinket knew that the Helmsman was referring to the current

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Prince of Yanping and de facto ruler of Taiwan, Zheng ling, eldest son and heir of the Great Marshal Zheng Chenggong, or Coxinga. The Prince had two sons. His second son was the insufferable Zheng

Keshuang.

'I'll bet it's that brat of a second son of his who's been getting up your nose.'

'He is young, it is true, and often says things without thinking. But he is the Great Marshal's grandson all the same. His elder brother, Sir Zheng Kezang, is

a

fine man. Unfortunately he is only a concubine's son. That is why the late Marshal's widow, the Lady Dong, wanted to disinherit him and set up the second

son in his place as Heir. The second son has the good fortune to be handsome, and the apple of his grandmother's eye.'

'Him! Handsome! An apple!' Trinket was truly disgusted. 'Why he's no more than a

putrid tarmy pickled turtle's egg! He's just a stinking piece of pus! He tried to kill you, for heaven's sake!'

Trinket!' The Helmsman's face darkened. 'You should not speak like that! Never

forget that it is Prince Zheng's son you are talking about, the late Marshal's grandson! It saddens me that there should be so much dissension and bickering

within the ranks of the Prince's family. It seriously weakens our cause.'

'Shifu' said Trinket, 'I think it's the late Marshal's widow, that Lady Ding'Dong, or whatever her name is, who's partly to blame, for being so partial and meddling in things that don't concern her. If you ask me, you ought to leave

them to sort out their own problems. As for old widow Dong, why not let me have

a go at her myself! I'm not bad at dealing with old whores like her!' Chen Jinnan shook his head and sighed. 'I cannot possibly do that! I owe everything to the late Marshal. I could never betray him. I could not abandon his son Prince Zheng when he most needs my support. I could never strike the Marshal's

grandson, Sir Zheng, however badly he behaves-much less take

his life!'

However hard Trinket tried to cheer him up, the Helmsman

seemed very gloomy.

It was time for Trinket to take his leave. The two Lodge Masters and the Helmsman saw him off. As they reached the doorway, Beggar Wu turned to Trinket'.

There is something I need to tell you, Brother Wei. That young maid of yours, well, she and I are sworn brother and sister now.'

Trinket and Ma looked thunderstruck. Doublet was not far off, standing there with her head downcast, and a maidenly flush on her cheeks. It transpired that old Wu had been so deeply impressed by the maid's courage and devotion, that he had in all sincerity proposed sealing a bond between them, in part following the example of Trinket and Hu Yizhi, the besotted Peasant. They had sworn an oath, and become 'brother and sister'. Doublet had, in characteristic fashion, gone along with the idea, while protesting her own insignificance and insisting that he tell no one.

'Tell no one!' Wu had let out a hearty laugh. 'Why, it's something to be damned proud of! Of course I'll tell people!'

Trinket spoke to Doublet, who confirmed the story, adding'

'Mister Wu gave me-'

'Mister Wu!' interjected Trinket. 'Come now, surely you mean Brother Wu'

'He said the only thing he had to give me was this.'

She produced the Russian pistol that Trinket had given Wu in the first place.

'I think I should give it back to you, Master. You may need it one day.'

But Trinket absolutely refused to accept it.

The Art of Escape

Trinket and his party made their way by slow stages northwards, back to the Capital. Occasionally the White Nun would give him some Martial Arts training.

But Trinket was his usual fickle, unconcentrated self. She could see he was just going through the motions.

'I despair of you!' she said. 'You'll never master anything. What can we do with

you' I'd like to have been able to teach you the branch of Iron Sword kungfu known as the Hundred Changes, but most of it requires a proper mastery of Inner Force, which you'll never have. What I could do is to teach you the part which doesn't require too much in the way of Inner Force' that's the part called the Art of the Hundred Flights, or the Secret of Escape.'

Poor Trinket was feeling rather crestfallen, and aware of his own failure.

'My poor Shifu, you've had rotten luck, taking on such a hopeless disciple as me! I just pray that your next batch of disciples will be able to master all the things I can't.'

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She gave a little laugh and patted him on the shoulder.

Trinket, you can't help the way you are. Not everyone is born to be good at kungfu. You're a good disciple, in your own way' you just let your mouth run away with you rather.'

Trinket was very touched, and was almost tempted to show her his great treasure too-the precious parchment scraps. After all, she too was devoted to the cause. But then he thought better of it.

He turned out to be a brilliant student of the Art of the Hundred Flights. Here was a branch of kungfu that really appealed to him. Even Apothecary Xu, the Eight'Armed Ape, famous among the Triads for his Flying skills, was impressed by Trinket's progress. And by the time they arrived in the metropolitan province of Zhili, and the White Nun had taught Trinket a few more tricks, Xu could not catch up with him at all. Trinket was pleased with himself. And then one morning, when Trinket went in to call on his Shifu, she was not there. She had gone on her way alone, leaving nothing but the briefest of notes.

In the Capital Once More

When they reached Peking, Princess Ning and Trinket went straight to the Palace to report to the Emperor. Kang Xi had already given his permission for his sister and Young Wu to be married in the Capital. He was pleased to see her and

Trinket again. She threw her arms around him and burst into tears.

‘That horrid man wasn’t nice to me at all!’

Kang Xi laughed.

‘Why, then I’ll have to give him a good spanking! What’s he been doing to you’

‘Ask Laurie. Brother, you’ve got to help me!’

She was sobbing and stamping her foot. Kang Xi smiled.

‘You go to your room and have a rest. I’ll talk to Laurie about it.’

When the two of them were alone, Trinket told the whole story, as he and the Princess had agreed it should be told. Kang Xi frowned. After a moment’s silence, he looked at Trinket’

‘You’ve got a nerve, haven’t you! Did the two of you really think you could pull the wool over my eyes’

Trinket fell to the ground and began kowtowing frantically. Kang Xi took him to

task.

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‘I know exactly what happened-I know my sister well enough. And I know Young Wu

too. He’s a man of the world. He’d never be such a fool as to try and rape a Princess! No, she made a scene, she picked a fight, and then she cut off his thing, and his tamardy testicles!’

He was unable to stop himself from bursting out laughing. Trinket laughed too. They neither of them had much affection for the Little Traitor.

‘We’ll have to go through with things now,’ continued Kang Xi. ‘You see to it. Let them get married, and then after a month they can both go back to Kunming.’

‘I’m not sure about them going back to Kunming,’ said Trinket. ‘Not with Satrap Wu planning this rebellion of his.’

Kang Xi’s face registered no expression. He merely nodded.

‘So what have you seen that makes you so certain of the Satrap’s intentions’

Trinket described in some detail Wu Sangu’s plans to form an unholy alliance with the Tibetans and Mongols in the west and north’west, the Russians in the north, and the Mystic Dragon Sect off the eastern coast. Kang Xi listened to all this intently, without uttering a syllable. Then finally he exclaimed’

The utter scoundrel! So that’s what he’s been busy doing all this time!’

Trinket was silent.

‘Well’ asked Kang Xi. ‘What else’

Trinket reported that they had brought with them back to Peking Hatiemo, the Mongol Prince’s envoy to Kunming. He described their whole escapade in Kunming with great gusto. Kang Xi seemed to find it all most entertaining.

‘What fun it must all have been!’

Kang Xi went on to ask Trinket a whole series of questions about Wu Sangui and his set’up in Kunming. He even asked about the rare black and white tiger skin in the Satrap’s study. Trinket was amazed. Kang Xi seemed to know virtually all there was to be known about the Satrap and his chief ministers, even though he’d never actually met him.

‘You seem very well informed, Majesty! I suppose you’ve got a whole network of spies working for you in Kunming’

“Know yourself, and above all know your enemy, and you will never be defeated.”

Those are the words of our great strategist

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of olden times, Master Sun, in his famous treatise The Art of War. But you did well, Laurie. What you have found out about this alliance is of the utmost importance. None of my spies knew about that. They only picked up petty details.

They couldn’t see the wood for the trees.’

Kang Xi told Trinket to have Hatiemo sent in, so that he could question him personally.

He received the Mongol in his study, and spoke to him in fluent Mongolian (a language not far removed from his native Manchu). Hatty was deeply impressed by the grandeur of the surroundings, and at the same time moved by the fact that he

was being addressed in his own language. He told the Emperor everything he wanted to know. Kang Xi kept him there for hours, and quite apart from the Mongol connection with the Satrap, he asked him a host of questions about the Mongols themselves' their military organization, eating habits, the currency they used, what the countryside looked like, and questions about any number of Mongol customs that he was curious about. He wanted to know about the different princes or dzassaks in command of the various Mongol Banners (or khoshun, as they were known), which ones were smart, which ones were so so, which were ill'disposed to each other, which were joined by bonds of friendship.

Trinket was watching all this from the sidelines, unable to make out a single word of their outlandish chatter. The interview finally came to an end, and Hatiemo fell to his knees and performed a series of kowtows. Kang Xi sent for a Palace Guard to escort him back to his quarters in prison.

A junior eunuch brought in a bowl of ginseng broth for the Emperor. Kang Xi ordered him to serve Colonel Wei a bowl of it too.

Of Jesuits and Cannon

There was the sound of footsteps outside the Imperial study, and another junior eunuch came in to report that two of the Emperor's western Jesuit advisors had come to pay their respects. These Jesuit priests had received favourable treatment from Kang Xi ever since he had taken over the reins of government from Oboi. The two most distinguished members of the fraternity were the elderly German Adam Van Schall, whom Kang Xi had literally saved from FHtDttKANO IHt CAULDRON

Lingering Death; and the younger Belgian, Ferdinand Verbiest. Both men (like the majority of Jesuits in China at the time) were referred to by their Chinese names' in Schall's case, Tang Ruowang or Father Tang, in Verbiest's Nan Huairen or Father Nan.

Kang Xi nodded, and the two men entered. They were both of tall stature, and wore long gowns similar to those worn by high'ranking Chinese mandarins. They knelt before the Emperor and kowtowed. Trinket was greatly bemused.

‘What the hell are these foreign devils doing in the Palace, dressed up as Chinese” he wondered. ‘Weird!’

When they had finished kowtowing, they each stepped forward and deposited a scroll on Kang Xi’s desk. It was the younger of the two, Verbiest, who spoke first’

‘Majesty, we have come to continue our explanations of the principles of cannon fire.’

Trinket let out a little gasp of astonishment. Not only was this foreign devil allowed into the Palace, and into the Imperial presence, he also spoke the most perfect, the crispest, the most fluent Mandarin Chinese. It was one hundred percent Peking brogue, without the slightest trace of a foreign accent. ‘Stone the tamardy crows!’ he muttered silently to himself. ‘I never thought I’d live to see the day! Why, these foreign devils probably even fart like us Chinese!’

Kang Xi meanwhile smiled at Verbiest and examined the scroll. Verbiest stood by the Emperor’s elbow, and began his little lecture, pointing from time to time at the scroll and the blueprint on it. Whenever Kang Xi failed to understand anything, he would ask for a more detailed explanation. This went on for about an hour. Then it was the turn of the older man, Schall, to expound some of the basic principles of astronomy and the science of the calendar. His discourse also lasted about an hour, after which they both kowtowed again and took their leave.

When they had gone, Kang Xi turned to Trinket.

Their Chinese is pretty amazing, isn’t it! They’ve been here in the Capital for quite some time. The older one arrived at the very end of the Ming dynasty. He’s from a Western country called Germany. The younger one arrived during my late father’s reign. He’s from Belgium. They are both priests. That’s why they learned Chinese-to help them preach their religious beliefs.’

Trinket nodded.

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‘Well, I’m mighty relieved they know so much about cannon!’ he declared. ‘It’ll come in handy if we ever do come up against the Russians.’

As Kang Xi continued talking, he began strolling up and down the study.

‘Before we Manchus conquered China, in the battles we fought in the north’east,

we often came off the worst because the Chinese had cannon. Nurhachi, our Great

Ancestor, was even killed by a cannon’ball. But we won in the end! It’s not the weapons themselves; it all depends on how you use them!’

‘I didn’t know the Ming Emperor had any cannon,’ said Trinket. ‘Where have they

got to’ We could use them to blast the Satrap to pieces!’

Kang Xi smiled.

‘They only had very few. They bought them from the foreigners in Macao. It’s no

good buying things like that from foreigners. One day, if we ever had to fight against foreigners themselves, they’d simply cut off our supplies. We need to learn to make them ourselves. Then we won’t be at their mercy any more.’

‘Right! Right!’ concurred Trinket enthusiastically. ‘We need to find out what’s what for ourselves. We need to learn the nuts and bolts, how to make things ourselves. That way these foreign devils will never be able to monkey around and

make fools of us!’

‘Exactly my own thinking! And it’s not easy, I can tell you, making cannon. Smelting the right quality metal, for a start. That takes some doing.’

Trinket wanted to show willing’

‘Majesty, why don’t I round up all the best blacksmiths in and around Peking, and we all set to work with a big pair of bellows, and huff’puff, huff’puff, we’ll smelt you a few million catties of the very best!’

Kang Xi laughed.

‘As a matter of fact, while you were away in Kunming, we did exactly that. We smelted a few thousand catties of the very best metal, and the two Jesuit Fathers are already supervising the making of some very big cannon. We must go

over together sometime, and have a look at them.’

‘I’d love to!’ cried Trinket.

He suddenly had a thought.

‘But Majesty, you should be very careful. These foreign devils are always up to no good. They’re not to be trusted. I don’t think you should go there, it might be dangerous, with all that gunpowder around the place. Let me go for you.’

‘Don’t you worry. This is a matter that concerns the protection of our nation, and I must supervise it personally. Besides, I have great confidence in Schall and Verbiest. Verbiest I know to be an honest man, and old Schall owes a great

deal to me. I got him out of serious trouble once, saved his life. He was most tremendously grateful. Neither of them would ever turn against me, I'm sure of it.'

'Saved a foreign devil's life!' cried Trinket. The strange things you do, Majesty!'

Kang Xi went on to tell Trinket how in the early years of his reign he had saved Schall from the charges of high treason and heresy brought against him by Oboi, when Oboi and the Regents still held power, and he was a mere boy of ten. He started talking about Palace politics and other matters of state, and much of what he said went over Trinket's head.

Trinket then remembered the Sutra belonging to the Plain Blue Banner that he had acquired from the Satrap during his stay in Kunming.

This, Majesty, is the Sutra I found at the Satrap's. It has finally come back to its rightful owner.'

The Empress Dowager will be so pleased,' exclaimed Kang Xi. 'I will show it to her, and arrange to have it incinerated in the Temple of the Imperial Ancestors. Then no one will ever be able to find out the secret hidden inside it!'

'Excellent!' thought Trinket secretly to himself. 'And no one will ever know that I have taken all the scraps from inside the covers, which contain the greatest secret of all!'

Piecing together the Scraps

Trinket returned to his own new Residence in the East City (the little mansion given him by Prince Kang). As soon as it was dark, he bolted the door of his room and took out the bundle of scraps. He had already sent for Doublet.

'I've got a job for you. It's a really fiddly one.' With the utmost patience, Doublet set about piecing together the parchment scraps. There were well over a thousand of them

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altogether, and it was very painstaking work. At the start Trinket sat up at the table with her and tried to give her a hand. But none of his suggestions ever

worked and eventually he lost interest, gave up, and went to bed. When he woke up the following morning he saw the lamp still burning in the next

room. Doublet was sitting there, holding one of the scraps in her fingers, and staring at the table. Trinket crept up behind her and gave a little cry. She started, jumped up in alarm, and then gave a laugh.

‘Have you woken up, then?’

‘What about you? It looks like you’ve been up all night! Come on, it’s time you tried to get some sleep!’

‘I’ll just put the pieces away first.’

On the table Doublet had stretched a large sheet of white paper, and using a neat little embroidery needle, she had already stitched twelve of the scraps in place. That tiny portion was complete. It fitted perfectly together.

‘You’ve made a good start!’ said Trinket.

‘It’s the first ones that are the hardest,’ replied Doublet. ‘I think I’ve worked out the basic principle of the thing, and it should be a lot easier from now on.’

Doublet carefully wrapped the pile of scraps in their original oilskin package, and put them away in a gilded lacquer chest, together with the sheet of paper.

‘I’ll help you to bed,’ said Trinket. He could see that her eyes were bloodshot from her night-long exertions. She blushed and made a coy movement with her hand.

‘No, that wouldn’t be right-’

‘What do you mean, not right? You’ve been up working all night, helping me. Surely I can help you-just a tiny bit!’

He put his arms round her. She gave another little laugh and slipped out from between his arms. He tried again several times, but she always got the better of him. He sat down and sulked.

‘I’ll get your washing things ready,’ she said, ‘and bring you your breakfast; then I’ll go and have a sleep.’

Trinket shook his head. Doublet could see that he was upset.

‘Is something the matter?’ she asked.

‘I’m just fed up that I can’t even get the better of a girl, after all the stuff I’ve been learning with my Shifu.’

‘I just didn’t want you putting your arms around me.’

‘Still...’

In a flash Trinket was up again and this time, by dint of a cleverly timed feint, he managed to get a good hold of her blouse, and she was too afraid of tearing it to pull away. He put one hand under her leg, hoisted her up, and carried her off bodily to his bed. By this time she was bright red in the face.

‘Master. . . put me . . . down. . . .’

He pulled the covers over her, leant down, and gave her the lightest of kisses.

There. Now close your eyes and go to sleep.'

He turned around and left the room, closing the door after him.

'She only let me do it,' he was thinking to himself, 'because otherwise she was scared I might get into a real state. Typical Doublet!'

He gave orders for a detachment of Valiants to mount guard outside his bedroom.

He was taking no chances with that precious collection of scraps.

During the days after his return to Peking, he distributed the Satrap's largesse among the various Imperial Concubines, Princes, Ministers, Palace Guards, and

Eunuchs of his acquaintance. He gave it away as if it was his own, and as a consequence earned himself a great reputation for generosity. Everyone agreed that Kang Xi had showed extremely good judgement in promoting this young man to his position of command in the Valiants.

As the days went by, little by little, Doublet contrived to piece together the scraps. Whenever she found two pieces that made a perfect fit, she would stitch them together with her embroidery needle. Each evening Trinket watched her, and gradually he saw a pattern emerging. It became more and more recognizable as a map. And spaced out on the map were some words written in a very squiggly script.

'These are words in some foreign language,' said Doublet. 'I can't read a single one of them.'

Trinket had been around in the Palace long enough to recognize Manchu writing when he saw it. But he had no idea what any of it meant. (Not that it would have been any easier for him if the words had been written in Chinese.)

On the eighteenth evening, Trinket came back to his room to find a beaming

Doublet standing in front of the table. He chuckled her lightly under the chin.

‘What are you looking so pleased about, then’ ‘ She gave a little laugh.

“.;; ‘Master, you guess!’

There had been two or three hundred pieces left unsolved the previous evening. As the days had gone by, Doublet had worked faster and faster. Trinket was sure

she had finished. But he was not going to miss out on this opportunity of teasing her.

‘Let me think now.... You’ve made me some of those yummy Huzhou dumplings you’re so good at’

‘No!’ She shook her head.

‘You’ve found some buried treasure’

‘No!’

‘Your newly adopted brother has come from Canton with lots of lovely presents for you’

‘No, no! Of course not! Canton’s much too far away for him to be able to do that!’

‘You’ve had a letter from Widow Zhuang’

This was a reference to Doublet’s original mistress and benefactor. Doublet shook her head and gave a little frown.

‘No! But I do often think about them and wonder how they are.’

‘I know!’ cried Trinket. ‘Today’s your birthday and-’

Doublet smiled.

‘No. My birthday’s not today.’

‘When is it then’

‘It’s in the ninth month, on the . . .’

Suddenly she blushed.

‘I’ve forgotten!’

‘Oh no you haven’t! Don’t try and fool me! How could you have forgotten your own

birthday’ I know what it is’ that old monk you got friendly with at Shaolin has come to see you.’

Doublet gave a little splutter of a laugh.

‘Master, you’re just making fun of me!’

Trinket scratched his head.

‘Well, I don’t know. It’s really hard to guess. You couldn’t possibly have finished piecing together the scraps yet. You still had two or three hundred bits left last night. They’d take you another week at least.’

There was a happy twinkle in Doublet’s eyes.

‘Come and look.’

She led Trinket over to the table. All the pieces were neatly stitched together on the great sheet of paper. The puzzle was complete. It was a large, detailed

map. Every scrap of parchment had been used, and there was not a single gap. It was perfect.

Trinket gave a great cry of joy and picked Doublet up in his arms.

‘For this you definitely deserve a kiss!’ He made to kiss her on the mouth. As he did so, she blushed fiercely, and looked away, and Trinket’s lips ended up somewhere on one of her earlobes. She felt a strange tingling sensation all over and cried out ‘No, don’t!’

Trinket put her down and held her by the hand. They stood there side by side looking at the map. Trinket could not praise her handiwork enough.

‘Dearest Doublet! I don’t know what I’d have done without you. It would have taken me years. And even then I probably wouldn’t have managed to do it!’

‘You’re much too busy to have time for stupid little things like this,’ protested Doublet with her usual charming display of modesty.

‘This, a stupid little thing! I call it brilliant! Most excellently brilliant kungfu, that’s what I call it!’

His ecstatic praise made Doublet feel very happy. Trinket now set about deciphering features on the map.

‘That’s a mountain. That’s a river. . . .’

In one place, near a winding river, there was a cluster of circles in eight different colours.

‘The rest of the map’s all in black. But these circles are all different colours’ yellow, red, white, blue, yellow with a red border. . . . ‘know! It’s the Eight Manchu Banners. This place with all the coloured circles must be a very special place for the Manchus. The only trouble is, I can’t tell which mountain is which, or which river is which.’

Doublet handed him a length of fine muslin, folded in concertina fashion into about thirty strips. On each strip was a squiggly piece of writing.

‘What’s this’ Who wrote this stuff”

‘I did.’

‘So you do know Manchu!’ he exclaimed, surprised and delighted. ‘You were just tricking me.’

He tried to hug her, but she slipped out of his arms again.

‘No, I don’t understand a word of it. I just traced the writing from the map line by line.’

‘Brilliant idea! I’ll get one of the Manchu clerks to look at it and write down the Chinese words beside these squiggles. Then we might know what on earth’s going on in this map. Doublet, dear, precious, wonderful Doublet, you’re so clever! You think of everything! For this, you most definitely deserve a kiss!’

But she was away and out of the room before he could even stretch out his arms.

Qobbledegook

Trinket went out to the main hall of his mansion, and sent one of his personal guards to fetch a Manchu clerk from the Valiant barracks. When the clerk arrived, Trinket handed him the folded length of muslin, pointed to one of the strips, and ordered him to translate the Manchu words traced on it. ‘Colonel Wei’ replied the clerk at once, ‘here we have some of our Manchu ancestral place’names. The Ergun River, the Zeja River, and Mount Khumarsk. They are all right up in the north’east, beyond the Pass.’

‘Beyond the Pass’ was the general term used for the whole of the north’eastern Manchu homeland.

‘Of course,’ Trinket was thinking to himself. ‘Makes sense. That would be where the Manchus would have buried their treasure’ as deep into their own stomping ground as possible.’

What he actually said was

‘I want you to write down all these weird’sounding names for me in Chinese.’

The clerk did as he was told.

Trinket pointed to another section of the muslin.

‘And these’

‘My Colonel, these are the Silimu River, Mount Amur, and the Amur River.’

‘Tamardy!’ exclaimed Trinket. ‘They sound weirder and weirder. Why can’t you give me some decent names, instead of all this gobbledegook rubbish. I’m sure you made the whole lot up.’

The clerk looked scared.

‘Forgive me, my Colonel, but in our Manchu language, they do mean something.

I

would never dare to make them up.'

'Don't worry. Just write them all down in Chinese. And this is for your trouble.'

He tossed the clerk fifty taels of silver. The poor man had probably never seen so much money at one time. His monthly wage would have been something of the order of twelve taels.

'But once you leave this room, you're to forget all about those place names, all right' If I find out that you've been chattering about them, I'll come after you for the fifty taels, plus another one hundred in interest and penalties. . . . Plus your head!'

It took Trinket a few days to sort out the names, with Doublet's help. There were some seventy or eighty of them in all. Looking more closely at the map, he saw that the cluster of eight coloured circles was in the very north of the province known in Chinese as Heilongjiang (River of the Black Dragon). In fact they were clustered around the very place where the Ergun River and the Amur or Black Dragon River converged, due north of Mount Khumarsk, and north-west of Mount Amur. The place was marked on the map with the Manchu words Meeting of the Waters, and next to these words, in yellow, was inscribed an old Chinese seal character meaning Water.

Right in the middle of the cluster of circles were two more symbols drawn in yellow. These two symbols also looked like the ancient Chinese seal script, and unmistakably represented a deer

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deer and a cauldron.

The Manchu words written alongside them, when translated into Chinese, read

Lu'ding'shan (which means Deer and Cauldron Mountain). Clearly this was a very special, important sort of place.

Trinket committed the map and all the names on it carefully to memory, and made

Doublet do likewise. Then, to make sure the scraps and their secret never fell into the wrong hands, he threw them all into the brazier. As they went up in flames, he felt an indescribable sense of happiness.

‘My Shifu’s instructions were to divide the scraps up and bury them in separate places. But someone could still have come along, found them all, and pieced them

back together again. Now they’re buried in my heart, and no one can ever find them, not even if they opened me up to look!’

Doublet’s face looked so radiantly pretty in the light from the dancing flames in the brazier. She could feel him looking at her, and hung her head shyly.

There we are, my dear Doublet,’ he exclaimed joyfully. ‘We’ve pieced it all together, and we’ve found out what all the names are. All those weird places, Gobbledegook Mountain and Hujamiflip River—we’ve memorized them all!

Don’t you

think this brilliant feat of ours deserves a-’

But before he could finish she was on her feet crying playfully’

‘No! No!’

‘What do you mean, no!’ protested Trinket.

She ran out of the room, crying’

‘I don’t know!’

Trinket ran after her.

‘I do!’

But just at that moment he saw one of his guards coming towards him.

‘My Colonel, His Majesty has sent for you. He wishes to see you at once.’

Trinket pulled a long face, and set off for the Palace.

Cannon of Divine Might

He arrived just as the Emperor’s cavalcade was leaving the gates of the Forbidden City. Trinket took up a position on the roadside and kowtowed.

Kang Xi

saw him there and called out’

‘Laurie! Come along! We’re going to watch those foreigners try out their cannon!’

‘Excellent!’ responded Trinket. ‘They certainly didn’t waste any time making them.’

The procession made its way to the imperially established Cannon Foundry at Dragon Pool, inside the city gate known as the Left Gate of Peace. The two Jesuit fathers, Schall and Verbiest, could be seen in the distance kneeling by

the roadside. As he approached Kang Xi bade them rise.

‘Up you get! So, where are the big guns’

‘Your Majesty, the cannon are outside the walls. Would Your Majesty like to inspect them’

‘Excellent!’

Kang Xi descended from his carriage, and proceeded through the Left Gate of Peace, with large numbers of Palace Guards walking before and after him. There, outside the city walls, he beheld three large guns, assembled and ready to fire. He walked closer to inspect them. Their barrels were dazzlingly polished, their mountings and wheels imposingly solid and well made. He was greatly impressed, and altogether delighted.

‘Well done indeed! Now for a test firing!’

Verbiest personally put the gunpowder charge into the barrel, ramming it in firmly with a metal rod. Then he inserted a cannon’ball, and turned to address the Emperor’

‘Majesty, this particular cannon can fire approximately three quarters of a mile. We have set up the targets at that distance, over there.’

Kang Xi’s gaze followed the direction in which he was pointing. In the distance he could see a row of earthen mounds.

‘Very good. Go ahead then.’

‘Your Majesty, may I suggest that you step well aside, for your own personal safety.’

Kang Xi chuckled, and did as he was told.

Trinket decided the moment had arrived to make a demonstration of his own courage, and he asked Kang Xi if he could

fire the cannon. Kang Xi nodded. Trinket walked forward, and addressed Verbiest’

‘Foreign brother, you set the sights; I will light the fuse.’

Verbiest made some final adjustments to the positioning of the barrel, and handed Trinket the torch. Trinket held the torch to the tip of the fuse. The next instant he had leapt into the air, dropping the torch and clapping both hands tightly to his ears. There was a great burst of flame, a clap of thunder, and a huge black cloud of smoke, and one of the earthen mounds disintegrated with the impact of the cannon'ball. A column of flame rose into the sky above the mound, which had been stuffed full of explosives to enhance the effect.

A roar of applause went up from the group of military officers gathered around the Emperor. Then they turned towards their Sovereign and chanted'

'Long Live His Imperial Majesty!'

There were three newly cast cannon, and they were fired altogether ten times. Seven cannon'balls hit the mark, and seven out of the ten targets were blown up.

The other three cannon'balls fell slightly short. Kang Xi was hugely pleased with the experiment, and showered the two Jesuits with praise. Verbiest was promoted on the spot to the rank of Director of the Imperial Observatory. Schall

was already a President of the Imperial Court of Ritual and a State Chamberlain,

and had some time earlier been awarded the honorary title of Master of Universal

Mysteries. All his ranks and titles, which had been taken away during the Oboi Regency, were now restored. His honorary title was changed, to Master of Universal Subtlety. This was because the word 'mystery' was currently tabooed, being one of the Emperor's personal names (hence his nickname Misty, used only

by his close personal friend and ex'sparring partner Laurie, alias Colonel Trinket Wei). The three mighty cannon were ceremoniously named the Great Cannon of Divine Might.

Mission Impossible

As they returned from their excursion, the Emperor was talking to Trinket, when a thought seemed to cross his mind, and he frowned.

'Apart from the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Russians, it appears that the Satrap is also trying to create some sort of an alliance

with that strange Mystic Dragon Sect on that island of theirs. And they are the very people who sent the Fake'Empress Dowager here (the one you always call the Old Whore), to do their dirty work in the Palace.'

That's right' replied Trinket. Kang Xi was certainly putting the picture together accurately.

'Well if that Old Whore is part of the plot, I absolutely have to crush this rebellion! I have to avenge my poor mother's death, and I have to make up for all the years the real Empress Dowager spent cooped up in that dark cupboard!'

There was something bitter and fierce about the way he said this.

'Oh dear!' Trinket thought to himself. 'I think I know what this is all leading up to. ... Would I kindly go and get hold of the Old Whore for him'-another tricky little assignment for Trink. But what he doesn't realize is that she went shooting off with Thin Dhuta, or Lump'of'Flesh, or Meatball, or whatever his current name is, and I haven't the foggiest where she ended up.'

He was extremely apprehensive, and too nervous to say anything at all in response to Kang Xi's emotional words.

'Laurie,' continued Kang Xi, to Trinket's dismay, 'this is a highly confidential matter. You're the only person I can trust with it.'

'Yes, Majesty. I understand. But the trouble is, I don't know where the Old Whore is. She could be anywhere by now. That fat lover of hers, the one who helped her escape, is capable of all manner of strange tricks.'

'Yes, I know. She may have vanished into the wilds, she may be hiding somewhere in the mountains. It will be hard to find her. But there must be clues. You just have to follow them up. Take a company of soldiers, take a whole regiment if you need to, go to that island and wipe out that whole Mystic Dragon gang. But be sure to interrogate them first. That's the way to find out where she is.'

Colonel Trinket looked an extremely doubtful starter for this particular mission. Kang Xi tried to jolly him along.

'Look, Laurie, I know this is a tough one. It's like asking you to fish a needle

out of the sea. But you're the man for it, I know you are. You're the one I turn to when all else fails. You're so smart, I know you can do it. I won't even set you a time limit. First you must set off towards the north-east, so that it looks as if you're on

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some other mission. Then when you're beyond the Pass and reach the city of Mukden, you can put your force together there and choose a good moment to take

their island. Wipe these Mystic Dragons out! I want them broken!'

Trinket could see that all this flattery was for a purpose. There was obviously no refusing. It was time for surrender.

'As always, Majesty, I owe every happiness in my life to you, to your infinite kindness and generosity. I just pray that I can live up to your expectations and bring back the Old Whore alive!' Kang Xi slapped him on the back.

'That's the fellow! But remember, it's wiping out those Dragons that's the most important thing. They're a threat to the Realm. Dealing with that woman is important too, but it's more of a personal settling of scores. Those Dragons on their island are just a stone's throw from our Manchu homeland in the north-east. They're too close for comfort. If they were to join up with the Russians and take the lands beyond the Pass, the stability of our whole dynasty would be threatened. Destroy them, and you break the Dragon-Russian alliance.

You deprive the Russians of the five fingers of one hand!' Trinket laughed.

That's right!' Suddenly he yelled 'Chop'skee off'skee' As he did so, he raised his right hand in the air and began thrashing it around wildly.

'What's that all about' asked Kang Xi, highly amused by Trinket's antics.

That's a Russian yelling because he's had five fingers chopped off!

Kang Xi laughed loudly. Then'

'In connection with this mission, I am making you a Viscount First Class, and bestowing on you the Manchu title of Baturu. Your confidential orders are to put

together an expeditionary force in Mukden, and to destroy the rebels of the Mystic Dragon Sect.' Trinket knelt to give thanks.

'Do this thing carefully, mark you' the Emperor continued. 'I don't want our plan to leak out. I don't want the Satrap and his allies to get the wind up and launch their rebellion ahead of time. I just want you to succeed, and your success to come out of the blue'

Mystic Dragons eliminated-end of story. To keep things quiet, and provide you with a cover, tomorrow I'm announcing that you'll be going as my official

representative to the Long White Mountains to perform a sacrifice to the ancestors of the Imperial Aisin'Gioro clan. That's the clan my family belongs to. We originally came from that range of mountains. They are sacred to us. Sending you there is a perfect alibi.'

'Your Majesty, you have thought it all out down to the last detail. As for the Great Leader of the Mystic Dragons... what I say is, Long Life to the Insect!'

'Eh''

Kang Xi was totally bemused by this pleasantry of Trinket's.

'Well, I mean he is a mere insect compared to your great might. So he'll probably live no longer than a little midge!'

In actual fact Trinket had been calculating to himself how infinitely slim his own chances were going to be against the deadly kungfu skills of the Leader and his various champions. All he would have on his side would be regular fighting troops with ordinary swords and bows. The diminutive lifespan of an insect was probably what lay in store for Colonel Trinket of the Valiants, was what he was thinking.

He left the Palace feeling exceptionally glum. Then suddenly his face lightened.

'I'm damned if I'll do it! Why the hell should I' However kind the Emperor's been to me, I'm through with this whole charade! I'll pretend to do it. I'll go as far as the Pass, and then make a dash for it. Perhaps I'll head for that place called the Mountain of , and dig up some of that treasure. Make myself a quick fortune, sneak back to Yunnan, marry Green and run away with her for ever. A quiet life, incognito, gambling, watching opera. . . having some fun for a change. . .'

He was feeling better already.

The Three Treasures of Manchuria

The following day Kang Xi issued the necessary Edict. After the morning audience, the high ministers of state competed with each other to congratulate Trinket on his new appointment. Songgotu was the closest friend Trinket had in

higher political circles (they were in fact sworn brothers). He came round to Trinket's mansion

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afterwards for a chat, and noticed his absence of enthusiasm about the new mission. Songgotu's interpretation was predictable.

'I completely understand how you feel, dear friend. There obviously won't be such rich pickings for you up in the north-east as there were down in Yunnan.'

'It's not that,' moaned Trinket. 'It's just that I'm a southerner. I'm not a Manchu like you. I hate the cold. The very thought of all that ice and snow has given me the shivers already, and we haven't even set off.'

Songgotu gave a hearty guffaw.

'Don't fret,' he said, in his most reassuring manner. 'I'll send you over a nice warm sable-lined robe. That should keep the cold out. And a charcoal brazier or two in your sedan should keep you warm on the march. And listen to me, brother'

there are, ways of making money on this mission of yours!

'Money'-up in that godforsaken frozen wilderness' I thought the only thing it was good for was freezing off your balls!

'We Manchus always say that our homeland has Three Treasures' ginseng, sable

fur, and ula'grass.'

'I know all about ginseng and sable,' replied Trinket. 'But what the hell is ula'grass'

'It's a very bitter plant,' Songgotu explained. 'But it's a treasure. A bitter treasure. Up in the north-east, during the winter, when the ground is frozen solid, the poor people can't afford to wear furs, or sit in warm sedan'chairs. To stop their feet from freezing, they pick this ula'grass (which grows everywhere up there), dry it, crush it, and stuff it in their shoes. It works wonders! Keeps their feet warm as anything!'

Pacifying the Ocean

At that moment, one of Trinket's guards came in to announce the arrival of Admiral Shi Lang, the Naval Commander of the Imperial Fujian Fleet. Somehow the

name rang a bell with Trinket. He remembered Zheng Keshuang (the Insufferable)

once telling him that this man was a master of the Wuyi School of kungfu (named

after the Wuyi mountains in the far north of Fujian Province). He had once served under Prince Zheng (the Insufferable's father, and Coxinga's son) and had

even taught the Insufferable himself a certain amount of kungfu. But later he had surrendered to the Manchus.

Trinket could not help being suspicious of the man, because of his previous connection with his pet hate and arch-rival in love.

‘What has he come here for?’ he demanded of the guard. ‘I don’t think I particularly want to see him.’

The guard went out to inform the visitor that his Master was indisposed and unable to receive him.

Trinket could not help feeling a little uneasy about this new development. He sent another of his guards off to fetch ‘Number Three’ and ‘Number Six’ (these were the somewhat unimaginative pseudonyms that Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu had adopted as members of his household retinue in Peking).

‘Are you not acquainted with Admiral Shi?’ asked the ever-smiling Songgotu.

‘Never met the man.’

‘He has been appointed Admiral in charge of Pacifying the Ocean’ was Songgotu’s comment.

In military parlance, this title indicated that Admiral Shi’s brief was to ‘pacify’ (that is, annex) the large island of Taiwan, still at this date in the hands of Coxinga’s descendants, who were managing to hold out very well against the Manchus more than twenty years after the conquest. They ran the place pretty much as their own private kingdom, and had in fact turned the island into quite a thriving little trade entrepot.

Meanwhile Numbers Three and Six had arrived and had taken up a position behind

Trinket, which helped to set his mind somewhat at ease. His guard brought in a present from the Admiral, a beautiful inscribed jade bowl, in an embroidered casket. The present slightly softened Trinket’s hostility. Songgotu inspected the bowl and smiled. ‘Brother Wei, you should not treat this as any ordinary present.’ ‘What do you mean?’

‘Admiral Shi has clearly given it a great deal of thought. The inscription conveys his sincerest congratulations on your recent promotion, and is signed “Your Humble Servant and Admirer, Shi Lang”.’

‘Hm ...’ mumbled Trinket to himself. ‘This man hardly knows me.’ Then out loud’

‘Something fishy going on here, eh Songgo’

Songgotu (the ever smiling) remarked’

‘It seems clear enough to me what is going on. This Admiral’s one and only goal in life is to take possession of Taiwan and avenge the cruel deaths inflicted on his family by the Coxinga faction. For

several years now he has been trying to enlist our support in his cause. Now he is trying to enlist yours.’

Trinket was relieved to hear this. Maybe the man had not come to execute some

dire command of the Insufferable’s. Maybe he wasn’t an assassin after all.

‘But why is he so set on taking Taiwan’

‘It’s a long story. It goes back to the time when he was a general under Coxinga. Coxinga suspected him of wanting to usurp supreme power on the island.

As you know, Coxinga regarded himself as king of the island. Shi Lang escaped before Coxinga could do anything to him, but his family were not so lucky.’

Songgotu made a gesture with his right hand that was unmistakably an executioner’s chop.

They all perished in the aftermath. Shi Lang himself is a first’rate naval commander. Once he’d come over to the Manchus, he v’ent on to defeat Coxinga at sea.’

Trinket’s tongue popped out in sheer amazement.

‘Wow! He must be good!’

Trinket relented of his earlier suspicions. He sent one of his guards to find out if Admiral Shi had already left. If not, he was to say that his Master was on his way out to receive him.

‘Won’t you come with me, Songgo’ he asked, still a little apprehensive about the encounter. The presence of Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu was reassuring, but he knew he would feel more comfortable if he had his eminent Manchu ‘brother’ with

him as well. Songgotu laughed and nodded and, taking Trinket by the hand, led the way out to the main reception hall of the mansion.

Shi Lang had already taken a seat on one of the ‘humblest’ (i.e. lowest) chairs in the hall. The moment he heard the sound of footsteps, he hurried forward.

‘Humblest greetings to you both, sires!’

Trinket brought his hands together in the usual gesture of salutation.

‘Come, come! You an Admiral of His Majesty’s Fleet, me a two’bit Colonel!

Let's

have a bit less of the humble greetings around the place, shall we, and bit more of the "Why don't we all sit down, and relax."

'You are too generous, sire!'

Despite Trinket's words, Admiral Shi sounded more obsequious than ever as he continued'

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'You are a Viscount of the First Rank, sire, infinitely superior in station to my humble self. You have risen so high at such a young age! Surely one day you will rise to be a Prince of the Realm!'

Trinket laughed.

'If that day ever comes, I'll remember your kind words.'

Songgotu smiled at the Admiral.

'You've certainly learned how to talk like a courtier, my friend! Your years in Peking have been put to good use. I remember you when you first came here. You were always offending people.'

'At heart I'm just a plain soldier. It's gentlemen such as yourself who have taught me what little I know of the ways of the Court.'

'Well, you're obviously smart enough' continued Songgotu, beaming the unstoppable Songgo smile. 'You've worked out one important thing for yourself' if you want to get close to the Emperor, Lord Wei will be more use to you than all the Princes and Ministers of State put together.'

And so on and so forth; long-winded civilities flowing backwards and forwards, ad nauseam. Trinket, meanwhile, was sizing up the Admiral. He looked about fifty, strongly built, with a bright, steady gaze, and a vigorous manner. But despite this, there was something a little careworn about him, as if life had not treated him too kindly.

'I must thank you for that beautiful jade bowl,' Trinket put in. There's one small problem, though.'

The Admiral jumped to his feet, afraid that he had committed some diplomatic blunder.

‘Pray tell me what flaw you have found in the bowl, sire’

Trinket laughed.

‘It’s not a flaw. No, no. It’s just that it’s so nice I’d be afraid ever to eat out of it. I’d be all in a tremble in case I dropped it and it smashed into a zillion pieces.’

He started chuckling, and Songgotu chimed in with one of his bluff Manchu guffaws. Admiral Shi felt obliged to contribute to the general hilarity, and gave a muted titter.

Tell me, how long have you been here in Peking” asked Trinket.

Three years, sire,’ was Shi’s reply.

Trinket seemed puzzled.

‘I thought you were in command of His Majesty’s Fujian fleet. What keeps you in town’ Some pretty girl, eh”

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‘You jest, sire’ protested the Admiral (humour Trinket’s style was clearly not his strong point). ‘His Majesty summoned me here to consult on strategy for the Taiwan campaign. I have not yet received His Majesty’s orders to proceed south.’

‘Be patient’ replied Trinket, thinking to himself that there was certain to be some good reason for the Emperor’s delay. The time will come soon enough. Don’t

worry. His Majesty always has some master plan up his sleeve.’

‘Indeed, sire’ It sets my mind hugely at rest to hear these words from such distinguished lips.’

Trinket was smart enough to recognize courtier’talk when he heard it, but he was

also a creature of vanity, and couldn’t help enjoying the flattery a little.

‘Listen to me, Admiral. Take my advice. Take things easy. Relax. Just put your faith in HM. He’s a wise old bird, for all his youth. Maybe he just wants to keep you waiting. He does that sometimes. Likes to take people down a peg or two, make sure they’re not getting above themselves. Really you should consider

yourself lucky. You haven’t actually been demoted or anything. Sometimes he even

puts people in the clink, just to test them out, see what they're made of.'

'Indeed, indeed.'

The palms of the Admiral's hands were sweating. Songgotu tugged thoughtfully at

his whiskers.

'What Lord Wei says is so very true' he commented, in the smooth, judicious tone

of another highly placed person in the know. 'As the saying goes' "A piece of jade must needs be rubbed smooth, if it is ever to become a vessel of great worth." A bit like that jade bowl you just gave Lord Wei. Dashed fine piece that. . .'

'Yes, yes' mumbled Admiral Shi.

Trinket now asked him to tell the story of how he had transferred his allegiance from the 'rebel' leader Coxinga to the Manchu Imperial cause. Shi described the

early days of his career, when he had fought for Coxinga (and indeed Coxinga's father before him) against the Manchu troops. As he listened to this tale of the Resistance, Trinket, who had so often talked of these heroic events with his Triad brothers, had to bite his tongue to prevent himself from cheering, or uttering some of the Triad mantras that he knew so well. Such were the hazards of his multiple existence!

As Shi Lang's tale unfolded, it became clear that the real cause
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of his shift of allegiance was the fact that he had offended Coxinga's consort, Lady Dong. At the very mention of her name, Trinket cried angrily'

That foul old whore!

The late Marshal's lady 'was, as he knew only too well, the great protector of her younger grandson, the hateful Zheng Keshuang. He now learned that, as a result of her interference, Shi Lang had been thrown into prison. He had been lucky to escape. His entire family-father, wife, children-had been arrested and executed, to placate Lady Dong.

Shi Lang and Trinket had found a common cause in their hatred of Lady Dong, and

in their contempt for women meddling in military affairs. Shi vowed that he would never rest until he had taken vengeance and wiped out all of Coxinga's descendants, the entire Zheng clan.

This was by no means the first time that Trinket had experienced the pangs of divided loyalties, and it would certainly not be the last. On the one hand, he had always been led (by his Triad friends) to think of Coxinga as a great

patriotic hero (rather than a ruthless pirate with a Japanese wife and maniacal tendencies). If he had been a hero, then wiping out his descendants seemed a dastardly thing to do. But on the other hand, he adored Green, and if extermination of the Zheng clan meant removing the obnoxious Zheng Keshuang from the face of the earth (and leaving the field clear for Trinket himself), then it was clearly an extermination devoutly to be desired. The agony of his dilemma was short-lived. Love won hands down over patriotism. Trinket nodded his head enthusiastically.

‘Yes! Kill the lot of ‘em! You owe it to your family’s memory. Vengeance must be yours!’

And so on. Shi Lang was needless to say delighted (and not a little surprised) to have found such an enthusiastic anti-Zheng ally in the person of Lord Wei. The past three years in Peking had been something of an ordeal for him. He had waited and waited for something to happen. No amount of bribery had succeeded in promoting his cause. He was growing tired of kicking his heels. No Edict to go South and launch the campaign was forthcoming from the Palace. Indeed, in all that time, he had been accorded but one audience with the Emperor. Somehow as a result of this brief conversation with Trinket, the Emperor’s favourite, he saw light at the end of the tunnel.

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Songgotu had his own words of advice to offer.

‘Admiral Shi, you are quite justified in your feelings. Coxinga should never have done what he did to your family. But think for a moment. If he hadn’t done that terrible thing, you might still be a rebel fighting against the Throne. You might never have seen the light. So you see, in a way, it was a blessing in disguise.’

‘Indeed, sire, what you say has a certain truth.’

‘So if I understand you properly,’ said Trinket, ‘you switched sides because Coxinga killed your family.’

‘Yes. His Late Majesty gave me command of the Fujian army and navy, and we drove Coxinga from his stronghold in Amoy. There were some Dutch troops fighting with

us, in their big warships, and we had some guns and cannon. His Late Majesty appointed me Admiral of the Fujian Fleet, in charge of Pacifying the Ocean.'

'With all your years in Coxinga's service,' said Trinket, 'you must know the situation in Taiwan like the back of your hand. What advice did you give His Majesty for the Taiwan campaign?' 'I submitted a memorial on this subject, in which I made a number of points. Firstly, Taiwan is an island, which makes it easy to defend and hard to take. Then, Coxinga's generals are seasoned veterans.

Our attack needs to be carefully coordinated. Above all, it needs to have a single command.'

'And that single command should be you' put in Trinket. 'I would never venture to put it as bluntly as that. But if we are to take their defence by surprise, then decisions will have to be made on the spot, on the coast in Fujian. It is no good waiting for authorization to arrive from the Court in Peking. By then, the opportunity for victory will have passed us by. There are a couple of exceptionally good commanders in the Taiwan army' Liu Guoxuan and Chen Jinnan.

They will be hard to beat.'

Trinket nodded. He appreciated anyone who praised his Shifu, the Helmsman Chen

Jinnan.

'You're right there. And I'm sure His Majesty is smart enough to appreciate the truth of what you are saying. What else did you offer by way of advice?'

'I suggested a two-pronged attack. On the one hand, we use spies to sow dissension within the Taiwan ranks. We spread rumours that Chen and Liu have

ambitions to seize power. That will provoke Zheng Jing (Coxinga's son, the one they call the Prince of Yanping) to purge two of his own best generals. He will kill

them outright, or he will strip them of all their power. Either way we stand to gain hugely.'

Tamardy!' thought Trinket to himself all of a sudden. This man is planning to kill my Shifu!

'And what about that general of theirs called Feng Xifan, the one known as the Bloodless Sword?'

Shi looked at Trinket in amazement.

'You know about him too, sire?'

'Oh, just some stuff I picked up from HM,' said Trinket as casually as possible.

The Emperor is remarkably well informed on the Taiwan issue. He also told me that Lady Dong is far too fond of that little runt of a grandson of hers, and has taken against Zheng Jing's first son, Zheng Kezang. She wants Zheng Jing to make the runt his heir, but he refuses. Is that true?"

Shi Lang was most impressed.

'His Majesty is indeed unprecedentedly wise! From the depths of his Palace he knows of events that are unfolding many hundreds of miles away! Yes, that is the exact truth of the situation!'

'Just now you mentioned a two'pronged attack. The first prong was using spies to bring about the downfall of Chen Jinnan and Liu Guoxuan. What is the second?"

'A full'scale naval invasion,' replied Shi Lang, without the slightest hesitation. 'And the invasion itself has to be three'pronged. One section will land at Keelung Harbour in the north'east; one at Taiwan Port;' (this is what the Chinese called Fort Zeelandia, on the west of the island) 'and the third at Dagou Port on the south coast. If even one of these three succeeds in getting a foothold on the island, the people are bound to panic and we will have the road clear to victory.'

'Anyone can see, my dear Admiral,' said Trinket, 'that you are an old hand when it comes to battles at sea.'

'I've spent most of my active life on the water,' was Shi's reply.

During this perfunctory exchange, Trinket's real thoughts were running as follows'

This is all very well. If he does attack Taiwan it'll be bad news for the Insufferable runt, which will be excellent news for me; but it'll also be bad news for my Shifu, which will be bad news for me too. This will never do. ... I know! If this man is such a brilliant commander, why not get him transferred to another mission' Like

this latest one of mine, for example' Interesting thought.. '

Tea was served, and shortly afterwards the Admiral took his leave.

Strategy, and a Qolden Bowl

When Trinket next saw Kang Xi, he brought up his recent conversation with Shi

Lang on the subject of Taiwan.

‘My first priority,’ said the Emperor, without any hesitation, ‘is to quell the Satrap and put a stop to his plans. Taiwan will have to wait. As for Shi Lang, I don’t deny his talent, but I’ve always been a little wary of his emotional involvement. Too much revenge about him for my liking. Could cause him to act

rashly and give the whole game away. That’s why I’ve kept him here in Peking all

this time. On a short leash, so to speak.’

‘Of course!’ exclaimed Trinket, as if suddenly seeing the light. Tf he started building ships and training troops, he’d spoil everything. The attack on Taiwan must be kept absolutely secret. We must take those scoundrels completely by surprise.’

Kang Xi laughed.

‘You’re becoming quite the little strategist! That’s straight from Master Sun’s The Art of War, where he talks about Empty and Full, Weakness and Strength, and

the Art of Deception! And at the same time I’m keeping Shi Lang in Peking so that when he does finally go into battle he will be lean and hungry, and ready to win.’

‘Just like another great strategist, Zhuge Liang, in the opera!’ cried Trinket, not to be outdone by the Emperor’s literary references. ‘I’ve seen it! Zhuge, Sleeping Dragon, gets Huang Zhong all worked up and excited, and in the end he

defeats General What’s’his’name and cuts his head off. . . . The one with the painted face.’

Kang Xi laughed.

‘His name was Xiahou Yuan.’

‘You know everything! What a memory you’ve got!’

‘I read the story in the novel, The Three Kingdoms. That’s where I remember it from, not the opera. But tell me about the present that Shi Lang gave you.’

Trinket was impressed.

‘You really do know everything! It was a jade bowl. Actually I don’t much care for it.’

‘Why not’

‘It’s too breakable. I much prefer those solid gold ones that you serve food in here. Nothing could break those, not in a million years!’

Kang Xi laughed again.

‘Majesty,’ Trinket continued, ‘I’ve just had an idea. If that Admiral Shi Lang is as good as they say he is, why not-’

‘Of course! What a brilliant idea!’ Kang Xi brought his left hand smartly down on the table. ‘What a clever fellow you are, Laurie! Of course you’re right! You must take him with you to the north’east. He can deal with the Mystic Dragons! Perfect!’

Trinket looked absolutely flabbergasted. He stared at Kang Xi for a moment, and then exclaimed

‘You definitely are some sort of wonder’worker, Majesty! How did you manage to read my secret thoughts” Kang Xi smiled.

‘Spare me the flattery, there’s a good fellow. Laurie, this is the perfect solution. I was always a bit worried by the idea of you having to take on the Mystic Dragons. Shi Lang’s the very man to help you. But the operation must still be kept top secret.’ ‘Of course,’ Trinket hastened to assure him. So Kang Xi summoned Shi Lang (for the long’awaited audience), and instructed him to accompany Trinket on this secret mission. He intimated that this was Shi Lang’s opportunity to prove himself for the Big One’ the invasion of Taiwan. Shi Lang was needless to say thrilled.

‘Colonel Wei has said good things about you, Admiral Shi,’ said Kang Xi. ‘I’d say a present of some sort might be in order. Something along the lines of a golden bowl”

Shi Lang made a mental note of this, and took his leave of the Emperor. The following day he arrived at Trinket’s mansion, and gave him a new present-a solid gold rice’bowl. Trinket was most appreciative and wanted to know what the little characters engraved on the outside said. Shi Lang read them out for him’

‘Presented to the Great Minister, Plain Yellow Banner Colonel of the Valiant Regiment, wearer of the Yellow Riding Jacket, Baturu Brave, Viscount First Class Trinket Wei.’ And below, in still smaller characters’ ‘Made at His Majesty’s Command by Admiral Shi Lang, Pacifier of the Ocean.’

Trinket looked pleased as punch.

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‘Brilliant! It’s just what I wanted!’ And to himself he was thinking ‘No fool, this Shi Lang!’

Later that day Trinket had a private consultation with his Triad friends’ Tertius, Li Shimin, Feng Jizhong, Apothecary Xu, and Father Obscurus. When they learned that their Lodge Master Wei had run into Shi Lang, who so far as they were concerned was quite simply a black’hearted traitor to the cause, they were all for killing Shi outright. But Trinket persuaded them that it was in fact in the interests of their cause to keep him alive for the time being. Let him first eliminate the Mystic Dragons, who were dangerous members of the Wu Sangu alliance (in this respect Triads and Manchus were of one mind). Then they could deal with Shi Lang himself.

Trinket at Sea

A day or two later, Kang Xi issued the formal Edict. Viscount Trinket Wei was to set sail from the port of Dagou, in command of a fleet equipped with ten Cannon of Divine Might, and sail across the Gulf of Liaodong. He was to perform (on the Emperor’s behalf) ritual sacrifices to the Spirit of the Gulf, and then disembark on the coast of the Liaodong Peninsula. Thence, he was to proceed to the Great White Mountains, where he was to perform sacrifices to the Great Spirit of Heaven.

Trinket did not think it quite appropriate to take Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu with him on this expedition (the real goal of which was, after all, to destroy the very Sect of which they were prominent members’at’large). He gave them orders to lie low in Peking, and await his return.

At the head of a detachment of his own Valiants, with Doublet and his Triad friends in tow, he finally set off and soon arrived at the bustling city’port of Tianjin. That evening he met with the local naval commander to discuss the details of his fleet and its equipment. Shi Lang was called into the meeting, and Trinket left him alone with the commander, while he himself sneaked out

to
have a hand of cards with the lower ranks.

They were in Tianjin for three days all told. Food, water, gunpowder, bows and arrows-everything was taken to the port of Dagou and put on board, and finally the little armada set sail and headed out to sea. A corps of sailors, Trinket's Valiants, ten ships of the line, and thirty-eight sloops.

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Once they were out at sea, Trinket revealed to his men the true nature of their mission. This was no sacrificial outing, but war. They were to give of their utmost, and if the outcome was successful, they would be suitably rewarded with promotion. The men were supremely confident of their success. What could a bunch of pirates on their island hide-out hope to do against the combined firepower of this Imperial fleet, complete with its ten great cannon, freshly cast to the very latest foreign design. Promotion was round the corner. Spirits were high.

As he sat on deck gazing out to sea, Trinket found himself thinking back to his first trip to Snake Island, with Fang Yi, sister-in-arms of the Little Countess. He remembered those days of romantic bliss, when he had stood on deck staring at her lovely face, that 'indescribable, adorable vision of beauty'. ... True, it had all turned out to be a plot, to deliver him into the hands of her Leaders in the Sect. But their sea journey there had been one of those magical experiences, like a dream.

Now they were going to take Snake Island by storm, and the Leader and all his men would be powerless to resist them, powerless against their great cannon! But Fang Yi was on the island! What if she were killed in the process? Or had an arm or a leg blown off by a cannon-ball? That would be most terrible. . . .

Here was a serious dilemma. How to destroy the Mystic Dragons, and yet preserve the lovely Fang Yi unharmed.

Trinket sent for Shi Lang, to hear his plans for the attack. Shi brought a large

map with him, which he spread on the table.

This' he said, pointing to a speck in the middle of the sea, 'is Snake Island.'

It had been circled in red, and there were three red arrows converging on it, from the north, east, and south. Trinket was most impressed.

'You've worked it all out, haven't you!'

'I thought a three'pronged attack would be best.' (It seemed to Trinket that Shi Lang was rather partial to three'pronged attacks!) 'We leave the west coast of the island unthreatened. We pound them with the big guns, and the bandits will

turn and flee. They'll automatically think of escaping from the unthreatened west coast. That's where we'll catch them. See here-ten miles west of Snake Island, another smaller island.' He pointed on the map. 'We'll have twenty or so

smaller ships lying in wait here, and the bandits will

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flee straight into their arms! There will be a signal from one of the big guns, and the rest of the fleet will encircle them. Then we've got them!'

Trinket clapped his hands enthusiastically.

'Excellent! Excellent kungfu!'

'I want you, Colonel, to take a detachment of men and pitch camp on this little island. Your job will be to provide a solid command post and liaison centre.'

'Crafty!' thought Trinket to himself. 'You know perfectly well that I'm scared shitless by this whole attack, so you're putting me on a nice little island well out of harm's way. If the lot of you get wiped out, I can still make a quick getaway. Excellent! Suits me perfectly.'

He congratulated Shi Lang once again on his skilful strategic planning.

'My thinking was this, Colonel' knowing you to be a great warrior, the slayer of the mighty Oboi and so on, I was concerned that you might get too carried away

in the heat of battle. I could never forgive myself if the slightest thing happened to you. I already owe you so much.'

Trinket sighed convincingly.

'It's true, I was really looking forward to being in the thick of it. Hoping I could be the first to get my hands on that Mystic Dragon Leader chap. Kill him in single combat. But I suppose I'd better go along with your idea.'

He paused for effect, then continued'

‘I happen to know that there are a hundred or so young ladies in that Sect. And some of them were actually abducted from the Palace. His Majesty has given orders that they are to be taken alive. So you’ll have to be very careful where you point your big guns. If one of these young ladies gets killed by mistake, HM will be extremely displeased.’ Shi Lang replied’

‘Most obliged to you, Colonel, for tipping me off about the ladies. All female persons to be taken alive and brought directly to yourself.’

‘That’s right. And this is to be kept top secret. Understood”

‘Absolutely.’

The fleet proceeded in a north’easterly direction, into the wind, and was only able to make slow progress. But gradually they came

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closer to Snake Island. One day Shi Lang pointed to a small island off to their left.

That is the island where you are to make camp, Colonel. The place has no name as

yet; I thought perhaps you might like to give it one.’

Trinket scratched his head.

‘I’ve never been much good at things like names. In fact I’m not much good with

words at all. Let’s think though. What am I any good at’ Cards. All right.

Suppose we’re playing a game of cards, I’m the dealer, you’re the fellow to my left, I win, I clean you out. ... I know! That’s it! The main object of our "game" is to wipe out those Dragons, to make a clean sweep of Snake Island.

Why

not call the place Sweep Island’ No, that’s no good. . . . Well, what about

food’ I like food. Suppose this is a meal. After all, war is a bit like a meal.

Then, the whole object of the exercise is to eat the Dragons! Dragon Fu Yung!

We’ll swallow them whole! Just munch up whatever comes our way. Take pot luck-

that’s it! Let’s call it Potluck Island. Not bad! Don’t you think”

Meatball, and other Floating Objects

As the fleet headed for Poduck Island, a sailor cried out from one of the smaller boats’

‘Floating body ahead!’

Shi Lang went to inspect, and reported back to Trinket that the floating corpse

that had been sighted was bound hand and foot. At first sight it looked like the work of pirates. Some unfortunate navigator had probably been stripped of everything and tossed into the sea. But even as he was saying this, another sailor's voice rang out to report two more floating corpses, to starboard. Shi Lang went off again to inspect. This time he returned with a new hypothesis that they were all three members of the Mystic Dragon Sect.

'Why do you think that?' asked Trinket.

They look big strong types, the sort to have done a certain amount of kungfu training.'

'I wonder if perhaps there's been some sort of fighting among the Dragons' Trinket mused aloud. 'A civil war, or some such thing.'

The wind's blowing from Snake Island, so the bodies most probably floated from there,' was Shi Lang's comment. 'Well, my Colonel, as you said, war is a bit of a meal. If there is a civil war

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going on, they'll be like stewed beancurd! They'll slip down a treat, nice and soft. We'll just have to take pot luck!'

Trinket stared at the horizon (apparently unaware of Shi Lang's heavy-handed attempt at humour), but however hard he stared it was too misty to make out Snake Island. He did however become aware of yet another strange object bobbing

about on the water. Not so much a body, more like a big bloated football. And it was gradually getting nearer.

'What the devil is that?' he asked.

Shi Lang stared at it too.

'Very odd . . .'

He sent a small boat to fish it out of the water. As the boat got closer, the officer in charge yelled out'

'Another floating corpse! But this one's very short and very round!'

'Oh no!' thought Trinket. 'Not him again!'

'Bring it up here and let me have a look at it!' he ordered.

Three sailors heaved the fat spherical creature out of the water, and dumped it dripping on the deck. As with the other floating corpses, its hands and feet were bound with leather thongs. Trinket took one look and recognized it at once

as Thin Dhuta. He'd been fat enough to start with; now he was all bloated and even more like a big ball than ever. Sea water was gurgling out of his mouth.

After a minute or two, his great belly started heaving, and he seemed to be breathing again.

‘It’s alive!’ cried the sailors. Shi Lang yanked him up, and propped him against one of the fore’deck bollards. His head slumped forward, and the gurgle of sea water coming out of his mouth became a gushing torrent. Then suddenly he leapt

to his feet, screaming, ‘Hot popping twatnots!’, toppled over, and ended up sitting on the deck. The sailors started in alarm, then burst out laughing. Thin Dhuta struggled to break his bonds, but the thongs were tighter and stronger than ever from their long immersion in sea water, and his efforts were to no avail. He shook his head from side to side, and a glazed look came over his eyes.

‘Hot momma’s . . . where am I’ In Heaven or Hell” ‘Dragon Heaven,’ replied Trinket, with a grin. ‘And I’m the Dragon King.’

The sailors all laughed. Thin Dhuta peered at Trinket. ‘You’ What are you doing here”

Trinket was nervous that Meatball might be about to betray one or two of his own personal secrets.

‘This thing,’ he announced, ‘may well possess useful information on the Mystic Dragons. Have him taken to my cabin at once. I shall interrogate him personally.’

Two of his guards escorted Thin Dhuta to Trinket’s cabin. Trinket instructed them to wait outside.

‘So’ he began, ‘tell me, Meatball, what’s a classy fighter like you doing all trussed up in a watery place like this”

It transpired that at one of the Mystic Dragon struggle’sessions Madame Hong had denounced Meatball’s lover the Old Whore (Mao Dongzhu, the Fake’Empress Dowager), who had as a result been condemned to confinement in the Dragon’s Lair (Sect’speak for the island equivalent of the Satrap’s Black Hole). When Meatball had leapt to her defence, he had been clobbered and set adrift on the ocean.

Thin Dhuta’s face was positively exploding with fury as he told the story. He looked fit to burst. If Trinket would only set him free, he swore that the first thing he would do would be to bounce straight back to Snake Island and rescue his lover.

‘What a gallant fellow you are!’ exclaimed Trinket. However, what he was thinking to himself was’

‘Here’s the perfect chance to locate the Old Whore myself and take her back in chains to the Emperor!’

‘But on the other hand,’ his thoughts ran on, ‘is it really safe to set this little package free’ He’s such a dangerous individual, and a mean fighter. Setting a tiger free is child’s play; catching him again is no joke! I’d most probably just get bitten in the process.’ Thin Dhuta interrupted his train of thought’ There’s one thing on my side. All hell’s been let loose on the island at present. It’s civil war. That’ll make it easier to rescue her.’ Trinket asked him to explain what this civil war was all about, and Thin Dhuta obliged.

The Five Branches of the Sect are all at each others’ throats. It’s been going on for over a week now. If anyone gets captured, they tie his hands and feet together with leather thongs and dump him in the sea. Food for the Water Dragons.’

‘But what are they fighting about’ asked Trinket.

Thin Dhuta turned his fat face towards Trinket and squinted at him through his piggy little eyes.

‘I thought Dongzhu’-(that was how he referred to the Old Whore’ for to him she was a real, lovable human being, with a name)-’told me you were supposed to be the White Dragon Marshal, with your own Five Dragon Disc and everything’ How come you don’t know what’s going on”

‘I’ve been away all this time on a top secret mission,’ replied Trinket (truthfully for once).

Thin Dhuta suddenly gave a great cry, a strange, strangled sound, and Trinket stepped back aghast. The guards outside heard it and, fearing for their Master’s safety, burst into the cabin, swords in hand. But all they saw was the fat creature sitting on the ground, his hands and feet still tightly bound.

‘Off you go! Everything’s all right!’

Trinket dismissed them with a wave of the hands and they returned to their post outside the cabin door.

‘What was that dreadful noise all about’ Trinket asked Thin Dhuta, when they were alone again.

‘I’m finished, done for! I suddenly realized. You’re one of the Leader and Madame Hong’s men, and I’ve gone and told you everything!’

Trinket laughed.

‘You’re not finished! In fact, I’m the one who saved you from the water. Would you like to go back in there, and do some more gargling’

‘Oh no! That salty water tastes ho’rrrrrr’ible!’

Then be a good Meatball, and tell me what they’re all fighting about.’

‘Well, when Dongzhu and I got back to the island, they’d already been at it for quite a few days. Apparently the Blue Dragon Marshal, Xu Xueting, was found murdered one evening. They discovered a bloodstained dagger hidden beneath the

floorboards in his room. The murderer turned out to be a young disciple of the Red Dragon Marshal, Rootless the Taoist. The Comrade’s name is He Sheng.’

All these names were bringing back to Trinket the full horror of his first initiation into Mystic Dragon politics. His immediate reaction was to assume that the murder had in fact been carried out on the instructions of the Leader. But then Thin Dhuta went on to say’

The Leader was very upset and angry about it all. He Sheng refused to confess to

the murder. The upshot was that the members

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of the Blue Branch wanted revenge, and they killed He Sheng. And then it turned

into a free’for’all between the Blues and the Reds.’

‘What about the other three colours’ I thought you said they were involved in this mess too’

‘Somehow or other, the Blacks supported the Blues, and the Yellows supported the

Reds. They just all started laying into each other, and it turned into an orgy of killing.’

‘What about my Whites’

Thin Dhuta stared at him incredulously.

‘Don’t you even know what your own people are doing’

‘I told you. I’ve been away. I haven’t been on the island.’

‘The Whites split into two factions. The older ones supported the Blues, and the younger ones supported the Reds.’

Trinket frowned.

‘Surely the Leader didn’t let them get away with all of this killing’

‘He just couldn’t stop it. Everyone’s blood was up.’

Smoke Signals and Big Quns

Even as they were talking, they felt the boat come to a standstill, and heard the sound of sailors shouting, chains rattling, and anchors being dropped. They had clearly reached Potluck Island. Trinket went up on deck, and surveyed the terrain. The island was covered in lush vegetation. It seemed hilly, and not unattractive. He called out to Shi Lang’

‘Snake Island is crawling with snakes. You’d better send a party ashore to check this island out for wriggly things too.’

Shi Lang acknowledged this order and ten small rowing’boats were dispatched towards the island.

Shortly afterwards a smoke signal went up from the woods, which meant that all was quiet, there were no traces of enemy occupation, and no nasty signs of serpent life.

The first detachment disembarked and began erecting their commanding officer’s tent on the shore, complete with official regimental flag, embroidered with the character WEI. Trinket and Shi Lang proceeded ashore, to the accompaniment of trumpets, a three’gun salute, and a ceremonial ‘hurrah!’ from the assembled troops.

Trinket entered his tent with the dignity expected of a Colonel

of the Valiants, and ordered his guards to take Thin Dhuta and confine him in a tent of his own, to provide him with food and wine, but on no account to untie his leather thongs. In fact they were to reinforce them with lengths of wire cable.

The time had come to issue Shi Lang with his official orders to launch the three’pronged attack on Snake Island. A reserve fleet was to lie hidden to the west of Potluck Island. At a prearranged signal from Snake Island (from one of the cannon), they were to sail out into the open sea and intercept the fleeing Dragons. The details for this pincer movement had all been carefully thought

through.

The officers and sailors present at the issuing of these battle orders were deeply impressed by their young Colonel's total command of the situation.

Little

did they know that every element in the plan had been worked out by Shi Lang.

Trinket was just playing the part of a very convincing ventriloquist's dummy.

They all had an excellent eve of battle dinner. As night fell, the ships set out. The attack was set for dawn the next day.

At first light, Trinket climbed his hastily constructed lookout, and scanned the eastern horizon. He could hear faint gunfire in the distance, and see the flashes of exploding shot and puffs of smoke escaping across the surface of the sea. Shi Lang had already begun his assault. Trinket's first thought was for the safety of the delectable Fang Yi. But he consoled himself that Shi Lang was a highly skilful and precise operator, and that his orders had been very clear: no women were to be killed.

When he returned to his tent, Doublet tried to raise his spirits. 'Our troops are sure of victory, Master! Who could be a match for those dreadful big guns of ours!'

Even as she said this, there was another burst of cannon fire. This time it seemed louder. Trinket jumped to his feet and threw his arms round Doublet. 'Hear that! Now you can't deny that's a brilliant achievement! That definitely deserves a kiss!'

He gave her two kisses on the back of her neck. 'What lovely white skin you've got!' he cried playfully. There was a loud burst on the bugle. Trinket ran out of his tent and back up to the lookout. Three tall columns of smoke were rising into the sky from Snake Island. The entire island was soon wreathed in a pall of black smoke. He could see the occasional boat heading across the water in the distance, but as yet no sign of the rout anticipated by Shi Lang.

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In which Trinket falls once more into Mystic Dragon Hands; travels North with Doublet, and crosses the Ice to Albazin; meets a Beautiful Princess and is taken to Moscow; and finally Returns

Unfamiliar Valiants

An hour or so later one of his guards reported that five boatloads of prisoners had been sighted making their way towards Potluck Island. Trinket jumped up excitedly and rushed down to the shore. Though they were barely within hailing

distance, he told the guard to find out what kind of prisoners the boats were carrying and, from the exchange of shouts that followed, learned that this batch were all female prisoners; the males were coming up behind.

‘Good for Shi Lang!’ he thought. ‘He’s been as good as his word.’

Already he saw himself reunited with the lovely Fang Yi. It would be nice if the Old Whore was among the prisoners as well. And the seductive Madame Hong’ he wouldn’t mind having her on board as his captive, just to look at her from time to time.

But when finally the boats were pulled ashore, all of the two hundred or so dejected young women who disembarked, many of them wounded or with their clothing in tatters, were members of the Red Dragon Branch; and though he scrutinized the face of each girl as she stepped ashore, none of them turned out to be Fang Yi.

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Both disappointed and anxious, he asked an officer if there were more female prisoners to follow.

The officer answered that probably there were’ the present batch were the survivors of a futile attempt to board the warships made by thousands of young fanatics who had rowed out in little boats after the first bombardment of the island. Most of them had been blown out of the water, drowning with a war cry on

their lips’ ‘Victory to the Leader!’ or something of the sort.

‘Victory to Our Great Leader!’ Trinket corrected him. The officer looked at him in surprise. His young commander appeared to be remarkably well informed.

‘Just so. After that’ he went on, ‘the rest of them made a dash for the west side of the island. We put three companies ashore to flush them out, but it was a very slow business, because of the snakes.’

Trinket looked at the prisoners again. He saw the sorry state they were in and wondered if Fang Yi had survived the bombardment. Looking at them this second

time, it suddenly struck him that one of them had a face he had seen before.

Then he remembered’ it was the Red Dragon girl who had pinched his cheek and

teasingly inquired if he was the ‘love child’ of Fat Dhuta that time nearly two years ago when he was himself a captive on Snake Island waiting to be taken to the Leader. He now got some of his own back by subjecting her to a gruelling interrogation, from which it emerged that Fang Yi, now a platoon leader in the White Dragon Branch, had been seen on Snake Island alive and well after the bombardment. Trinket was about to conclude the interrogation with a kick when

the approach of another batch of prisoners was announced and he dashed off again

down to the shore.

This time, a small war'junk was sailing towards the island. Presently he could make out three or four young women standing in the bows, one of whom he felt sure was Fang Yi. From another shouted exchange, he learned that this was a mixed batch of male and female prisoners. As the junk sailed closer, there was no longer any doubt' the figure in the bows really was Fang Yi. She suddenly recognized him and called out'

Trinket, Trinket! Is that you''

'Fang Yi! My darling!' he shouted back rapturously. 'Yes, I'm here!'

Just then one of the sailors on board cried out that they were running aground, and the junk began slowly turning about.

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Trinket, save me!' Fang Yi called out piteously, as the junk began to pull out to sea again.

'Don't worry!' Trinket shouted back. 'You'll be all right, my darling. I'm coming to you.'

He jumped into one of the skiffs that was waiting at the water's edge and told the four sailors manning it to row as fast as they could towards the junk. As the men started to row, Doublet came running, seemingly out of nowhere, and jumped in after him. By the time the junk had turned fully about, the four sailors, by rowing with all their might, had brought the skiff alongside and Trinket called to the soldiers on board the junk to release Fang Yi from her bonds. Standing in the stern of the skiff, he waited for it to be manoeuvred round until only a few feet of water separated him from where Fang Yi was standing; then, he took an almighty leap and landed in her arms.

Last time he had been on board a ship with Fang Yi, Trinket had still, in physical terms, been a mere boy. He had experienced much since then, and now,

pressed against her soft body and inhaling its delicious perfume, he clung to her with an adult passion. The long, blissful moment of that embrace was interrupted for Trinket, first by a choking sensation as someone gripped his collar from behind, and then by a sharp pain in the middle of his back. Simultaneously a saccharine voice was cooing in his ear'

'White Dragon Marshal, how nice of you to come! And how clever of you to have

brought all those people with you to destroy our island!'

Trinket recognized the voice of Madame Hong.

'Damn!' he thought. 'Idiot! Idiot! That little whore Fang Yi has tricked me once again!'

Fang Yi let go of him then and stepped aside. As she did so, his legs gave way beneath him and he found himself sitting on the deck. She had closed his points.

He called for help, but none was forthcoming. Above him he could see that the sailors were running up another sail. The skiff with its oarsmen was already thirty yards behind. As the junk sailed briskly northwards, the voices on the shore were gradually growing fainter. Soon they would be on the open sea where none of the main fleet, who did not yet know that he was missing, would be able to overtake them.

He looked about him in bewilderment. Several officers of the Valiants stood round him grinning, but he was feeling dizzy and it

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took some effort to bring their faces into focus. Finally he could make them out' the round, chinless face of Thin Dhuta, the cadaverous, horse'like face of Fat Dhuta, and the ascetic, lean face of Doctor Lu. He saw that Madame Hong, too, was dressed as an officer of the Valiants.

'Well, little man,' she said, 'quite a dangerous fellow aren't you, for one so young!'

Trinket was totally confused. Thin Dhuta must have been released by the other two, but what were they doing here' They were supposed to be waiting for him in

Peking. What on earth could he do to save himself now'

'Long Life to the Leader and His Wife!' he said weakly. 'Blessings be on Them!' Desperately, for he could think of nothing else, he fell back on flattery. After inquiring solicitously about the Leader's health, he congratulated Madame Hong

on looking younger than ever; and he proceeded to enlarge on this with even grosser flatteries, eliciting a complacent giggle from Madame Hong but so enraging Thin Dhuta that in the end he burst out angrily' 'How dare this impudent little lecher utter such impertinencies in the presence of the Leader's

wife”

Trinket told him that he was too stupid to be worth replying to; to which Thin Dhuta retorted that he was not so stupid as Trinket, who had failed to see that his imitation of a floating corpse was an effect achieved by kungfu, and that the story of civil war on the island was a fabrication. Both had been part of a plot which the Leader himself had devised to ensnare Trinket and into which Trinket had blindly walked, like the gullible ninny he was.

Again Trinket cursed himself for his own idiocy in not having seen through Thin

Dhuta’s corpse act. He had, after all, witnessed in the past some of the bizarre kungfu feats Meatball was capable of. But Trinket was never very long at a loss for words and, after insisting that it was by no means stupid to fall in with the plans of the all’wise, all’seeing Leader, he returned to the safer subject of the miraculous youthfulness of Madame Hong. This developed into a wrangle

with the two Dhutas, in the midst of which there was the distant sound of cannon. Doctor Lu, noticing a sudden gleam of hope in Trinket’s eyes, put a stop

to the discussion by suggesting that they should forthwith throw him into the sea.

‘No’ said Madame Hong. The Leader has something to say to him.’

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To be forced to see the Leader would be worse than drowning. Trinket looked round him wildly, catching sight as he did so of Fang Yi’s face, stony and unmoved.

‘Congratulations!’ he said bitterly. ‘The Leader really ought to promote you for this!’

‘Come!’ said Madame Hong, and Doctor Lu grabbed hold of Trinket from behind and carried him, head down and feet in the air, towards the entrance of the cabin, the others following.

An Artful Customer

Inside the cabin the Leader was sitting in state with the Red, Yellow, Blue, and Black Dragon Marshals standing stiffly on either side of him. Still suspended, Trinket began singing out, almost as soon as his head "was in the doorway, ‘Long

Life to the Leader and His Wife! Blessings be on Them!’

Doctor Lu dropped him on the floor and he and the two Dhutas intoned the same

words, though without the bit about 'His Wife'. The Leader gazed through the cabin window at the sea, giving no indication that he had heard.

Trinket's mind was moving rapidly. Attack is the best form of defence' begin with an attack-The Art of War again. He turned to Thin Dhuta with a convincing show of anger and surprise'

'What a liar you are! I thought you said that the Marshals had started a rebellion. You told me that the Leader and his wife were in terrible danger. That's why I threw up everything else, hoping I'd be in time to save them. But now it turns out that nothing you told me was true.'

The Leader shifted his gaze languidly from the horizon. 'You were saying something' he inquired icily. 'I faithfully carried out your orders,' said Trinket. 'I infiltrated the Palace; and I managed to get hold of five of the Eight Sutras you wanted.'

'Five' The Leader's slightly raised eyebrows seemed to indicate a measure of curiosity.

The two that I've already sent you, which you praised me for getting, and three more that I brought back from Satrap Wu's place in Yunnan. I've hidden those in a very safe place in Peking. I had a pretty good idea how I could lay my hands on the remaining three, so I thought I would go off and get them first and then let

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you have all six of them together. I told Fat Dhuta and Doctor Lu to guard them safely while I was away. I told them they were under no circumstances to leave the place where I had hidden them!'

'You never said a word about guarding sutras,' the two men protested indignantly.

'Don't lie' said Trinket. 'You saw me hide them inside the wall.'

'We did not.!

'How can you trust these men' said Trinket, turning from them contemptuously

and addressing the Leader. 'Every day, first thing when I got up in the morning and last thing before I went to bed at night, I would pray for your good health.

"Long Life to Our Leader" was always on my lips. I never once heard these men

say those words, all the time we were away. They don't know the meaning of loyalty.'

'He's just lying to save his skin,' Doctor Lu protested. 'He's responsible for the deaths of hundreds of our young Comrades and for wrecking the work that it

took our Leader decades to achieve. How can such a criminal be believed?"

'We are to obey the Leader whether he tells us to live or die' said Trinket.

'It's not for us to question his plans. How do you know that this wasn't all part of a much greater plan than anything

you can imagine?"

The Leader stroked his beard contemplatively. The idea of the young Marshal praying for his health night and morning in faraway Peking had been a pleasing

one; but he made no reference to Trinket's remark and addressed himself rather

coldly to Doctor Lu. 'What exactly were your grounds for saying that an attack on our Sect was, from the start, the object of the White Dragon Marshal's commission?"

From Doctor Lu's reply Trinket learned what he ought long ago to have guessed'

that the Doctor and Fat Dhuta had received instructions to spy on his every movement and report on them to the Leader. They had noted his meetings with Shi

Lang, the ex'admiral from Taiwan, and had eavesdropped on some of their conversations. When Trinket set off with Shi Lang and insisted that the Doctor and Fat Dhuta should stay behind, they had examined the contents of his waste'paper basket and found tom'up scraps of paper with Chinese and Manchu

writing on them. They pieced the scraps together and made out the names of several places in Liaodong. Snake Island was off the coast of the Liaodong peninsula.

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When they heard that the ships were carrying cannon on board, it seemed obvious

that the purpose of the naval expedition must be an attack on the Mystic Dragon

Sect.

'Madame Hong has spoken of the White Dragon Marshal's loyalty' Doctor Lu said in

conclusion, 'but I'm afraid his loyalty is a sham. He is a black'hearted villain, a traitor who intends nothing but harm to our Sect.'

‘You think you are wiser than the Leader and Madame Hong’ said Trinket. ‘They both know that I am loyal, but you think you know better. As a matter of fact, the official purpose of the expedition was to sacrifice to the sacred mountain of the Manchus in Liaodong, but the real purpose was a secret which the Emperor said I was to keep strictly to myself.’

‘And what was that’ asked the Leader.

‘Up to this moment I haven’t breathed a word of this to anyone’ said Trinket, racking his brains to think of something plausible to say, ‘but the Leader is a hundred times more important than the Emperor. If the Leader asks me to unseal my lips, my lips are unsealed.’

The Leader nodded and stroked his beard. Trinket’s flattery did not strike him as excessive.

The Emperor has two red-haired foreigners at his Court. One of them, Father Tang’ (Trinket was referring to the Jesuit priest Adam Schall) ‘has an important post on the Board of Astronomy.’

‘I have heard of this Tang Ruowang’ said the Leader. ‘He is a man of many sciences, a great astrologer.’

The Leader knows everything!’ Trinket made tutting noises expressive of amazement. ‘Well, Father Tang discovered from his calculations that a great country to the north of Liaodong called "Losha" is likely to do great damage to our Empire.’

Trinket noticed, with great satisfaction, that the Leader seemed to prick his ears up at the mention of ‘Losha’ (which was how Russia was known in Chinese at that time). The Mongol Hatiemo whom they kidnapped in Yunnan had spoken of an alliance between the Satrap, the Mystic Dragon Sect, and Russia. He was beginning to feel that he was almost home and dry.

The Emperor was very worried. When he asked Father Tang what he could do to prevent this, Tang did a lot more calculations and told the Emperor that he had worked out that the Dragon Line controlling Losha’s fate ended in Liaodong

itself, between a

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mountain called Ham'and'Eggs and a river called Armoury, or something like that.

I can't pronounce them, but the Emperor wrote them down for me afterwards in

Manchu and Chinese writing.'

The Leader and Madame Hong knew the geography of the area and exchanged amused

smiles to hear Trinket's distortion of familiar names.

'Father Tang said that if the Emperor sent ships with cannon on board to bombard

the dragon with at a certain time and in a certain way when it came down to the sea to drink, they could prevent Losha from doing us any harm for the next two hundred years. He couldn't promise any more than that.'

Trinket's ideas about fengshui were extremely vague and what he was saying would

have made little sense to a Chinese expert; but the Leader reflected that

Western fengshui must be quite different from the Chinese science; and the bit about two hundred years sounded very plausible, because it was common knowledge

that Tang Ruowang had narrowly escaped Death by a Thousand Cuts (Lingering

Death) because his reformed calendar had only been designed for the next two hundred years, whereas everyone knew that Great Qing was due to last for ten thousand.

The cannon and warships were made ready' Trinket continued, 'the Emperor appointed a defector from Taiwan called Shi Lang who was experienced in the use

of cannon at sea to share the command with me, Father Tang chose a lucky day,

and we set sail from Tianjin with instructions to take a roundabout route and slip up to the coast of Liaodong unseen. We were still on our way when we ran into a lot of floating corpses. Well, not all of them turned out to be corpses'

one of them was this fat fellow here. I had him picked up out of the kindness of my heart, but in return he told me a pack of the most dreadful lies. He said he was from the Mystic Dragon Sect on Snake Island which was now in a complete shambles. He said the Leader had had the Blue Dragon Marshal killed-'

'I didn't' said Thin Dhuta.

'Don't interrupt when someone is speaking to the Leader', said Madame Hong.

‘Did you or didn’t you say that the Blue Dragon Marshal had been killed” said Trinket.

‘Yes, the Leader told me to.’

‘I suppose the Leader might have said something like that as a joke’ said Trinket, ‘but the Leader is kind’hearted and always fair.

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He would never do some of the things you told me. For instance, you told me that

he’d had the Blue Dragon Marshal and the Red Dragon Marshal killed out of sheer spite, to get his own back.’

‘Lies’ said Thin Dhuta.

That the Leader is kind’hearted and always fair”

‘Lies, lies, lies,’ said Thin Dhuta mechanically.

‘And would do nothing out of spite”

‘Lies, lies.’

As well as being more hot’tempered than his two companions, Meatball was also

much less intelligent. Doctor Lu feared that his repeated interruptions would provoke the Leader’s wrath and quietly did his best to restrain him. There was a

brief silence during which Thin Dhuta’s heavy breathing was distinctly audible.

‘Well’ said the Leader, ‘and what else did he say”

‘He said that you deliberately stirred up trouble between the Red Dragon and Blue Dragon Branches and set them fighting each other.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Will you shut your fucking mouth’ said the Leader. ‘If you interrupt once more I shall slice you in two.’

No one present had ever heard him use such language before, or even betray that

he was angry. There was a terrified silence and Thin Dhuta's face became purple from the effort of keeping quiet.

Trinket was now free to embroider as much as he liked. Thin Dhuta had told him

that He Sheng, the disciple of Father Rootless the Taoist, the Red Dragon Marshal, had been named as the assassin of Xu Xueting, the Blue Dragon Marshal.

Calculating that, as the Taoist's favourite disciple, he must be young and probably quite good-looking, he added that Thin Dhuta had told him that prior to

the assassination He Sheng had for some years been the secret lover of Madame

Hong. Shocking. Trinket said he understood Madame Hong's outrage at hearing

this' he had himself been unable to resist several times striking the mouth that could utter such obscenities. As Thin Dhuta wasn't at liberty to speak, Trinket generously suggested that he should nod or shake his head. Had he or hadn't he

said these things' The unfortunate Meatball didn't know whether to nod or shake.

This ploy could be made use of indefinitely. For example, Thin Dhuta had said that the Leader had engineered dissension among the different Branches so that

all of them, Blue, Red, Yellow, Black,

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and White, had ended up fighting each other; but he had not said that in the course of this civil strife the Leader's beard had been torn out and that he had been suspended upside-down from a tree, or that Madame Hong had been stripped of

all her clothes and publicly humiliated. Trinket described these horrors in vivid detail. It was on account of the horrors, he explained, that he had ordered the flotilla to sail towards the island and bombard it, hoping against hope that the beloved Leader and his wife could yet be rescued alive. It was an inexpressible relief to arrive and find that they were perfectly safe and well and that the whole story had been a pack of lies.

The Leader appeared to be turning this over in his mind. Trinket wondered if he

hadn't perhaps overdone it a bit.

'I was so upset at the time and so worried that I could only think of rushing to support the Leader and Madame as quickly as possible. Looking back, I realize now that I ought to have known that the Leader, with his great wisdom and foresight, would never have allowed such a state of affairs to develop in the first place; and even if some people had been foolish enough to rebel, he would have crushed them like ants.'

The Leader nodded pensively.

'You are very ready with your explanations' he said, 'and what you say sounds plausible enough. But what I don't understand is, if you were so concerned about

my and Madame Hong's safety, why instead of leading an assault on the island yourself did you send your ships to blast it indiscriminately with their cannon while you were lurking safely in the background"

This seemingly unanswerable question was the one that Trinket had been dreading.

The whole ingenious edifice he had been labouring to construct, part truth part falsehood, now showed signs of collapsing; and if it did collapse he was as good as dead. For a short while he seemed at a loss for words, then a tearful expression appeared on his face.

'I deserve to die,' he said. 'I'm not really loyal at all. The fact is, I was just frightened. When I listened to Thin Dhuta describing all those horrible things they were doing to people on the island, I remembered how some of them

had threatened me after I sabotaged that plot against the Leader and Madame Hong

two years ago. If they ever got the chance, they said, they'd tear me apart with their bare hands. I was just scared, that's why I had the island bombarded
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and sent others in to rescue you while ' stayed out of harm's way in the rear. I'm so sorry, so sorry. I really deserve to die.'

The Leader and Madame Hong exchanged a long glance and nodded to each other. The boy was probably telling the truth if he admitted to being a coward.

'I'm not sure whether you're telling the truth or not,' the Leader said finally. 'We shall have to investigate. You know what will happen to you if we find out that you aren't.'

'Oh yes' said Trinket. 'Oh yes. I'd deserve anything you decided to do to me if

that were the case. But in the meantime, don't, I beg of you, put Thin Dhuta or Fat Dhuta or Doctor Lu in charge of me. They hate me. It was through their trickery that I bombarded the island. And I know that Doctor Lu has grand ideas of his own. He wants to be Leader himself. He was joking about it when we were in Yunnan.'

Speechless with fury, Doctor Lu was only prevented from striking Trinket by Rootless the Red Dragon Marshal, who parried the blow and sent him staggering backwards.

'Not in the Leader's presence, Doctor!'

Doctor Lu's face was deathly pale.

'Forgive me, Leader, for being so lacking in respect,' he said in a shaking voice, 'but this boy's lies are really more than I can bear.'

The Leader merely grunted and turned to Trinket'

'Get below, now! And you,' he said to Father Rootless, 'go with him and keep an eye on him. Don't let anyone hurt him, but don't let him wander about. And don't speak to him. You'd better be careful, he's a very artful customer.'

Through Ice and Snow

For several days after this Trinket was incarcerated in a cabin below deck with only Father Rootless for company and nothing to look at but the sun shining through a starboard window in the morning and a port'side one in the evening, from which he deduced that they were sailing steadily northwards. If he asked Rootless where they were heading, Rootless said he didn't know, and his attempts at starting a conversation were frustrated by Rootless reminding him that he was on orders not to speak. For a day or two he had some hopes that Shi Lang might rescue him, but these hopes soon vanished, and he began to feel very despondent and bored.

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Meanwhile the temperature was gradually falling. Father Rootless had cultivated

his own Inner Force and seemed not to notice it, but Trinket was soon shivering

with cold and his teeth continually chattered in his head. Waking up one night he heard the chink of ice against the ship's sides and cried out in alarm'

'What if it freezes solid and we're stuck in the middle of the sea'

'It doesn't freeze on the open sea' said Rootless, breaking his silence. 'We must be near the coast.'

'Is this Liaodong, then' asked Trinket, but got no reply.

First thing next morning he opened the cabin window and looked out. Ice floes covered with a thick layer of snow floated everywhere on the surface of the sea. Beyond he could just make out the line of snow-covered coast. Throughout the day

the junk made slow progress.

That evening they cast anchor, so it seemed likely that they would be going ashore in the morning. Trinket began wondering what his fate would be when they

did. How much of his story had the Leader really believed' He was still mulling over this question when he fell asleep and dreamed that Fang Yi was sitting beside him and shaking him. He reached out to embrace her, but she pushed him

away and told him not to fool about.

'But I want to fool about' he said.

The shaking grew more persistent.

'Master, we've no time for this. We must hurry.'

He woke now with a start. It was Doublet.

'How did you get here'

'I can't tell you now. We've got to go at once. We've got to get away.'

'Oh, it's freezing!' said Trinket. 'Get inside the covers and warm up a bit.'

'Master' said Doublet in an anguished voice, though she was speaking in whispers, 'please be serious. We've got to escape.'

'But where to' said Trinket.

'If we can get through to the stern, we can row off in the ship's boat. Without the boat they won't be able to pursue us.'

'Brilliant' said Trinket. 'But what about the Taoist'

'I've already closed his points. He can't move or speak.'

A blast of cold air struck him as she opened the cabin door. He turned back and felt his way to where Rootless was lying. While

Doublet waited, he stripped the Taoist habit off the recumbent figure and wrapped it round himself; then, hand in hand, they made their way stealthily to

the far end of the junk, where the skiff which served as landing'craft was floating somewhere below, fastened to the stem with a painter. As they were at anchor, everyone on board the junk including the helmsman was sleeping. So far so good, thought Trinket.

Til go first,' said Doublet. 'You must jump in after me, when I'm in the boat.'

She jumped down lightly into the skiff. Looking down fearfully into the blackness he couldn't see her, but he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and jumped. She was waiting for him with arms outstretched and broke his fall.

Suddenly a voice called out in the night' 'Who's there''

It was the Leader, who had just been woken from his sleep. Startled, the two of them crouched down in the bottom of the skiff, scarcely daring to breathe. There was the sound of a flint being struck and light streamed from the shutters of a cabin window. He must have got up to investigate.

'Who's that'' he called out again. 'Whoever it is, don't move!'

Doublet grabbed at the oars and began to row, but the skiff didn't move. In her panic she had forgotten to release the painter; but when Trinket stood up and reached for it, his hand touched freezing metal. It was a chain. Sounds of running and shouts could be heard from the junk. Already they had discovered that the White Dragon Marshal was missing. Ah, the dagger! It was still there in

his boot. He drew it out and slashed at the chain, which parted with a loud swish. Doublet could begin rowing now to some purpose, but the noise all this made had betrayed them. The Leader stood looking out from the open casement with

the two Dhutas and Doctor Lu standing behind. By the faint glow that the lights on board made on the ice and snow he was able to see where they were and took

aim at them with a length of batten hastily wrenched from the side of the junk; but the wood was too light and fell just short of the swiftly'retreating skiff.

'He's such a slippery little devil. I always said we ought to have finished him off when we had the chance,' said Thin Dhuta.

This was tantamount to criticism of the Leader, and not to be endured.

'You go and catch him then!' the Leader said, seizing him with both hands and

hurling him with immense force through the cabin

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window. He sailed like a human cannonball through the air and fell with a great splash into the freezing water only a few feet from the skiff. After bobbing up again he struggled towards it and managed to get hold of the gunwale with his left hand. Doublet raised one of the oars and hit him squarely on the head with it. It must have hurt, but he only grunted and got his right hand too on the gunwale. Panic-stricken, Doublet stood up and, holding the oar with both hands, hit him with it again, this time using all her strength. The oar broke in two, the skiff spun round at a right angle, and the fat man shook his head dizzily from side to side; but still he clung on. Only when Trinket slashed his right hand with the dagger and cut off four of his fingers, did he let go, threshing about in the water and yelling and cursing with pain.

Doublet took up the remaining oar and used it as a paddle, and Trinket found a piece of board on the floor of the skiff and paddled with it on the other side. Between them they managed to work up quite a speed and Thin Dhuta's yells and the cries from the junk faded away on the wind. But it took them the better part of half an hour to reach the shore.

Deer

Doublet jumped out of the skiff into the water, which came up to her knees, and pulled it by what remained of the chain on to the beach.

There,' she said, 'we've made it!'

Trinket jumped out. 'Oh, clever Doublet! This deserves-'

He wanted to start kissing and cuddling her to show his gratitude, but she reminded him that, even without the skiff, the Leader would find a way of pursuing them and that they must still make haste to get away. He looked about

him and frowned. Everywhere, as far as he could see in the darkness, was the same flat expanse of snow. What god-forsaken country was this?

'Which way shall we go, Master?' she asked.

He was shivering with cold. Even his brain seemed frozen. All he could do was curse 'Damn Fang Yi! Thanks to her we'll just freeze to death in this snow.'

'Well, it doesn't matter which way we go, let's just start running,' said Doublet. 'It'll warm us up a bit.'

So, holding hands, running and stumbling, they hurried forward as best they could. It was heavy going, because at each

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step they took their feet sank deep in the snow. Fear of the Leader kept them going, but each had the same heavy feeling' that he was sure to find a means of getting ashore and sooner or later would catch up with them

As they plodded on through the night, Doublet explained how she had contrived to

be present through all those days aboard the junk. Back at Potluck Island, he had been too engrossed with Fang Yi to notice her in the skiff behind him, and the others had been so intent on his capture that she had been able to slip on board unseen and stow away in the stern. Then after a bit she observed that the ship had been one of their own, and that many of those who manned her were dressed in the uniform of the Valiants, which she herself was wearing. After that she had occasionally shown herself, and had managed to get by without being

challenged until the junk began to draw near the coast and she realized that the time had come for them to try and make their escape.

By dawn they were already a long way from the sea and turned back to look. Behind them their twin tracks showed up very clearly in the snow, while ahead an infinite waste of snow stretched out on every hand.

'If we ran for ten days and nights in this, he'd still track us down,' said Trinket despondently.

'Look, Master!' said Doublet, pointing to a distant elevation in the snowy landscape. 'That could be a wood. If we could get in there, we'd be much harder to find among the trees.'

'It doesn't look much like a wood,' said Trinket. 'Still, we could try.'

Walking with what speed they could towards the elevation, it took them more than

an hour to reach the foot of it; but long before they arrived they could see that it was not a wood but a low, flat hill.

'If we walk round to the back of this, we might find some cover on the other side,' said Trinket.

They were already out of breath, but after walking for another half'hour to the back of the hill and finding that beyond was only more of the same endless, snow'covered plain, Trinket collapsed, exhausted, and lay on his back in the

snow.

‘Dear Doublet,’ he said. ‘I’m done for. I think I need a kiss to revive me!’

Doublet blushed. She was about to remonstrate, when a

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strange animal cry was heard from quite near them and a group of seven or eight

large deer emerged from a bend in the hill.

‘I’m starving,’ said Trinket. ‘Do you think you could manage to catch one’ Then we could have venison for lunch. That would be yummy!’

‘I’ll try,’ said Doublet.

She waited a few moments, then darted forwards to seize the nearest of the deer.

Almost as she did so the whole group jumped up in the air like a single animal and, turning as they jumped, bounded off at a speed that no human foot could equal.

‘It’s no good. I could never catch one,’ said Doublet.

But these were deer without experience of Man and therefore without fear of humans. They had only been alarmed by her rapid movement. They had halted after

running a little distance and now that she was not moving they turned round and

looked towards her inquisitively.

‘If you lie down and we both pretend to be dead, perhaps they’ll come up to us,’ said Trinket.

‘All right,’ said Doublet, and lay a few feet from his side.

‘I’m dead and buried and my old wife Doublet is dead and buried too,’ Trinket intoned as he lay on his back in the snow. ‘Our eight sons and nine daughters have come to the graveside to mourn for us.’

Doublet giggled and told him not to be ridiculous.

The deer is not a very intelligent animal, but these deer were very curious. A couple of them walked over slowly, bent down over the recumbent couple, and began snuffling at their faces.

To horse! To horse!’ cried Trinket jumping up and bestriding the deer that was sniffing him. To prevent himself falling off, he clung to its antlers. Doublet had been quick to follow his example and for a few minutes the two of them hung

on for all they were worth while the deer made unsuccessful attempts to throw them off.

‘Kill it with your dagger!’ said Doublet.

‘No, not yet,’ said Trinket. ‘Let’s stay on their backs as long as we can. That

way, we shan't leave any footprints and the Leader won't be able to find us.' And so they did. At first they greatly feared that they might become separated and lose each other; but deer are gregarious creatures, and the two who were carrying them stayed with each other and followed the rest of the group. In fact this group was part of another group which they presently joined, so that Trinket and Doublet found themselves riding in a herd of between fifteen and twenty animals. It was dreadfully bumpy riding and they were dizzy with hunger, having had nothing to eat since the day before, but they managed to hold out until the early evening, when the herd entered the outskirts of a forest.

'Time to get down now' said Trinket, reaching with one hand for his dagger. Still clinging to the antlers with the other, he drew it across the deer's throat.

The deer took a few more steps, stumbled forward, and fell down dead in the snow. Trinket himself collapsed and lay in the snow for a while, too weak with fatigue and hunger to move; then getting up painfully on his hands and knees, he crawled over to where the deer was lying, applied his lips to the gaping wound in its neck and began sucking. As the hot blood reached his stomach, he could feel warmth spreading round inside him, thawing his frozen body and revitalizing his spirits.

'Doublet, come and drink some too!' he called.

Resourceful Doublet, when she was sufficiently restored by drinking the blood, borrowed Trinket's dagger and cut a haunch from the dead deer. After skinning it, she hunted around for some sticks and some dry lichen and, using the flint lighter that she always carried with her, she managed after a few attempts to start a fire. Trinket helped her feed it for a while, and when it was hot enough, she set about roasting the haunch. Even if still half-done when they ate it, they were so famished that it seemed delicious; but when they had finished eating, Doublet began grieving for the deer.

'Poor deer!' she said. 'You saved our lives, and all we do in return is to kill and eat you!'

But Trinket took a more robust view.

'Why don't we stay here, Doublet' he said. 'We could become hunters and live

in
the forest as husband and wife.'

Doublet blushed, as she always did when he said such things.

'I'm your servant,' she said. 'Whether you're a great man in Peking or a huntsman in the forest, it makes no difference.'

That night they curled up beside their fire and in the morning they ate some more of the venison. When they had eaten their fill, Doublet removed the rest of
the deer's skin and, to replace the hat that Trinket had lost the day before in their ride, she made him a

crude cap out of two pieces of skin. She cut the "r" edges with the dagger and using thin strips of it to lace them together with. As provisions for the journey that lay ahead, they cut some more flesh from the carcass and attached as much of it as each of them thought they could carry by wrapping it in large pieces of deerskin and tying it to their backs with more thin strips of the skin.

The herd they had travelled with the day before had run off when Trinket slaughtered their fellow, but they had not walked very far that morning when they saw another herd of twenty or more deer among the trees ahead, all of them
with heads upraised, nibbling at the shoots on the lower branches.

'Let's see if we can get a lift again,' said Trinket, and walking step by step towards them, he slowly reached out his hand and began stroking one gently on
the back. The deer, showing no sign at all of fear or surprise, looked round and began licking his face.

'I think this one fancies me,' he said.

'Try getting on it,' said Doublet, and next moment each of them was astride a deer again, and the whole herd, startled by the sudden movement, began running,
including, of course, the two deer they had mounted.

In this way, sometimes riding on deer and sometimes walking, stopping towards
the end of each day to make a fire and cook some venison, and sucking the pure snow when they felt thirsty, they travelled through what seemed endless forest for more than a fortnight. It was a relief when they heard the sound of water

ahead and emerged from the trees to see in front of them a turbulent and swiftly moving river. They resolved to walk northwards, following the flow of the river.

Mountains and Rivers

They had already been walking along the bank for more than an hour when they saw three fur-clad men ahead of them, each carrying one of those long-handled tridents that huntsmen favour. Trinket felt a great happiness to come upon other humans after so many days in the wilderness and hurried forward to greet them.

‘Where are you bound for, brothers’ he asked them.

‘We go to Peony River. Where you go’

The one who answered was a man of forty or so and spoke Chinese with a very peculiar accent

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‘Oh’ said Trinket. ‘Which way’s that then’ We seem to be lost. Do you mind if we join you gentlemen until we get there’

The men seemed willing, so Trinket and Doublet travelled in their company. Along the way they conversed in snatches, but it was quite hard to understand what they said. The men belonged to the Tungus people, who were closely related to the Manchus. They were trappers and ginseng-gatherers and made their living by selling their ginseng and pelts at the big market on Peony River, which is where they had picked up their Chinese.

‘Peony River’ (or Mudan’jiang in Chinese) was the name of the river they had been following, but also the name that had been given to the market on its banks where the native Tunguses came to do business with the Chinese settlers. It turned out, when they got there, to be quite a large settlement, with shops and taverns as well as the very large open market. Trinket still had a big wad of banknotes on him and invited the three Tunguses to a tavern to have a drink.

While the five of them were sitting there drinking, Trinket and Doublet both overheard someone at the next table mention a familiar name’

‘ . . . You should have seen the one that a fellow brought back last month from Mount Khumarsk . . . ’

Trinket and Doublet exchanged glances’ it was definitely one of the places marked on the map. Glancing over his shoulder he saw that the speaker was one of

two old ginseng’gatherers discussing their finds. He called the waiter over, slipped him a piece of silver, and told him to fetch a large plate of sliced cold beef and two pints of baigar spirit and serve it to the gentlemen at the next table with his compliments. The two old men were a little mystified that the young huntsman in the fur cap at the next table should want to treat them, but delighted nevertheless, and in the ensuing civilities, in the course of which they were soon all sitting together, it was easy for Trinket to bring the conversation round to Mount Khumarsk, which the old men hadn’t been to but knew

the whereabouts of. It was, they said, many hundreds of miles north of Peony River. And when, at Trinket’s bidding, Doublet mentioned other place’names she

had memorized from the map, they knew them all-in some cases had even visited

them-and were able to say exactly where they were.

When the company had eaten their fill and had considerably more than enough to

drink, Trinket took a warm leave of his new

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friends and went out with Doublet to plan what they should do next.

Cossacks, and the Fort

The first thing was to get some new clothes. The remnants of military apparel they were wearing were not only conspicuous and quite inadequate for the climate, but in a pitiful state after their journey through the forest. What they needed was fur.

While they were looking for a furrier’s, Trinket was trying to think of some way in which he could keep permanently out of the clutches of the evil Leader. The eight little coloured circles on the map which had marked the place where the Manchu treasure was buried were near the meeting of two big rivers and Mount

Luding (The Deer and Cauldron Mountain)-one of the names Doublet had remembered

which the old men had heard of. It must, like the other places, be hundreds of miles to the north, too far for even the Leader to reach. If they could get

there and dig up just a little of that treasure, he and Doublet could live in comfort somewhere in the area and wait for the old wretch to die. He was an old

man and couldn't last for ever, in spite of all the 'Long Life' chants and suchlike flattery. He decided that that was what they would do.

'We'll go to that Deer and Cauldron Mountain and dig up some of the treasure,' he told Doublet. This was the first she had heard of any treasure, but she accepted what he told her without comment.

They found a furrier's shop and Trinket bought an expensive sable-lined gown for

each of them, which they changed into immediately. Then he bought a large wagon

and pair of horses and, after more shopping, when their preparations were finally completed, they set off.

The journey north was to take them several weeks. When the roads became impossible and finally gave out altogether, they were forced to abandon the wagon and advance on horseback. And finally, when even the horses could carry

them no further, they continued on foot. Doublet was able to recall every detail of the map, and by enquiring about the places named in it whenever they met a trapper or a ginseng-gatherer, was able to make sure that they were moving in the right direction.

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They were, by their calculations, not very far from their destination and were walking, hand in hand, through a small pine wood, when they heard what was unmistakably the report of a firearm. Trinket's instant reaction was to think that the Leader or his agents had caught up with him and to dart for cover inside a clump of bushes, dragging Doublet after him. But the shouts and cries they could now hear were not made by Chinese voices, as he could see when he peeped out through the bushes. They came from a group of ten or so Tungus hunters who were now running frantically across the clearing as if pursued. Several more shots followed in quick succession, and three of the hunters rolled over and lay still, their blood spreading out rapidly beneath them. This was instantly followed by a sound of hooves, and seven or eight foreign horsemen

in military uniform, tall, fierce-looking fellows with blue eyes and fair hair, came galloping through the trees, some of them carrying muskets and some wielding sabres, slashing and running down the wretched hunters until every one

of them was dead. Dismounting with shouts of laughter, they proceeded to gather

up the sable and silver fox pelts and anything else of value that the Tunguses had been carrying, all the time chattering away in some incomprehensible language; and having secured this loot to their saddles, they mounted their horses again and galloped away.

‘Foreign soldiers’ said Trinket. ‘They’re no better than bandits.’

‘Worse’ said Doublet. ‘Bandits wouldn’t be so cruel. Think of the wives and children of those poor huntsmen, waiting for them to come home.’

But Trinket was thinking about his friend Misty, the Emperor. What would become of him if an army of these thugs armed with invincible weapons joined Satrap Wu when he rebelled’

‘We must go back to Peking,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to see the Emperor.’

To Doublet this sudden change of plan when they were so near their destination seemed utterly incomprehensible.

‘What about Deer and Cauldron Mountain” she said weakly.

‘It must "wait for another time.’

Doublet was obliged to accept this, though she did not understand.

‘We don’t want to run into any more of these foreign bandits’ said Trinket. ‘We’d better find where the river is and look for a boat.’

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Emerging from the wood onto the open steppe, they walked in an easterly direction for the rest of the morning and arrived in the afternoon at the bank of a violent, foaming river from which, somewhere in the distance, they could see a fort.

‘I’ve still got plenty of money’ thought Trinket. ‘If we can get there I should be able to hire horses or a boat.’

They hurried on, hoping to reach the fort before nightfall; but after they had gone a couple of miles or so, the turbulent river they were following flowed into a much larger, more slowly moving one which was snaking its way from

the north'west across the plain. They could see now that the fort was situated on a slight eminence above this larger river. And just behind it was a much bigger hill. For an hour or so they walked beside the river towards the fort, then suddenly Doublet stopped and cried out excitedly 'Master, this is the Meeting of the Waters! These must be the two rivers on the map-the Argun and the Amur. Look' she pointed to beyond the fort, 'that must be the Deer and Cauldron Mountain!'

'Are you sure' said Trinket. The map only showed eight little circles. It didn't have anything about a fort.'

Just then they heard distant hoofbeats behind them and saw a troop of thirty or forty foreign cavalry come riding in from the south. Soon they were trotting along the river'bank; they were likely to spot Trinket and Doublet at any moment. In desperation, for this was open country with no cover whatsoever to be seen, they rolled down the river'bank and crouched behind a boulder out of sight. The cavalymen passed and disappeared eventually into the fort.

'Aiyo!' cried Trinket, jumping up. 'Damn! Damn! Damn!'

'What is it' asked Doublet. She had never seen him look so distressed. Those foreigners must have found out the secret of the Dragon Lines and the treasure' said Trinket. 'But how could they build a fort so quickly' And how on earth did they get to know about it' We burned the map soon after you pieced it all together. I must get to the bottom of this. There's something very weird about this fortress.'

'We can't do much about it' said Doublet. These foreigners are ruthless people and they've got those terrible weapons.'

Trinket thought of what they had witnessed earlier in the woods and shivered. 'We must wait until it's dark and they can't see us' he said.

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The Secret Passage

When they had eaten a little dried venison, they lay under the bank, making themselves as comfortable as they could, and rested; then, at about nine o'clock, they got up and began stealthily making their way towards the fort. It was a bright moonlit night and, as they drew nearer, they could see the huge stones and massive timbers of which the walls were made. Clearly this was no recent structure and had taken a long time to build. Trinket now felt sure that

the Russians who built it could not possibly have known about the map and its closely guarded secret.

He had not been reckoning with the moonlight and suddenly realized that the long shadows they were casting were making them an easy target for anyone on the walls with a firearm. He could see a wooden guardhouse on the south-east corner of the fort with a single window from which, through a chink in the shutters, a little light was gleaming. Pulling Doublet after him, he ran to take cover there and reconnoitre. As they crouched in the shadows beneath the window, they heard a little giggling laugh and looked at each other with the same unspoken question 'What was a woman doing there'

Trinket raised his head to peep, but the crack was too narrow for him to see inside. They could hear a murmur of two people talking, a man and a woman, punctuated with more little laughs. It was fairly clear what they were up to. Listening to them provoked amorous feelings in Trinket, who put both his arms round Doublet and tried to give her a kiss; but Doublet feared his untimely fooling might make a racket and pushed him off. This unfortunately had the opposite effect to the one intended, for the spot they were standing on was slippery with compacted snow and the movement caused Trinket to pitch forward, hitting his head with considerable force on the wooden wall and crying out in pain.

The talking in the guardhouse ceased instantly, and after a moment or two of expectant silence, a man's voice called out questioningly. Trinket and Doublet crouched down even lower, hardly daring to breathe. A few moments later there was the sound of a bolt being drawn, the wooden door opened noisily, and a man came out and stood in the doorway, holding up a lantern and peering to left and right. Almost without thinking, Trinket leapt up and plunged his dagger in the man's chest. His body went limp and he collapsed without a groan and lay still.

At once Doublet rushed inside. A moment later Trinket heard her call out in surprise'

'Where's the woman gone'

He dragged the man's body inside and closed the door. It was a Russian soldier,

in his uniform but without the breeches, the lower half of the body being

completely naked. He looked around. The room was bare except for a brick kang, a table on which a bear's grease lamp was burning, and a wooden chest. The only way out was the door, and there was no one in the rafters overhead. With infinite care and dagger poised at the ready he opened the wooden chest, only to find that there was nothing in it but a heap of furs, though he had been fully expecting a Russian woman with a pistol to leap out and fire at him. However, when he removed the furs, he found that the chest had a large square hole in the bottom. It was the entrance to a secret passage. This is where she's gone,' he said. 'We must try to catch her before she gives the alarm.'

Quickly removing his bulky fur-lined gown and still cautiously holding the dagger in his right hand, he let himself down through the hole and found himself in a passage which for a while sloped downwards and then levelled out into a fairly narrow tunnel, too low for anything but crawling to be possible. After advancing a few yards in the darkness, he heard a slight noise ahead and increased the speed of his crawling. The noise was much closer now. He reached out a hand and touched a smooth bare leg. It was the woman, for when he took hold of it, she let out a little cry. Trinket couldn't bring himself to stab her, so he slipped the dagger back in his boot. A hero isn't supposed to hurt women, and in any case he was curious to know what she would be like. He had seen quite a few Russian men by now, but never a Russian woman. This one must have been very strong, for when she found that turning in the narrow tunnel was impossible, she struggled on forwards, pulling Trinket after her. He managed to stop himself by bracing his feet against the tunnel's walls, but as he did so she slipped from his grasp and swiftly crawled on ahead. However, being small, Trinket could crawl even faster, and was soon almost on top of her and holding her round the waist with both his arms. She gave a little laugh, wriggled round, and tried to kiss him, but in the darkness only succeeded in kissing the tip of his nose.

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Princess Sophia

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They had reached, without knowing it, the other end of the tunnel, for

simultaneously they both became aware that they could raise their heads without bumping them. Trinket also became aware that the woman he was holding hadn't got a stitch on. He could smell the perfume on her body as she rose to her knees to embrace him. When Doublet, still crawling towards them in the tunnel, called out 'Master, are you all right', the woman stifled any response by kissing him passionately on the mouth.

He could easily have succumbed to temptation, but just at that moment a voice somewhere above them quenched any amorous thoughts he might have had, like a bucket of icy water poured over his head.

'We hurried to meet you here as soon as we heard that Your Excellency was coming to Albazin' said the familiar voice.

It was the Leader.

Trinket's first impulse was to escape, but the woman only held him tighter, murmured incomprehensibly into his ear, and pinched his cheek. Overhead a man's voice could be heard speaking in what was presumably Russian. This was followed by another voice speaking Chinese, clearly an interpreter'

'His Excellency the Governor greatly welcomes the visit of the august Mystic Dragon Leader and expresses his apologies for not having arrived sooner to meet him. He looks forward with very much pleasure to our fruitful collaboration in this great enterprise.'

Then the Leader made some complimentary remarks about the Russian 'emperor' and about His Excellency the Governor, which were followed by a lot more Russian in the other voice. It began to seem that the civilities in Chinese and Russian would drone on interminably. Desperate to escape, Trinket pleaded with the woman, speaking in a low voice in her ear'

'Look, it's dangerous here. We've got to get away.'

He was forgetting that she was unlikely to understand Chinese; but surprisingly enough she did.

‘Not move! Not move!’ she said. ‘Moving, can hear!’

He had heard the Jesuits speaking perfect Chinese to the Emperor in Peking, without the slightest trace of an accent. Her accent was atrocious!

He was glad that he was there, however, when the Leader began getting round to the purpose of his visit. He had come to

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advise the Russians that, as the northern approaches to the Capital were well’defended, an attack by the overland route through Liaodong would be much more costly than if they were to take the much longer sea route and make a naval attack on Tianjin.

Tamardy! This man is as big a traitor as Satrap Wu!’ thought Trinket. ‘Somehow

or other I must get back to the Emperor. If we had cannon lined up and waiting for them in Tianjin, we could blow these Losha foreigners into the sea!’

He listened again. This time the Leader appeared to be offering presents.

‘I’m afraid after our long journey this is all we have to offer Your Excellency’ one hundred orient pearls, one hundred sables, and one hundred catties of ginseng.’

At this point Trinket’s attention was distracted by the woman’s groping in a distinctly improper manner at his clothing.

‘Two can play at that game!’ he thought, and felt one of her breasts, causing her to let out a little shriek of laughter.

The laugh was clearly audible in the room above, but the Leader, supposing it not unusual for a person in the Governor’s position to have a woman concealed on

the premises, pretended not to have heard, merely making some excuse for breaking off the discussion with the suggestion that they should continue it next day, after which he politely took his leave, accompanied by the Governor’s Chinese interpreter.

Immediately following his departure there was a loud bang as the lid of a large chest immediately over their heads, just like the one from which they had

entered the secret passage, was thrown violently open, temporarily blinding them with light. Chuckling lubriciously and with careless unconcern, the woman stepped nimbly from the chest, picked up a gown, which she seemed to know would be there, and wrapped it round herself. 'Come out! Come out!' she called; and with much hesitation Trinket cautiously followed. 'One more!' said the woman; so Doublet, who had been hoping to lie in the tunnel concealed and only rush out if Trinket should need her help, was obliged to climb out too. She had with her Trinket's fur-lined gown, which he hurriedly wrapped around himself. The young woman had golden hair which came down over her shoulders, lively, greenish-coloured eyes, and a very fair

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complexion. In fact, she was extremely beautiful but for her nose, which to Trinket's way of thinking stood out far too prominently from her face. She was half a head taller than him. It was hard to judge her age, because she was the first foreign woman he had ever seen, but he guessed that she "was probably about twenty.

'You, leettle boy' she said, looking roguishly at Trinket. 'Feeling me, naughty Naughty boy!' She seemed very amused.

The Governor, however, (it was he who had thrown the lid of the chest open) looked like thunder and spoke rapidly to the woman in Russian. She answered him volubly in the same language, whereupon he suddenly became deferential and bowed several times. Then the woman spoke to him again and he went to the door, opened it, and called to the interpreter to come in again. The interpreter first listened to some instructions given him by the Governor in Russian and then addressed Trinket in Chinese'

‘The Princess and His Excellency want to know who and what you are.’

‘Is she a princess?’ Trinket asked incredulously.

‘This lady is Her Highness the Princess Sophia, elder sister of the Russian emperor. The gentleman is General Golitsyn, the Governor of Albazin. You’d better kneel’ said the interpreter.

She seemed a funny sort of princess to Trinket; but then he thought of Kang Xi’s sister, Princess Ning, and concluded that perhaps all emperors had sisters who were a bit crazy. He made her a very deep salutation in the Manchu style, kneeling on one knee and touching the ground with the knuckles of his right hand.

‘Pleased to meet you, Your Highness’ he said, smiling all over his face. ‘You’re as beautiful as an angel. There aren’t any ladies as pretty as you in China.’

The Princess knew enough Chinese to get the general idea of this compliment and was immensely pleased.

‘Chinese boy, very good!’ she said. ‘I give.’

She went across to a bureau and, taking some gold pieces from a drawer, she handed them to Trinket. Ten gold pieces. Trinket thanked her and, because the hand that gave them was so soft and white, he impulsively leaned down and kissed it. The interpreter was deeply shocked, perhaps not having yet learned that kissing a lady’s hand was, to a Russian, the height of good manners. It’s true that Russians kiss the back of the hand, not, as Trinket had done,

the palm; but the gesture was appreciated nevertheless and the Princess was quite ravished.

‘You leettle boy’ she asked, ‘doing what’

‘I’m a hunter’ said Trinket.

High Diplomacy, High Stakes

‘No, he’s not!’ a voice called out loudly from somewhere on the other side of the door. ‘That boy is an important minister at the Chinese Emperor’s Court.’

Don't believe a word he says!

It was the Leader, of course. This time Trinket was so scared that he lost his wits. Seizing hold of Doublet, he charged towards the door, as if the route to his destruction was the exit to escape. Needless to say, the door opened to reveal the Leader barring their way, who, when Doublet leapt at him and attempted to strike, easily parried a blow that would have put anyone else out of action and disabled her with a swift jab at her waist. As she sank with a little moan to the floor, Trinket automatically started on the usual litany of flattery and praise 'Long Life to Our Leader! Blessings be on Him! And how is Madame' Has she come too' . . .' But the Leader, not deigning to reply, simply picked him up by the collar and marched with him into the room.

'Your Highness, Your Excellency,' he said, 'I beg to inform you that this person is Trinket Wei' Viscount Wei, a minister in high favour with the Chinese Emperor, Deputy Commander of the Imperial Guard, Vice'Commander of Armies in the Field, and Imperial Plenipotentiary.'

This was haltingly translated by the interpreter.

The Princess and the Governor looked incredulous.

'Leettle boy' said the Princess laughing, 'not great minister. Minister, not true.'

'Permit me to show you proof' said the Leader, and turning his head, he called to someone in the next room 'Bring in the brat's clothes!'

Doctor Lu came in carrying a bundle, which he undid to reveal, somewhat the worse for wear, the uniform Trinket had been wearing on campaign, with all his insignia, including the peacock's feather and the yellow jacket. They were obviously his, because they would only have fitted a person of his size. Heaven knows how the Leader and his agents had got hold of them.

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'Better have him searched' suggested Doctor Lu.

'No need' said Trinket. 'I'll do it myself.'

He took out the big wad of banknotes from inside his fur-lined gown. Golitsyn knew about banknotes from his experience on the frontier. He took the notes from

Trinket, riffled through them and, having ascertained that they were all of a very high denomination, handed them back to him. He said something to the Princess in Russian, and for a few moments there was a brief exchange between

them. They were clearly impressed and believed that the boy must, after all, be a person of some consequence.

‘I must explain to Your Highness’ said the Leader. ‘The Chinese Emperor is very

young. He likes to have young people about him. And this boy knows how to suck

up to him. That’s how he’s come to hold these important posts.’

The Princess could understand most of this, but ‘suck up’ puzzled her.

‘What is "suck up" please’

When it was explained to her at some length by the interpreter, she beamed’

‘I like suck up.’ She turned to Trinket and asked him another question’

‘How old Chinese Emperor’

The Chinese Emperor is seventeen’ Trinket told her.

‘My brother, Tsar of Russia, also boy. Twenty’ said the Princess. ‘Not old man.’

‘You, young person’ said Trinket, pointing to the Princess, ‘he, young person’ (pointing to Golitsyn), ‘I’ he said pointing to himself, ‘Chinese great official, also young person. Very good. He,’ (he pointed to the Leader), ‘Chinese bandit, old man. Very, very bad.’

The Princess found this vastly amusing and broke into peals of laughter. Golitsyn, seeing her amused, joined in the laughter, though he was all of thirty. The Leader looked as if he would like to kill Trinket with a single blow, but dared not.

‘You Chinese boy big official come here, what do’ asked the Princess.

The Chinese Emperor heard that the Russians had appointed a great general as

governor in the East.' Trinket had too much to explain this time to be able to keep up his amusing attempt at pidgin. 'He knew that the young Russian emperor had a sister who was

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beautiful as an angel, so he sent me with gifts for the princess and the governor' two hundred orient pearls and two hundred catties of ginseng. Unfortunately on the way here I was held up by bandits who robbed me of all the gifts . . .'

The Leader could contain himself no longer. This was to accuse him not only of stealing the gifts he had just presented, but also of holding back half of what he had stolen. Trinket anticipated his reaction and dodged behind the Princess just as a wooden chair crashed down on the spot where he had been standing. Golitsyn forestalled a second attack by covering him with a pistol. The Leader knew that, against a firearm, all his great strength and skill were of no avail and retreated to the door.

This is all nonsense' he said. 'Her Highness must not believe the boy.'

Golitsyn put away his pistol and addressed a few words in Russian to the interpreter, who then translated them for the Leader'

'His Excellency says that the august Leader is not to distress himself. He knows that the boy is lying about the presents. Her Highness's visit to the East was a secret one which the Chinese Emperor could not possibly have known about. And

the Chinese Emperor would be most unlikely to send presents to His Excellency.'

The Leader was mollified, and when Golitsyn went on to ask for more information

about Trinket, gave a brief sketch of his career, beginning with the assassination of Oboi, taking the opportunity to blacken him as much as possible, and concluding with the suggestion that it would be greatly in Russia's interest to put him to death. He was the Chinese Emperor's favourite, and the Emperor's distress if he was eliminated would greatly assist the Russians in their campaign. All this was translated sentence by sentence into Russian.

Unfortunately for the Leader, in neither Golitsyn's nor Princess Sophia's case was his narrative having the desired effect. In the Princess' case, the more she heard of Trinket's enormities, the more she seemed amused. Golitsyn's reaction

was rather different.

‘Did you say he is the Chinese Emperor’s great favourite’ he said reflectively.

‘Oh, yes’ said the Leader. ‘A person so young would otherwise never have been given such responsibilities.’

The boy must not be killed’ said Golitsyn decisively. ‘We must write to the Chinese Emperor and demand a large ransom for him.’

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The Princess was delighted and planted a big kiss on Golitsyn’s cheek. Trinket thought he would make a start on the ransom himself, dividing his wad of notes

into three parts, one part of which he offered ceremoniously to the Princess and

one part to Golitsyn. The third part he put back in his inner pocket after extracting a one hundred’ael note from it and handing it to the interpreter.

When Golitsyn told the Princess what the notes were worth, she kissed Trinket on

both his cheeks and told him it was enough.

‘Tomorrow to Moscow we go back’ she said.

Trinket had no idea where Moscow was, but he told her he would follow a woman as

beautiful as she was to the moon. She nodded approvingly, sure that she would find this extraordinary boy an entertaining companion on her journey. But Golitsyn frowned. He was about to object, but then something occurred to him and

he smiled and nodded too.

‘Good. We’ll let you go to Moscow then,’ he said affably.

He waved a hand dismissively at the Leader, who was obliged to take his leave, glowering as he went at Trinket, who retaliated by pulling a face and sticking his tongue out at him.

To Moscow

Princess Sophia, unlike her younger brother, the Russian Tsar Theodore the Third, a twenty’year’old invalid who seldom left his bed, was an active, ambitious young person. Beautiful and emancipated, she had little use for conventional morality, and had dispensed her favours to most of the

better-looking noblemen at the Russian court. Her particular favourite, however, was Golitsyn, and when Golitsyn was sent out east to build the forts of Albazin and Nerchinsk and keep a watchful eye on the frontier, the Princess, partly from a curiosity to see something of the fabled Orient, and partly because she was missing her lover, had recently, on an impulse, made the secret journey to meet him in Albazin.

But though Golitsyn was the main object of her affection, she felt in no way inhibited from pursuing any other diversion that might come her way. One such was the unfortunate sentry whom Trinket had killed. While alone in the chamber she shared with Golitsyn, she had found the entrance to the secret passage he'd had made to escape by in case of emergency (a mutiny of the

garrison, for example), and had climbed in out of curiosity. Having found this man in the room at the end of the tunnel, she had at once set about seducing him.

Now she had got Trinket to divert her, and taking him at his word when he said that he was eager to follow her, she made arrangements for him and Doublet to accompany her on the journey back to Moscow.

They travelled, sometimes by troika, sometimes on horseback, with an escort of two hundred Cossacks. At first the days passed pleasantly enough with the Princess trying to teach Trinket a little Russian while at the same time improving her Chinese, and, as might have been predicted, the two of them were

soon lovers. But when they had already been journeying through the monotonous, snow-covered steppe for three weeks or more and Trinket, confident that they were now safely beyond Leader Hong's reach, asked hopefully if they would soon

be in Moscow, he was horrified to be told that it would take another four months to get there.

'Four months!' he said. 'It must be at the end of the world. By the time we arrive I shall be an old man!'

'You tired already then of me?'

It was clear that the Princess was offended. He had already learned something of

her temper and knew that if seriously upset she was quite capable of having him

beheaded on the spot. He hastened to assure her that he was blissful in her

company but merely frightened by the great distance.

‘I not allow you to go’ she said petulantly. ‘Reaching Moscow, you stay with me ONE YEAR, then to China go back.’

Trinket groaned inwardly. When he and Doublet were on their own, he had discussed with her the possibility of escaping and both had concluded that escape would be useless, as it would be quite impossible for them to get back to China on their own. On those vast empty steppes they would quickly get lost and

perish in the snow. At first he thought much about the Emperor and Satrap Wu’s

threatened rebellion, about Ah Kor in Yunnan and Fang Yi and all the others back

in China; but then the snow seemed to freeze out his memories and he became resigned and began to be cheerful again, devoting whole days at a time to storytelling and stupid Russian jokes.

Russian Affairs of State

A day finally came when they were approaching the outskirts of Moscow. Already

it was May; the weather was getting warmer and the ice and snow had melted. From

what he could see so far, Moscow, apart from its great walls and a few churches with onion-shaped domes, appeared to be a primitive, squalid place, not to be compared even with one of China’s small inland cities, let alone Peking or Yangzhou. He marvelled that during the journey the Princess had been constantly

harping on its splendours, and began to take a very contemptuous view of both Russia and the Russian people.

When they were about a mile from the city, some of the Cossacks galloped on ahead to give notice of the Princess’ arrival. After an interval a bugle sounded and a company of musketeers came riding towards them. The Princess observed that

all were wearing black plumes in their hats and had black bands fastened to their muskets-the symbols of national mourning. She rode up to the captain and

demanded to know what had happened. The captain dismounted and bowed’

‘Your Highness, it has pleased Almighty God to summon His Imperial Majesty to heaven.’

The Princess at once began weeping.

‘When did this happen” she asked.

‘If Her Highness had arrived four days earlier, she could have taken her leave of him’ the captain replied.

The Princess had known that her brother was not destined to live long, but was still grief-stricken to hear of his death, and bowing down over her saddle, she wept for him very bitterly. Trinket, of course, having gathered that the Russian Tsar was dead, rejoiced to think that the chances of a Russian invasion of China were diminishing. When she had sufficiently recovered herself, the Princess and

her train followed the company of musketeers into the city with her Cossack escort in the rear. At the entrance to the palace the captain dismounted and barred the way’

‘The Tsarina has given orders that Her Highness should retire to the Imperial Hunting Lodge outside the city.’

The Princess’ shock was quickly followed by rage.

‘What Tsarina” she shouted. ‘Who is this Tsarina to give me orders”

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At a signal from the captain the musketeers levelled their weapons at the Cossacks and made them dismount and lay down their arms. The Princess was furious.

‘Is this mutiny” she screamed.

The Tsarina feared that when you were back in Moscow you would be unwilling to

submit to the orders of the new Tsar, so she has ordered us to take you under our protection,’ said the captain.

The Princess was scarlet-faced with anger’

‘New Tsar’ Who is this new Tsar”

‘His Imperial Majesty Peter the First’ said the captain.

The Princess threw back her head and laughed’ ‘Peter is a child of ten, how can he possibly be Tsar’ I suppose the Tsarina you are talking about is his mother Natalia.’

‘Just so’ said the captain.

The Princess’ father, Tsar Alexius Mikhailovich, had married twice. Princess Sophia was one of several children he had had by his first wife. His second wife Natalia had only borne him this little boy, Peter.

‘Take me inside and I shall have this out with Natalia’ said the Princess imperiously. ‘My brother Ivan is older than Peter; they should have made him Tsar. What are the boyars at court doing? Have they all taken leave of their senses?’

‘Your Highness must forgive me, I am only doing my duty’ said the captain, and taking her horse by the bridle he began turning it round, so that it faced away from the entrance to the palace. The Princess’ fury knew no bounds. Never in her

whole life had she been treated so cavalierly. She raised her riding-whip and began lashing out wildly at his head and shoulders; but he dodged the blows, laughing, and jumped on his horse again. The musketeers closed round the Princess, Trinket, and Doublet, and trotted off behind the captain, keeping the three of them prisoners in their midst. By this stage there was no sign of the Cossacks.

When they reached the Imperial Hunting Lodge, in the countryside at some distance from the city, the Princess, Trinket, and Doublet were hustled into an apartment and a heavy guard placed on all the exits. The musketeers showed every sign of staying.

The Princess was by now almost demented with rage. She set about smashing up

almost everything in the room that could be broken, and when the chef on the lodge’s staff brought in wine and food for her dinner, she threw the lot in his face. She kept up this

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behaviour for several days; then, when she saw that there was no relaxation in the restraint placed on her freedom, she summoned the captain to her and demanded to know how long she was to be kept a prisoner.

The Tsarina’s orders are that Her Highness should reside here until the fiftieth anniversary of the Tsar’s enthronement. She will then be permitted to take part in the celebrations,’ the captain replied.

‘You mean you are going to keep me shut up here for fifty years?’ said the Princess.

The captain smiled. ‘I am already forty, Your Highness. No doubt in ten or

fifteen years' time I shall be retiring and another will take my place.'

The Princess felt a cold shudder pass through her, but forced herself to smile.

'But you look younger than that, captain. You are a very handsome man,' she said
in her most winning manner. 'Why be so formal' Why don't you come a little closer''

The captain bowed and retreated several paces.

'Forgive me, Your Highness, but I have orders not to do so. The Tsarina has said
that if any officer lays a finger on Your Highness, he is to be instantly beheaded and his post given to the next in command.'

The Tsarina knew her enemy and had taken every precaution against the Princess' wiles.

When the captain had gone, the Princess threw herself face downwards on the bed
and wept into the pillow, raising her head from time to time only to utter maledictions against the detestable Tsarina.

Trinket gives Counsel

The days went by and Trinket was beginning to find their confinement very hard
to bear. The Princess' tantrums continued unabated and the behaviour of the guards towards the two oriental foreigners in their midst was contemptuous and
insulting. As there was no point in trying to escape, he whiled away the time by telling Doublet stories he had picked up in the past from watching plays and listening to professional storytellers. One day as he was in the midst of a story about Monkey from The journey to the West, the

sounds of weeping and crashing furniture were becoming all too audible from the Princess' bedroom.

'I suppose I'd better go and talk to her,' he said, breaking off. 'What good does it do, her carrying on like this''

He put on a smiling face and went in to her.

'Don't cry, Princess!' he said. 'Let me tell you a funny story.'

‘Not want funny story,’ she said. ‘Want Tsarina in hell.’
 ‘What does "Tsarina" mean?’ Trinket asked her.
 ‘Tsarina, wife of dead Tsar.’
 ‘Oh,’ said Trinket. ‘We had one of them in China. I called her "the Old Whore". I found a way of getting rid of her. The Emperor was very pleased.’
 ‘How get rid of Russian Old Whore?’ the Princess asked.
 ‘I got rid of the Chinese Old Whore with some help from the Emperor,’ said Trinket.
 The Princess shook her head. ‘Not good,’ she said. ‘Peter very fond of mother.’
 At least she’s stopped misbehaving, thought Trinket. The Princess had got up and
 was pacing up and down on the carpet in her bare feet, frowning and thinking hard.
 There was once a woman in China who made herself Emperor,’ said Trinket.
 ‘She
 was called Wu Zetian. She had lots of good-looking men as her man-wives. I reckon you’ve got a lot in common with her. You ought to make yourself a Lady Tsar.’
 The Princess was delighted with the idea. She placed her hands on his shoulders
 and kissed his left cheek.
 ‘When I Lady Tsar, I make you man-wife.’
 ‘Oh no,’ said Trinket in alarm. ‘You couldn’t have a Chinese one. You could make
 me a great lord.’
 ‘Great lord and man-wife,’ said the Princess. ‘Now, how make me Lady Tsar?’
 Trinket knew nothing of strategy or statecraft, having always, in situations requiring such knowledge, relied on others, like Kang Xi, Songgotu, or the Helmsman, to tell him what to do. He was totally unqualified to answer the Princess’ question, yet she was waiting impatiently for an answer and showing dangerous signs that a tantrum was on the way.
 ‘You must give me a bit of time to think,’ he said, and went and stood by the window, gazing out vacantly and seeking for inspiration.

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All that he knew of Chinese history derived from the highly coloured, fictionalized accounts given in the theatre and the narratives of professional raconteurs. He turned over in his mind what he could remember of stories about
 the founders of various dynasties. The only thing they seemed to have in common
 was that each had involved a lot of fighting and bloodshed. He turned to the

Princess’

‘To be an Emperor you have to fight.’

‘Fight who?’ she asked.

The Russian Old Whore, of course.’

At that moment the captain, who must have been spying on them, burst into the room, grabbed hold of Trinket by the front of his jacket, and began jabbering at him in Russian. Then he hustled him from the room and, when they were outside, kicked him really hard in the bottom. He would have given him a second kick, but Trinket, angrier than he had ever been before, thought of one of the tricks that the Leader had taught him’ he somersaulted onto the captain’s shoulders so that he was straddling his neck from behind, at the same time pressing his thumbs against the man’s temples and holding a finger against each of his eyes. He didn’t know how to tell him in Russian that if he moved he would gouge his eyes out, so he just said, ‘Eyes, kill!’

The captain had enough wit to understand what he meant and offered no resistance.

‘Now, walk!’ said Trinket, and using his ears like reins, he steered him back into the room.

‘Shut door, pistol take!’ he shouted to the Princess.

Surprised and pleased, the Princess hastened to close the door, removed the pistol from the captain’s belt, and pointed it at him. Then Trinket jumped nimbly down from his shoulders, tied his hands behind him with his sash, and undid the belt of his breeches to tie his feet with. As he did so, the man’s breeches fell down. Trinket and the Princess both laughed, for he was wearing nothing underneath. The captain’s face turned scarlet and he was almost spitting with anger.

Just at that moment the door was pushed gently open and Doublet peeped in.

‘Are you all right, Master’” she said. Then catching sight of the captain, she

too burst out laughing.

But what were they to do now? The Princess, speaking in her fractured Chinese, pointed out that kidnapping the captain was

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not going to help them very much. For a moment Trinket was stumped. He had acted

in anger without really thinking about the consequences. Suddenly he had an inspiration.

‘Tell him to start a mutiny’ he said.

The Princess didn’t understand the Chinese word he used, so he said ‘Tell him, kill Tsarina, kill Tsar. You, make Lady Tsar.’

The Princess at first seemed a little startled, but then she looked pleased. She started talking volubly to the captain in Russian, then he answered in Russian and they appeared to be arguing. Trinket couldn’t understand what they were saying, but he saw the captain several times shaking his head. He bent down and

took the dagger from his boot.

‘If he won’t obey you, kill him!’ he said, waving the dagger under the captain’s nose; and with a deft stroke he cut off his left moustache.

The Princess laughed, but the captain cursed himself for not having searched Trinket more thoroughly.

What the captain had been telling the Princess was that his was only one of twenty companies of musketeers, and that even if he did start a mutiny, the other nineteen companies in Moscow, rather than joining in with them, would probably wipe them out. It cost the Princess a great deal of effort to explain all this to Trinket. In her demonstration she had need to use not only all of her fingers but also her toes. In the end she made it clear to him that by killing the captain he would accomplish nothing.

Tell him to call in the adjutant’ he said.

The Princess couldn’t see the point of this, but decided to do as he said.

‘Call for the adjutant’ she told the captain. ‘And don’t give him any warning, or I shall blow your brains out.’

The captain had no choice but to obey. Since he was tied up hand and foot, he shouted from where he stood that he needed the adjutant inside the room.

After a

brief interval there was a brisk knock and the door opened. Trinket had arranged

for Doublet to be waiting in readiness behind it and, as the adjutant walked inside, she stepped up behind him and immobilized him with a couple of jabs to

the spine.

‘Now’ Trinket said to the Princess, ‘tell him to kill the captain and start a

mutiny. Tell him that if he won't, we shall get one of the lieutenants to kill him.'

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The Princess got the idea. 'I want you to kill the captain' she told him in Russian. 'You are to take command in his place and after that carry out any other orders I shall give you. If you refuse to do this, I shall call in the senior lieutenant and tell him to kill you both. And I shall give the command to him. Will you do this for me'

'Undo the point for his top half' Trinket told Doublet, and when she had done so, he unsheathed the sword that the adjutant was wearing at his side and put it into his hand.

The captain began cursing and swearing, though the fear could be heard in his voice.

'Look' said the adjutant, who had never got on with the captain and didn't like the things he was saying, 'I haven't much choice but to kill you. If I don't, it's both of us, and there's no point in that.'

He took a swipe with his sword at the captain and succeeded in half-severing his head. The Princess took his hand, having satisfied herself that the captain was dead, and praised his loyalty. 'Sit down' she said. 'I want to discuss things with you.'

The adjutant frowned.

'I can't' he said. The foreign children have bewitched me.'

'Please' said the Princess looking towards Trinket, 'magic, make going.'

Doublet smilingly obliged. The Princess then told the adjutant that she wanted him to order the junior officers to come in, entering the room one at a time. She wanted to see the foreign child bewitch them, she explained.

When all six-three lieutenants and three ensigns-had severally entered the room and been immobilized by Doublet and were standing before her in a row, unable to move hand or foot, she addressed them as follows'

The adjutant wants to make me a Lady Tsar. We want to lead the men into Moscow and kill the Tsarina Natalia. Are you willing to help us”

The six men had known that something was dreadfully wrong when they entered the room and saw the captain’s body lying on the floor. Now, hearing this proposition from the Princess, they looked at each other with ashen faces, too horrified to speak.

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Mutiny

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All this talk of killing to make a new emperor had put Trinket in mind of the stories he had so often heard about the Ten Days of Yangzhou-the ten days of rape and arson and pillage perpetrated by the invading Tartars in his native city as a preliminary to the enthronement of a new Manchu emperor in Peking. Tamardy!’ he thought. ‘Why don’t we have a Ten Days of Moscow’ If we want a new

kind of Russian emperor, the more rioting we have here the better!’

‘Why don’t you tell the musketeers to go into Moscow and kill and burn and pillage to their heart’s content” he advised the Princess. Tell them they can all become lords or generals or something. Tell them they can have all the money

they want and all the beautiful women for their wives.’

This struck the Princess as an excellent idea. She told the adjutant to assemble the entire company of musketeers in the courtyard so that she could address them. When the men had assembled, she had the six immobilized officers carried

out and stood up facing them like a row of statues. Then she climbed on a mounting’block and began to harangue them in a ringing voice that all of them could hear.

It was a piece of rabble’rousing rhetoric that would have done credit to an impoverished revolutionary. There were fat merchants and idle nobles over there

in Moscow, living idle lives in their luxurious mansions. They dressed in silks and furs. They monopolized the beautiful women. They ate the choicest food and

drank expensive wines. They kept the finest horses in their stables, etcetera.

While they, brave men, sweated and bled for their country, were poorly paid, ate

wretched food, were subjected to every hardship, every inconvenience, etcetera,

etcetera. Was this just? Was it fair?

As this was all in Russian, there was not a word of it that Trinket understood; but the roar of 'Nyet Nyet!' that answered her question he understood only too well, having heard it rather more often than he could have wished.

The Princess went on to propose the remedy. They should go into Moscow and persuade their comrades in the other nineteen companies to join in their enterprise; tell them it was the express wish of the Princess Sophia, who was now their Lady Tsar, that

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they take all the gold, fine clothes, wine, horses, and beautiful women from the rich, idle pigs of the city. 'Have you the courage for this?' she asked. 'Do you dare?'

'We do! We do!' they cried.

The Princess knew that the vaults of the Hunting Lodge contained a large stock of the finest old vodka that was reserved for the exclusive use of the Tsars and their favourite boyars. She asked for it to be fetched up and distributed to the men. As bottle after bottle was emptied, the men's enthusiasm began visibly to

increase.

'Hurrah for the Lady Tsar!' one of them ventured; and soon all of them were cheering 'Long life to the Lady Tsar! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!' This was a word that Trinket didn't know.

He tugged at the Princess' sleeve. 'Tell them to kill the six officers,' he said in her ear. 'If they do that, they'll know they've got to go through with it' there'll be no turning back for them then.'

She nodded enthusiastically.

With vodka inside them the men were easily suggestible. Who was holding them

back from this brave undertaking, she asked them. She pointed to the six officers behind her. These are the ones who say you shouldn't do it.'

Two of the assembled musketeers-named Vobolsky and Chironov-with more of an eye

for the main chance than most, at once shouted enthusiastically 'Kill the buggers!', and a dozen of them with drawn sabres scrambled forward and swiftly hacked the unfortunate men to death.

'Off with you to Moscow, then!' cried the Princess. 'Tell the men in the other companies to join you. If any of their officers tries to stop you, kill him! If boyars, or generals, or ministers of state give you trouble, kill them! Their gold and silver, their wives and daughters are yours. Take them, and then set fire to their houses!'

The men dashed off to get ready, then, having mounted their horses, with their muskets slung on their backs, they galloped off, cheering wildly, for the city.

The Princess noticed the adjutant hanging back.

'You go, too,' she said. 'Don't be shy! See that the men don't quarrel with the other companies, but act together. Take a group you can trust with you into the Kremlin and arrest Peter and the Tsarina. Any treasure or pretty women you can find there, you have my permission to take.'

The adjutant brightened considerably at this, and, mounting his horse, galloped off to join the others.

Now that they had all gone, the Princess felt drained and sat down, exhausted, on the stone mounting-block.

'Let me help you inside,' said Trinket. 'You ought to lie down and rest.'

'No,' said the Princess. 'We'll go up to the watch-tower and see what happens.'

The Imperial Hunting Lodge had a high tower which a former Tsar, fearing that while he was hunting some rival might take advantage of his absence to start an uprising, had built as a lookout point from which to survey the city. The Princess, Trinket, and Doublet now climbed to the top of this tower and looked out towards the west. It was already dark and they could see the lights of Moscow in the distance. It all looked as tranquil and peaceful as on any other night and the Princess soon became impatient. However, after what seemed like several hours of fretful watching, they detected a growing patch of brightness in one part of the city. The fires had started! The Princess threw her arms round Trinket and kissed him. Soon several fires seemed to have broken out in

the west half of the city and a dull red pall of smoke covered much of the eastern half. The Princess clapped her hands. 'Killing now!' she cried delightedly. 'You, clever boy with plan!'

But as time went by and the number of fires increased, she began to worry. What would the next step be in the plan for her enthronement, she asked him. Alas! there was nothing in Trinket's colourful stock of folklore that would provide an answer.

'I suppose when they've pillaged enough, they'll just stop pillaging,' he said rather weakly.

The Princess frowned. She didn't feel that this really answered her question; but since, for the time being at any rate, there was nothing else to be done, the three of them descended from the tower and made their way to bed.

Trinket has another Cunning Plan

Next morning the adjutant arrived accompanied by a small group of other horsemen-the two 'enthusiasts' Vobolsky and Chironov among them-and announced that all twenty companies of musketeers had responded to the Princess' orders by engaging in a

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night of pillage. More importantly, the Tsarina Natalia had been killed.

'What about Peter?' she asked.

'Young Peter has been arrested and imprisoned in the wine cellar of the Kremlin.'

'Good! Good!' she exclaimed delightedly. (The word she actually used was khorosho, which sounds like 'harra shaw'.)

She became apprehensive when shortly after this another party on horseback could be heard approaching. But the adjutant reassured her. This was a delegation of ministers and other dignitaries, both civil and military, coming to invite her to be Lady Tsar. The Princess was now in raptures. Trinket stood high again in her estimation and she embraced and kissed him, twice this time, once on each

cheek.

What Prince Bodonich, the leader of the delegation, actually told her, however, was that the council of boyars were entreating her to take over control in order to restore law and order. No mention was made of the imperial title. The Princess, seemingly unaware of this omission, nodded smilingly in acceptance and asked whether or not Natalia, who was undoubtedly responsible for this deplorable uprising, was still alive.

‘Natalia was a threat to the security of our country’ the Prince replied. ‘She usurped the power of the state and was responsible for the death of loyal ministers. By the grace of God and to the great satisfaction of the Russian people she has been justly executed.’

‘Good’ said the Princess. ‘We shall go at once to the Kremlin.’

A horse was fetched for her and soon she was on her way to Moscow, nobles and musketeers riding in close formation about her, like swarming bees round their queen, leaving Trinket and Doublet all on their own in the deserted lodge. Trinket was indignant.

Tamardy!’ he said. Talk about throwing away the plank when you’ve crossed the stream! This Russian princess won’t have much use for us when she’s Lady Tsar.’

‘Were you hoping she’d invite you to be her Empress?’ Doublet giggled, dodging the threatened thumping.

But Trinket’s ill’humour didn’t last very long. It was early summer now and everywhere flowers were blooming and birds were singing. Though it wasn’t much like China, the countryside round the lodge was very pretty. With no one else to bother them,

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Trinket and Doublet, for the time being at least, were very happy. Seven or eight days had already passed in agreeable isolation when a small detachment of mounted soldiers arrived from Moscow with orders to invite them to the palace.

When they were in the Kremlin and Trinket had been conducted to the room where the Princess was, he found her in the midst of one of her rages. Her hair was flying wildly about her shoulders and she appeared to be attempting to demolish a piece of furniture by kicking it violently with one foot. On catching sight of Trinket her expression immediately changed to one of delight.

‘Ah, Chinese boy! Must quickly help with plan!’

‘Oh, you’re in trouble, are you?’ he thought. ‘So that’s why you’ve suddenly remembered me! Well, my dear, if you want any help from me this time, you’ll have to pay for it.’ But what he said was

‘What’s the problem, Your Imperial Highness?’

‘Me Lady Tsar’ she shook her head several times, ‘no, no! They no want.’

It took her rather a long time to give him a clear picture of what the situation was. It seemed that discussions about the succession had been going on in the Kremlin for several days in the course of which two parties had emerged’ Peter’s party, mostly older men who had held high office in the previous reign and who thought that with a young boy as Tsar the real power would be in their hands and they would be able to hold on to what they had got, and Princess Sophia’s party, mostly the discontented and ambitious, who thought there would be rich pickings and a chance of advancement for them under a completely new regime. There was no precedent in Russian history for a woman ruler, so the older, more conservative boyars had been able to make this a reason for opposing the Princess’ enthronement and the debate had raged back and forth without conclusion. What made it difficult and potentially dangerous to conclude was the fact that, although inside Moscow itself the Princess had the support of the musketeers, or stryeltsi as they were called, the opposition was able to call on the support of Cossack regiments outside the city.

‘You have plan?’ asked the Princess hopefully.

‘Of course’ said Trinket, though he hadn’t the faintest idea how matters of such great import could be settled; ‘but I need a bit of oil in the works to get me thinking.’

‘Oil?’ said the Princess.

‘I mean ... that is ... Look, you want plan, right’ You give me things, much, much things, I give you plan.’

‘Oh, this sort of oil for works. Very good. I marry you. Make man’wife. Like Tsarina.’

Trinket thought of the Princess’ body, covered with a down of minute golden hairs, and was not tempted.

‘No, that wouldn’t do. Very nice for me, I’m sure, but your Russian men would never stand for it.’

‘If not man’wife, you want what” said the Princess. ‘Ask anything, I give.’

Trinket laid out his conditions.

One. He must be given some high’ranking Russian office.

That was easy, said the Princess. She would make him a count and send him to govern the East Russian Tartars. He had a yellow face and a small, flat nose like theirs, so they would gladly accept him as their governor.

Two. She must renounce war with China and write a letter to the Chinese Emperor in Peking promising peace and friendship which Trinket would deliver for her.

The Princess had seen in the person of Doublet just how formidable even a young Chinese girl could be. A whole nation of grown men with such powers as these was not to be tampered with. Certainly there should be no war. Moreover she felt a sincere affection for this remarkable Chinese boy, whom she now embraced and gave a big kiss to prove it.

‘Is more oil for works” she asked him.

‘Nothing else.’

‘Now, plan’ she said.

But of course Trinket had no plan, and when he had ‘ummed’ and ‘ahed’ for quite

a while, there were signs of an incipient storm.

‘You cheat me, yes’

‘No, no, no,’ he said. ‘I’m just thinking.’ Which was true enough.

But then he had an inspiration. Hadn’t he once been told that when Kang Xi’s father Shun Zhi, who was still a boy at the time, was enthroned as the first Emperor of the new Qing dynasty, the real ruler was his uncle Dorgon, who was called the Regent’

‘If they won’t let you be Lady Tsar’ he said, ‘you could be a Regent.’

‘What is "Regent"’

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‘Well, a Regent is the one who has all the power’ he can have people killed, or beaten, or give them jobs, or money. Everyone’s afraid of a Regent. They do what the Regent says, not what the

Tsar says.’

The Princess thought this was very ‘harra shaw’ and put the idea of a regency to the leaders of her party, who in turn floated it at the general council of the boyars. The idea was an innovation, but most of them were willing to accept any sort of fudge that would avoid having a female Tsar, particularly when it was suggested that those who held high office in the past were to keep their jobs and emoluments, and that everyone who acquiesced in the new arrangement, whatever side they had originally taken, would receive promotion and generous awards. After a certain amount of discussion it was finally decided that there should be o, joint Tsars’ the Princess’ halfwitted teenage brother Ivan should

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be Senior Tsar, her ten’year’old half’brother Peter should be Junior Tsar, and Princess Sophia should be Regent and rule on their behalf.

Trinket Returns

Now that this was all settled, the Princess, or the Regent Sophia as she now was, felt deeply grateful to this little Chinese boy, but for whom, she now reflected, she might have been forced to end her days immured in some dismal nunnery. Trinket's knowledge of statecraft was nil, but she was beginning to look on him almost as a sage. At first he found this gratifying, but then he began to worry. 'I hope she doesn't decide that I'm indis-, indis-, I mean, that she can't do without me' he thought. 'Holy ting'a'lings! She might keep me here in Russia for ever!' He resolved to tackle her.

'My Lady Regent' he said, 'play things right, and you'll probably end up making yourself Lady Tsar anyway. There's just one thing you've got to do, though, to make it work.' 'What that thing' she said. 'Quick, tell!' 'You must show that your word is your wand.' (He could never get this right.)

'Wand' What wand"

'I mean, if you say you'll do something, you have to do it. Never, never go back on what you say. Word precious. No break. Then everyone trust you. Everyone obey you.'

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'Yes, yes, yes. My word very precious. Gold wand; diamond wand. No break.'

'Good' said Trinket. 'Now do you remember those two things you promised me'

'Yes, yes' she said.

And she was as good as her word. An Edict was promulgated in the name of the two

Tsars creating Trinket Count of the Eastern Tartar Region, and a great minister was ordered to compose a letter for him to deliver to the Chinese Emperor. A Russian ambassador was appointed to accompany him. He was to receive a great

number of precious gifts and to be reimbursed for the money he had given the Princess and Golitsyn in Albazin. And there were to be two companies of Cossack

cavalry to escort him on his journey east. After a fond farewell with the tearful Princess, the cavalcade set off some time in mid' June.

All that summer they were travelling across Russia. The weather was warm and sunny. Riding through the Siberian grasslands, mounted on a splendid horse, at

the head of the long train of Cossack cavalry, with his pretty maid Doublet

riding on his left hand and the blond-haired, blue-eyed Russian ambassador on his right, Trinket could be forgiven for feeling on top of the world. The ignorant Yangzhou urchin had played a part in history!

But you will search in vain for Trinket in the Russian records. You can read about Princess Sophia and the stryeltsi rising; but you could hardly expect a serious historian to believe the strange, rather disreputable facts that we have been recording.

CHAPTER 23

In which Trinket advises the Emperor on Affairs of State; and is sent on an Important Mission to Yangzhou

Trinket in Peking

Finally, after many months, Trinket and his Russian escort arrived in Peking. Prince Kang, Songgotu, and Trinket's various other friends among the ranks of the Manchu nobility were delighted (and not a little astonished) to see him back. Since his departure from Peking on his naval mission nearly two years earlier, nothing had been heard of him. Several expeditions had been dispatched

to ascertain his whereabouts, but no trace whatsoever was found. It had been assumed that he and his entire fleet had been swallowed up into the ocean.

Even

the Emperor had resigned himself sadly to the thought that his young friend had

perished. When news of his arrival in Peking reached the Palace, Kang Xi immediately sent for him.

He was visibly delighted to see Trinket safe and sound. He was also greatly comforted to see him in the company of a friendly Russian ambassador. The thought of the Russians forming an alliance against him, in league with Wu Sangui, had been among his principal preoccupations for some time. Trinket gave

a highly entertaining account of his Russian adventure, and Kang Xi

congratulated him on his precocious diplomatic skills in 'oiling the works', and enabling the Princess Sophia to become Regent.

The following day Kang Xi summoned the Russian ambassador to Court. During the

audience, the only person who could claim any competence as an interpreter was

Trinket. His own command of the Russian language, however, was extremely limited, and as the Russian diplomat became more and more voluble, and

embarked
on what sounded (from his rhetorical manner) like an excited Slavic eulogy of his Tartar host, Trinket had to delve deep into his bag of Trinketian tricks. He still remembered the lengthy Turtle Stele inscription that he and Doctor Lu had between them concocted on Snake Island, and managed to produce a mishmash of expressions from the inscription, cleverly adapting them so that they were appropriate to this new occasion. So the Russian ambassador ended up showering the Manchu Emperor with flowery (and rather Mystic Dragon'like) words of praise, wishing him endless 'Long Life and Blessings' and extolling more than once the 'awe with which His Majesty held sway over His subjects, and the magical power that He wielded over his realm . . .' From time to time Trinket glanced nervously at Kang Xi, but was pleased to see that the Imperial Countenance was receiving all this with apparent pleasure (little knowing that these words had originally been intended for the Great Leader of the Mystic Dragon Sect), and that the great Ministers of State were also nodding their heads wisely. What the Russian was actually saying, no one present had the faintest notion.

The ambassador then presented Kang Xi with a selection of superb Siberian sabre pelts, whose quality (and superiority to their own sable) was immediately appreciated by the assembled Manchu nobility. Trinket was entrusted by Kang Xi with the task of officially receiving these gifts, and of presenting the ambassador with suitable Chinese gifts in return.

When the audience was concluded, Kang Xi summoned Fathers Schall and Verbiest, and instructed them to converse with the ambassador. Verbiest, being Belgian, was able to communicate with the Russian in French, and made a point of impressing upon him what an enlightened ruler Kang Xi was.

The next day, Kang Xi gave orders for Schall and Verbiest to stage a cannon'firing display in the grounds of the Imperial Park to the south of Peking, and invited the Russian ambassador to attend

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the firing. The Russian was secretly impressed by the quality of workmanship, and by the accuracy with which the guns hit their targets. He asked Verbiest to communicate to the Chinese Emperor the earnest desire of the Princess Regent Sophia to enjoy cordial relations with China.

Once the Russian ambassador had taken his leave, and set off on his long return journey to Moscow, the Emperor reflected that in view of the important and highly statesmanlike contribution that Trinket had made to the establishment of the new Sino-Russian Entente, he deserved to be raised to a higher rank of the nobility. This was duly promulgated, and Viscount Wei became Earl Wei, First Class, with the right to wear the double-eyed peacock feather, an event that called for celebrations all round.

Trinket thought to himself that most probably Shi Lang and the others had not dared to report back, terrified of the consequences if they were found responsible for the disappearance of one of His Majesty's great favourites. They were most probably holed up somewhere on Potluck Island or one of the other nearby islands. He sent a couple of men to try and determine their whereabouts, and if possible to instruct them that all was well and they could return to Peking.

A Command Performance

One day, Kang Xi summoned Trinket to the Upper Library, and showed him three folded sheets of paper-Memorials to the Throne-that were lying on his desk. 'Who do you think these are from' he asked. 'Guess . . .'

Trinket of course had no idea. Kang Xi made three chopping movements with his right hand' three unmistakable executions. Trinket gave a little laugh. 'I know! It must be Big Traitor Wu and his two sidekicks, Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong. The Three Big Baddies! They sent them, didn't they.'

'Very clever guess. And what do you suppose they wanted to say'

That's a tough one! Did they all arrive at the same time'

'More or less.'

'Well, in that case, I should guess that they're all more or less up to the same mischief-'

'You wouldn't be far wrong.'

Kang Xi tapped the memorial lying closest to him on the table.

'This one here's from old Shang. He pleads that he's getting on in years, and

wants to retire to his family home in the northeast. When he retires (if I let him), he would like to leave his son Shang Zhixin in charge of Guangdong. Do you know what I wrote in the margin' "If Shang wishes to leave Guangdong, well and good. But that does not necessarily mean that his son is to take over from him." In other words, you call my bluff, I'll call yours. The other two, Satrap Wu and Geng, have both sent in memorials to the same effect. Suddenly everyone wants to retire.'

Kang Xi picked the two other folded sheets of paper from his desk.

'Here's old Wu's, and here's Geng's. Obviously they're trying me out. Putting out feelers, to see how I'll react. Both of them claim that they want to "retire". But really they're just seeing if I've got the guts to stand up to them. They're trying to intimidate me. They're in this together. You can tell from the wording.'

Kang Xi tossed the two memorials back onto his desk. He was clearly very angry.

'Why, it's disgraceful!' exclaimed Trinket. 'Anyone can see those aren't proper memorials. They don't really want to retire at all! They're declaring war. We should raise an army, capture all three of those traitors, and have their entire families-whoops, I mean, have all the men in their families executed! The womenfolk we'll give as slaves to your worthiest ministers.'

In his enthusiasm, Trinket had for an instant forgotten that the 'family' of the greatest traitor of the three, Satrap Wu, included the beautiful Peerless Consort, Chen Yuanyuan, and her adorable daughter Green.

'No' replied Kang Xi, 'if we attacked them openly, that would create a bad impression. My subjects would accuse me of being ungrateful to my great ministers. "He casts aside the bow once it has shot the bird," they would say. "He cooks the dog once it has caught the hare." I think I'll allow them to retire. See if they do go quietly into retirement. If they don't, then I can raise an army and crush them, with good cause.'

'Your Majesty's wisdom knows no bounds!' cried Trinket. An opportunity for showing off his histrionic talents had just presented itself 'It's just like a scene from an opera. Centre stage,

and sings' "Pray, which of my subjects Wu (painted face, big beard, costume

bristling with lots of peacock feathers) sings back' "Your humble servant Wu Saaaaaan'guuuuuuiiiii!" Lots of warbling and vibrato here . . . "Why, look up man!" cries the Emperor. "Why so downcast'" "My liege, I have committed an offence! I must needs confess!" "What offence, man' Speak up!" The Emperor begins to grow angry. The Satrap' "I never truly wished to retire! All I really wanted to do was to rebel" The orchestra starts to wind itself up. "Why you shameless rascal!" cries the Emperor. "Where is my Trusty General, Earl Trinket

Wei'" That's where I come shuffling forward and kneel before the throne. "Your humble general at your service, Majesty!" The Emperor hands me the tally' "Go forth, General Wei, lead an army of a hundred thousand men and crush the wicked

traitor and rebel, Wu Saaaaaan'guuuuuuiiiii!" More warbling. I take the tally

and sing' "My Emperor's word is my command!" And then I swing my leg through the

air and give Wu Sangui a boot right up the bum, and he is so badly winded he ends up pooing all over the stage and howling, "Oh woe is me! Oh lack a day!"

Trinket had Kang Xi in stitches. The Emperor hadn't laughed so much in a very long time.

Council of State

The next day Kang Xi held a dawn audience in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, to

discuss this whole matter of the Three Feudatories with his Ministers of State and Princes of the Realm. Trinket, although only a junior official, was asked to attend the audience by special Imperial Dispensation. Kang Xi took his seat on the Dragon Throne, and before him stood assembled the Princes of the Blood, the

Princes of the Second, Third, and Fourth Order (Beilehs and Beizis), the Grand Chancellors and Ministers of the various Boards- and, last and youngest of all (but by no means least), Trinket.

Kang Xi handed the three memorials to the Grand Chancellor of the Hall of Middle

Harmony, an elderly Manchu statesman by the name of Lord Batai, who simultaneously held the important post of Minister of the Board of Bites. He was

ordered to show them to all present, that they might tender their views on the best way to proceed.

It was Trinket's friend Giyesu, Prince Kang, who spoke first'

'Majesty, these "requests to retire" are clearly not meant in earnest.'

Tray explain,' replied the Emperor.

Prince Kang drew attention to obvious inconsistencies, which all pointed to the likelihood that these so-called memorials were in fact 'feelers', designed to test the young Emperor's mettle. Kang Xi nodded.

Another of his senior ministers, Wei Zhouzhe, the Grand Chancellor of the Hall for Protecting Harmony, an elder with white hair and a flowing white beard, spoke next, urging the utmost caution on the Emperor's part.

'I strongly advise that Your Majesty should in no way countenance these false pleas for retirement. To do so would merely goad them into unleashing the forces of chaos in our land. We would have a full-scale rebellion on our hands.'

He followed this up with several learned references to the Taoist classic *The Way and Its Power*, in which the ancient sage Laozi denounces all acts of military aggression as contrary to the peaceful motion of the Tao.

Kang Xi nodded.

Another of the Grand Chancellors, the Manchu Duikena, also pointed out that by accepting the resignation of the Three Feudatories, Kang Xi might be creating a dangerous power vacuum in the South and South-West, where for years Wu and his cronies (for all their faults) had kept the native tribes under control.

Several others among Kang Xi's elder statesmen spoke to the same effect. The consensus was that to accept the 'resignation' of the Three Feudatory Warlords of the South would be a rash move, likely to lead to civil war.

Trinket could only follow a limited amount of the high-flown language being used at the audience, but it was enough for him to understand which way the debate was tending. It was not at all the way he and Kang Xi had hoped. He caught his friend Songgotu's eye, and gave a barely perceptible shake of the head-meaning, 'I'm counting on you to speak out against all these people and their policy of appeasement.'

Unfortunately, Songgotu completely misunderstood Trinket's gesture. He assumed that Trinket was privy to the young Emperor's intentions, and that Kang Xi was

reluctant to confront the Satrap,

or to provoke him by willingly accepting his resignation. He therefore interpreted Trinket's shake of the head to mean, 'I want you to speak out against accepting the resignation.' Which is exactly what he proceeded to do. 'Satrap Wu and his associates are experienced and skilful generals,' Songgotu began. 'Supposing Your Majesty were to accept their resignations, and by so doing offend them. Suppose they were to raise the standard of rebellion in the five southern provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Fujian. Suppose other provinces were to join them. We would have an extremely difficult

situation on our hands. My advice is this. Wu and Shang are already advanced in

years. Let them die, and with them the rest of the older generation of their generals. Then, with them out of the way, we can make a move to retrieve control

of the South.'

Kang Xi gave a wry smile.

'Just the sort of cautious line I would have expected you to take.'

Songgotu chose to take this as a compliment.

The Grand Chancellor Tuhai offered his words of counsel next, among which was

the observation that if the Emperor were to allow Wu and his associates to 'retire' and move to the North, together with their substantial body of troops, he would then be obliged to station fresh troops of his own down in the barbarous regions of the South; and in view of the fact that the dialects spoken by the common people of Fujian and Guangdong were totally outlandish and incomprehensible to the Manchu ear, these new troops would undoubtedly have

great trouble communicating, which would lead to serious misunderstanding between the Emperor and the subjects he loved so dearly-etcetera, etcetera.

Trinket was beginning to panic. He knew (from their previous conversation in the

Library) that Kang Xi had set his mind on accepting the 'resignations' and on calling Wu's bluff; but his counsellors were too cowardly, not one of them was willing to support such a bold and decisive course of action. And he himself was much too junior and inexperienced to dare to speak out.

Kang Xi turned next to the Manchu nobleman Mingju, Minister of the Board of War,

and one of the up'and'coming statesmen of the time.

'What do you think, Mingju' This falls under your department.'

'Majesty, I hold your wisdom in these matters in the deepest
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respect' replied Mingju. 'I have myself given a great deal of thought to this question of whether or not to accept the so-called resignation of the Three Feudatory Warlords of the South. I can see both sides. It is an extraordinarily hard decision-'

Trinket held his breath.

'For several nights' continued Mingju, 'I have been unable to sleep. Then last night, I suddenly realized something fundamental, something that finally set my mind at rest, and enabled me to have a good night's sleep at last.'

'Well go on' Trinket muttered silently to himself. 'Let's hear it!'

'What I realized' continued the unruffled Mingju, 'was this. Your Majesty, in His great wisdom, has considered every aspect of this affair with penetrating vision. Nothing that we, Your humble ministers, may think or say can possibly compare with Your Majesty's far-seeing judgement in this matter. All we have to do is to obey, all we have to do is to serve, to put at the disposal of Your Majesty's plans-whatever they may be-our last drop of life's blood, our last ounce of courage, and victory will be assured, all will indeed be for the best in the best of all possible worlds . . .'

'Phew!' thought Trinket to himself. 'At last someone in this pathetic gaggle of old geezers has actually got things right! And boy, does this dude know how to lick the Emperor's dragon'arse! I could do with a few lessons from him myself. He'll go a long way, this one! Excellent kungfu!'

Kang Xi, meanwhile, was smiling at Mingju's little speech.

'I asked for your opinion, Lord Mingju; I asked for a plan, not a hero party.'

Mingju kowtowed.

'Majesty, my words were no exaggerated praise. They were a true statement of fact. At the Board of War, my colleagues and I have been aware for some time now of rumblings in the South. I have personally been racking my brains to come up with a plan of action that would enable Your Majesty to deal with the problem

smoothly and swiftly. But now I realize that I have been thinking incorrectly. My most basic assumptions have been wrong. You are the one who understands. You are the Son of Heaven, you are the earthly embodiment of the Star of Wisdom. Your orders are for us to obey. This is a most simple truth that has finally dawned on me with blinding clarity, Your Majesty!’

The other statesmen were secretly spitting at Mingju for a shameless sycophant,

but none dared to contradict him.

Kang Xi turned to Trinket.

‘Lord Wei, you have been down to Yunnan in person. Tell us what you think. How

should we deal with this problem”

‘Your Majesty’ replied Trinket, ‘there is one thing I remember very clearly from my trip to Yunnan. I remember the Satrap saying to me’ "If anything should happen, don’t you worry, you can only rise higher ..." I asked him at the time what he meant by anything happening, and he just said that I would know soon enough when the time arrived. Your Majesty, if there’s one thing I know for dead

certain, it’s that the Satrap is planning to rise up against you. There’s no question about it. That’s the thing that’s going to happen, I know it is. It’s only a matter of time. He’s probably got his own Dragon Robe all ready and hanging on a peg, waiting to put on when he sits on the throne. He sees himself as the Savage Tiger, and you as the Helpless Little Bird. I know he does. He more or less said so.’

Kang Xi frowned.

‘What do you mean”

Trinket promptly performed a series of kowtows.

‘Majesty, Satrap Wu said a lot of unrepeatable things-’

‘Come, come... There’s no harm in repeating them. After all, it wasn’t you that said them.’

‘Very well, Majesty. The Satrap has what he calls his Three Treasures. He told me all about them. And he said to me, that however much he loves his Three Treasures, there’s something about them that makes him unhappy.’

Kang Xi looked utterly bewildered by this. Trinket continued’

‘The first of his Treasures is a huge ruby the size of a pigeon’s egg. It’s deep red, a true chicken’s blood colour. He’s got it mounted on the very top of his favourite hat. He said to me, "This is a fine ruby, isn’t it’ Pity the hat isn’t something bigger. . .”‘

Kang Xi gave an audible ‘humph’. The assembled statesmen glanced nervously around. It was clear to them all that by something bigger Satrap Wu meant ‘an Imperial crown’.

Trinket continued.

‘The second of his Treasures is a white tiger skin with black stripes. In all my time here in the Palace, Majesty, I’ve never seen anything like it. The Satrap told me that this kind of tiger is very, very rare. So rare that it may only be seen once in a hundred years.

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The Founding Emperors of the Song and Ming dynasties each saw one; the Emperors

Cao Cao and Liu Bei each saw one, in the time of the Three Kingdoms. The Satrap

had this tiger skin spread on his big chair, and he said to me’ “Splendid skin, isn’t it’ Pity the chair isn’t something bigger. . .”

Kang Xi nodded. He was secretly chuckling to himself, and deriving a great deal

of amusement from this fanfaronade of Trinket’s, which he knew perfectly well had been made up for the occasion, purely to show Satrap Wu in an unfavourable

light. It was a typical piece of Trinketry, he thought to himself, to have made the mistake of calling Cao Cao an emperor. Anyone who had actually read the book

of The Three Kingdoms (as opposed to gleaning bits here and there from storytellers and operas, as Trinket had) would have known that the famous General Cao Cao died well before he could found his own dynasty. It was his son

who was the first to sit on the Wei Throne. This was precisely the sort of Trinketian carelessness that betrayed the whole performance.

Meanwhile Trinket was still in full swing’

‘The third of his Treasures is a screen made of mottled marble from Dali in Yunnan. The natural pattern of the stone looks just like a landscape, and in the foreground you can see a cute little bird, an oriole, perched on the branch of a tree, with a great tiger crouching beneath it. The Satrap said to me with a sigh’ “This screen is a true treasure, isn’t it’ But I always feel there’s something not quite right about it. The Bird is perched above the Tiger, and not the other way round . . .”

Kang Xi registered a mild protest, and reminded Trinket that all of this was no more than a figure of speech. It proved nothing. At no point had the Satrap actually mentioned rebellion.

‘Your Majesty is too generous. I only wish the Satrap was the sort of man to appreciate Your Majesty’s kindness. I wish he was capable of showing himself worthy of it in any way. I’m afraid all he is capable of doing is bribing everyone to say flattering things about him. He’s done it with every nobleman in Peking. He even tried doing it with me. See . . .’

This was the moment for Trinket to produce his trump card. He took an embroidered bag from inside his gown, and held it high in the air so that the characters embroidered on it in red silk were clearly legible-they read ‘Satrap of the West’. Then he emptied its contents on the floor for everyone to see’ pearls, priceless gems of

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every kind, jewelry inlaid with turquoise, pieces of jade-a dazzling heap of every imaginable kind of precious stone. Some of them had in fact been given to him by the Satrap; others were bribes given him by a number of different individuals. In the circumstances, no one there could possibly distinguish the one category from the other.

Kang Xi smiled.

‘Quite a little haul you picked up in Kunming!’

‘I should like to present all of this to Your Majesty, for you to distribute as you see fit.’

Kang Xi chuckled.

‘Come! These things are yours, they were given to you by the Satrap in person. How could I possibly give them away to anybody else.’

‘He gave them to me because he wanted me to lie to Your Majesty, to say all sorts of good things about him, so that you would play his game and refuse to accept his offer of resignation. But I am Your Majesty’s loyal subject, I can only speak the truth. I could never tell you a lie, not for a thousand bags of jewels as big as that one! Keep it all. Anything that belongs to the Satrap belongs by rights to Your Majesty.’

Kang Xi laughed.

‘Well, my loyal and trusty subject, I agree to redistribute these precious trinkets on your behalf! I hereby give them-to you!’

As he said this Kang Xi reached inside his gown and produced a little solid gold timepiece with a Western spring mechanism- the sort of gadget he had always been

fond of collecting from his Jesuit advisers.

‘And here’s a little Western "trinket" of mine to add to your collection.’

Trinket promptly kowtowed, took a few steps forward, and accepted the gold watch.

This protracted exchange between the Emperor and his favourite was enough to

make Kang Xi's real wishes abundantly clear to his assembled counsellors (which

had, of course, been Trinket's plan all along). They were no fools. All of them had (over the years) received substantial bribes from the Satrap, and many of those bribes had reached them via Trinket himself. If this information were to be placed before the Emperor now, the best they could hope for would be deportation; the worst they could fear was decapitation. As for Trinket's performance (the 'Three

Treasures', and all that stuff about 'anything happening'), they saw through that at once as the fabrication of a child. Supposing the Satrap had been planning an immediate uprising against the Manchu Throne, he would hardly have

chosen to give hints of his plans to the Emperor's juvenile envoy. But that wasn't the main point. Now that Trinket had said all this, no one would dream of

contradicting him. They would be extremely foolish to even think of doing so.

Mingju was the first to respond.

'Young Colonel Wei has demonstrated for us all his extraordinary strategic and diplomatic acumen, and I think we are all indebted to him for having insinuated

himself so effectively into the Satrap's inner sanctum, and for having extracted such vital information, information which is indeed of the first import in our present deliberations today.'

He was at it again. Trinket stifled a yawn as Mingju continued'

'We must congratulate Your Majesty on the great insight You exhibited, in selecting Colonel Wei to undertake his mission to Yunnan. Now we know what wicked intentions truly lie concealed within the Satrap's breast!'

Mingju had skilfully repositioned himself on the winning (that is to say, the Emperor's) side of the debate, and simultaneously provided most of his colleagues with a way out, while reiterating the Satrap's criminal intent. There was an almost audible ripple of relief in the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

Songgotu and Prince Kang (long-time friends of Trinket's) lost no time in giving their support to this new consensus, and before long everyone in the assembly was speaking emphatically in favour of accepting the Satrap's 'resignation'

(where minutes before they had been unanimous in opposing it). There was now even talk of confiscating the Satrap's property, and the faces of one or two present lit up at the thought of the spoils that might come their way if they were put in charge of that particular assignment. But their premature excitement cooled considerably when they remembered who it was they would be dealing with.

The Satrap was still (by the reckoning of some) the most powerful man in China.

You might well find that before you actually succeeded in confiscating a stick of his, he had taken steps to confiscate, sequester, and separate your head from your shoulders.

Kang Xi let them talk for a while amongst themselves, and then he spoke'

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'Very well. We are au agiccu Ui^ ^.'''

evil course of action. But as yet we have no tangible proof. We must be cautious. What we have said here today must go no further than these walls. We

must give him a chance to see the error of his ways.'

Kang Xi produced a scroll of yellow paper and handed it to Lord Batai.

This is my Edict concerning this matter. Pray read it out loud.'

This Batai did, interjecting at appropriate intervals exclamations of wonder at the elegance and force of the Emperor's prose, which emulated that of the great prose masters of the Tang and Song dynasties. He went on to invoke the names of

several of these masters' Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan, Ouyang Xiu, and Su Dongpo. The

drift of the Edict was simple' His Majesty was pleased to accord to his loyal subject Wu Sangui the right to retire to the North in his old age and enjoy the fruits of a lifetime's loyal service.

The assembly was fulsome in its praise of the Edict, Tuhai drawing attention to the Emperor's generosity in offering to provide the Satrap with a residence in the Capital, thereby relieving him of the bother and expense of building himself a mansion of his own.

Kang Xi commented'

'It is my sincere hope that Wu will accept this offer of mine, and that my people will be spared the consequences of a conflict. I shall select two senior ministers to convey this Edict to him personally in Yunnan. They must be men

capable of being very persuasive.'

All eyes turned automatically to Trinket. He felt extremely uncomfortable.

After

all, he reasoned with himself, his previous visit to Yunnan had nearly ended in catastrophe. If he were to try his luck again, and this time as the bearer of an Edict, which for all its elegance was quite clearly a challenge, why, he would be asking to have his head chopped off. But then again, if he went, he might have a chance to see Green. . . But then again, on reflection, even the prospect of that pleasure did not cancel out the undesirability of losing his head. . .

Mingju observed that Trinket's face had turned somewhat pale, and correctly deduced that he was not an enthusiastic candidate for this assignment.

'Your Majesty,' he declared, 'undoubtedly the person in many ways most qualified

for such an important task would be Colonel

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Wei. Unfortunately, his deep-seated hostility towards Satrap Wu disqualifies him

in this instance. He might find himself, out of loyalty to Your Majesty, incapable of mollifying this villain's evil intentions. Instead I propose that Your Majesty send Jerken, Chief Secretary at the Board of Rites, and Senior Academician Darli. Both are men of great culture and refinement, and would I am

sure acquit themselves admirably in this task.'

Kang Xi was only too pleased to go along with this proposal.

Now that the whole thing was settled, the ministers felt a sense of great futility about their earlier reluctance to take a firmer stand against Satrap Wu. Clearly, appeasement had never been the Emperor's intention; his mind had

been made up from the very beginning. He had even come to the meeting with an

Edict already prepared. Most of them managed to get in a few concluding remarks

about the Satrap's unforgivable treason, before they were all dismissed and the audience was declared closed. Kang Xi's parting remarks were'

'Do not be too hasty in your condemnation of the Satrap. We must judge by facts,

and by facts alone.'

As the members of his Council of State withdrew, he gestured to Trinket to follow him into the inner apartments located behind the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

An Unusual Friendship

When they reached the Imperial Garden, Kang Xi turned to Trinket with a smile.

Thank heavens for you! If you hadn't tipped all those jewels on the floor, the old buffers would still be in there saying nice things about Satrap Wu!

The truth is, Your Majesty, that all you needed to do was come out and say that you thought it best to accept the resignations, and they would all have fallen into line. They were none of them prepared to stick their necks out.

Kang Xi nodded.

They're not bad. Just terribly cautious. Sometimes one has to act. If we let the Satrap make all the moves, we don't stand a chance. We need to call his bluff, throw him off course a little.

'I couldn't agree more,' chipped in Trinket. 'It's like gambling. You can't let the Satrap be banker all the time!'

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'Exactly! Well, the die is cast now, my friend! Let's just hope it all turns out for the best. Old Wu could be a formidable opponent. And if a large number of Chinese decide to rally to his side, and take a stand against me, the going could get really rough!'

Trinket knew only too well that there were genuine grounds for these fears of Kang Xi's. Wherever he'd travelled, he'd heard the Chinese reviling the Manchus.

There was little love lost there. And for every Manchu there were hundreds of Chinese. If they were to take Wu Sangui's side, they would be unstoppable. The only hope for the Manchus lay in the fact that however much the Chinese hated them, they hated Wu even more.

'You can set your mind at ease, Majesty. The Chinese will never side with Wu. They hate him too much. The only people he can count on are his own cronies.'

Kang Xi nodded.

‘I know that what you say is true. After all, it was Wu who brought the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui, back from Burma and put him to death. He may claim to be

a Chinese fighting the Manchus; but after what he has done, he can never claim to stand for the restoration of the House of Ming.’

After a moment’s thought he added’

‘I’ve got an idea. I shall send a delegation of Princes to the tomb of the last Ming Emperor, Chong Zhen, north of Peking, on the anniversary of his death. I’ll

give orders for them to make offerings at his grave. That may help me to win over the hearts of my Chinese subjects, and cause them to hate Satrap Wu all the more.’

That is an excellent idea, Your Majesty,’ commented Trinket. The sooner the better in fact, or Wu may have already started his rebellion.’

Kang Xi walked up and down the paths of his garden.

Trinket, since you came to the Palace, I’ve kept you very busy. I’ve sent you to the Wutai Mountains, I’ve sent you to Yunnan, to Snake Island, to Liaodong Province, and you’ve only just come back from Russia. Well, this time I’ve thought of a much nicer place to send you. It’ll do you good to have a change of scene.’

‘You know that for me the best place of all is when I’m near you, Majesty. I just like to hear the sound of your voice, I like to see you smile. That’s what makes me happy. And I mean it. I’m not trying to flatter you.’

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Kang Xi nodded.

‘I believe you. I feel the same way myself. I feel happy when I see you. All that time when you were away and no one knew what had happened to you, and we

all thought you were drowned, I felt so wretched. I should never have sent you on such a dangerous mission in the first place. I felt damned bad about it.’

Trinket was genuinely moved by these words of Kang Xi’s. ‘I just... I wish I could stay with you for the rest of my life.’ There was an unmistakable lump in his throat. ‘Very well. I shall rule as Emperor of China for sixty years, and you shall be my Chief Minister of State for sixty years.’

The Emperor rarely talked to one of his subjects in this way. But the friendship between these two young men was most unusual. ‘Laurie,’ said Kang Xi, reverting

without thinking to his old name for Trinket, ‘I’ll tell you what I’ve got in mind for this new mission. I’m planning to send you to Yangzhou. To your old

home. It can be your splendid home'coming. What do you say"

Trinket was not quite sure what 'splendid home'coming' meant exactly. Kang Xi continued'

'Just think, you can show off in front of all your friends and relations. We can even arrange for your family to receive special honours for the occasion' your mother, your father . . .' Trinket was looking a little sheepish. 'What's the matter' Don't you want to go" 'Yes, of course I want to go. It's just that . . . well, I don't actually know who my real father is'

Kang Xi stared at Trinket for a moment. He too had a somewhat strange relationship with his own father, he reflected. After all, the old man, who was officially supposed to be dead, was a hermit living incognito on Mount Wutai. He felt he almost knew how Trinket must feel. He patted him on the shoulder and spoke a few words of consolation.

'When you get to Yangzhou, you can make a few enquiries. You never know, you might strike lucky. You may end up happily reunited with your father after all. And Laurie, on this trip, your duties will be very light. I want you to go to Yangzhou to build a temple in honour of the Martyrs who died during the Massacre.' Kang Xi was referring to the terrible Ten Days of Yangzhou' and the Three Butcherings of Jiading', in which the occupying Manchu troops had massacred so many inhabitants of Yangzhou

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and the nearby city of Jiading. Kang Xi himself felt a great sense of remorse for these atrocities (even though they were committed by his forbears well before he was born).

'I know all about that,' said Trinket. 'Even ten years after the killings, people were still finding skeletons down wells, and in the riverbed. But neither of us were alive then. It wasn't our doing.'

'In a way you're right,' replied Kang Xi. But the men who did it were my ancestors. So in another way it is to do with me. Have you heard about a man called Shi Kefa"

'Who hasn't!' replied Trinket. 'He was the great general who died defending Yangzhou. When I was a boy, the old folk of Yangzhou used to break down in tears

if they so much as mentioned his name. There was even a stone tablet in his honour in the courtyard of our . . . our home.'

‘It’s martyrs like him whose memory lives on. People still feel love for them long after their death. Incidentally, tell me, Laurie, whereabouts in Yangzhou exactly was your home’

Trinket flushed.

‘Majesty, it’s nothing to be proud of, I’m afraid. As a matter of fact, I was brought up in a whore’house. My folks ran one of the best places in Yangzhou, a place called Vernal Delights.’

Kang Xi smiled. He was thinking to himself

‘I’ve always known you were a street’urchin. But I’m touched that you finally felt able to tell me the whole truth.’

Actually Trinket’s version was a somewhat inflated version of the truth. His mother didn’t run Vernal Delights. She wasn’t anything as grand as a Madame. She

was simply one of the many whores who worked there.

Kang Xi proceeded.

‘You are to be the official bearer of my Edict in Yangzhou. I intend to honour Shi Kefa as a selfless martyr and a loyal minister. A great man, in short. Our Manchu Imperial House sets great store by the virtues of selflessness and loyalty; we decry treason and rebellion. I wish to raise a memorial to Shi Kefa and all the other loyal ministers who died with him, fighting to protect the city of Yangzhou. And I intend to set aside three hundred thousand taels of silver to succour those in need among Yangzhou’s citizenry, and among the needy of the city of Jiading, which also suffered so terribly. And I shall exempt them from paying taxes for a period of three years.’

Trinket heaved a great sigh.

‘Your compassion and generosity are boundless, Majesty! For this, I must kowtow to you in all sincerity.’

Which he proceeded to do.

Kang Xi laughed.

‘You mean, none of your previous kowtows were performed in sincerity’

Trinket smiled.

‘Sometimes they were, and sometimes they weren’t.’

Kang Xi laughed out loud. He was thinking to himself

‘Ninety’ nine out of a hundred kowtows are performed without the slightest sincerity of feeling. But Trinket is the only person who’d ever dare to admit to it.’

‘Seriously, Majesty, if you build this temple and lower their taxes, the people of Yangzhou will love you.’

Kang Xi nodded.

‘I know. Another thing-on your way down to Yangzhou, there’s an additional assignment I have for you. Do you remember those bandits you once encountered on Mount Wangwu, in Henan’ The ones who were working for the Satrap”

It had been a while since Trinket’s encounter with Situ Bolei’s men, and the fair Zeng Rou, but Kang Xi’s words brought the episode back vividly. He especially remembered the Imperial scolding he had received for allowing himself to be distracted on his way to Yunnan with Princess Ning.

‘At the time, I was displeased with you for getting involved with them as you did. You see, the Satrap has spies everywhere’ a showdown with the Wang Wu Clan at that time would have alerted old Wu, and could have precipitated his uprising. At that stage we were simply not prepared for him. We had neither the necessary troops nor the necessary information. As Master Sun says in The Art of War. "Know yourself, know your enemy, and victory will always be yours.”‘

He continued’

‘But now things are different. I don’t feel comfortable with that little nest of Wang Wu traitors so close to the Capital. So I want you to wipe them out. You can take five thousand men, and a detachment of cavalry. The Wang Wu people are between one and two thousand strong, and that includes a large number of women and children, and old folk. Don’t believe the exaggerated

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reports of their numbers. I have excellent information on this. You should have

no trouble. Think about it and report back to me in a couple of days.'

A Small Favour

Having agreed to Kang Xi's 'additional assignment', Trinket proceeded to make ready for the expedition, and selected a lieutenant-colonel by the name of Zhao Liangdong as second in command of his force.

While all the necessary preparations were taking place, Trinket received an invitation from Wu Yingxiong, the Little Traitor, Satrap Wu's unfortunately mutilated son, whose marriage with the spirited Princess Ning had by now been

technically 'celebrated'. Wu wished to 'thank' Lord Wei formally for having served as a go-between in his marriage. The couple were now living in a large princely mansion in the Capital, and Trinket made his way there, unable to resist the thought of the substantial new inflow of gifts that must be in the offing.

Young Wu came out to greet him at the main gate, accompanied by several members

of his staff. Wu introduced his men to Trinket, and they all sat around in the Prince's reception hall for a while making perfunctory conversation. One of his serving-men came in to announce that the Princess would be pleased if her husband were to bring Lord Wei in to see her.

Trinket blushed fiercely. He was completely taken aback by this unexpected development, remembering only too clearly the passionate relationship he'd had

with Young Wu's tempestuous bride, and their frequent bouts of torrid love-making on the long journey down to Yunnan. This might prove to be a tricky

encounter. But Wu insisted, and excusing himself from the other company, led the

way through towards her private quarters.

They had not yet reached their destination, and were passing through a side-room, when Wu suddenly closed the door behind him and looked at Trinket

with a very serious expression.

'Lord Wei,' he began, 'I have a very special favour to ask of you.'

Trinket blushed again, thinking to himself

'Sorry mate, just because she sliced your thing off and you can't perform your duties as a husband, that doesn't mean to say

that yours truly can step into the breach (so to speak)' there's really nothing I can do to help you . . .'

What he actually managed to say was'

‘I’m not sure . . . It’s really rather tricky . . .’

‘Look’ replied Wu, ‘do this for me, and Father will be indebted to you for ever!’

Trinket looked a trifle nonplussed.

‘What’s your old dad got to do with this’ he was thinking. ‘Oh, I see, the old boy wants grandchildren, and you can’t oblige. That figures.’

‘And it will make the Princess so happy!’ Wu blurted out.

‘Hrn’ reflected Trinket. ‘If I know anything about her, I’d say that was more than likely.’

‘You’re the only person I can turn to!’ Wu’s plea was sounding more and more urgent. ‘I know it’s a dashed difficult thing to ask of anyone-’

‘A trifle unusual perhaps,’ was the extent of Trinket’s silent agreement. ‘I wouldn’t say difficult exactly. I think I know more or less what’s involved.’

Then a major drawback occurred to him if he did go ahead with Young Wu’s request and father the Princess’ children, later on, when it came to exterminating the Satrap’s entire family (which was now official Imperial policy), this would have to include Trinket’s own children, the fruit of his own loins (and all that kind of thing). Then again, he could probably persuade the Emperor to make an exception in the case of the Princess, who was in fact part of his Imperial family too. Perhaps the thing was do’able after all. Memories of pleasant hours spent wrestling in bed with the tomboy Princess came drifting back.

Young Wu was studying Trinket’s face’ he could not decipher what was going on in his mind. He stepped forward nervously and whispered in his ear’

This whole business about His Majesty accepting my father’s resignation-and the new Imperial Edict-hasn’t reached Yunnan yet. There’s still time I know you can do it! You’re the only one the Emperor listens to. Speak to him! Make him change his mind, I beg you! Persuade him to send an express messenger and cancel the whole thing-and I promise you, you’ll not regret it! I’ll make it worth your

while . . .’

Trinket stared at him in utter astonishment.

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‘You mean that’s it!’ was all he could say.

‘Why, yes! It’s the only thing that matters right now! You’re our only hope.’

‘What a scream!’ Trinket was thinking. ‘I was on completely the wrong track.’

He suddenly burst out laughing. Wu seemed very put out.

‘Please tell me what the joke is, Lord Wei. Have I said something wrong?’

‘Oh no, not at all’ returned Trinket casually. ‘I suddenly thought of something funny that had absolutely nothing to do with what you were talking about.’

Wu looked more than a little crestfallen.

‘Go on’ he muttered bitterly to himself, ‘make a fool of me now! Crow for all you’re worth! But when my father gets started and mows down everything between Yunnan and Peking, I’ll have you thrown into chains, you dirty rat, and sliced into little pieces like you deserve!’

‘Your Highness’ said Trinket, ‘be assured, first thing tomorrow I will raise this matter with His Majesty.’

‘I should be most obliged’ said Wu, and led the way on.

You Little Monster!

A maid emerged from the Princess’ chamber, and asked Trinket and Young Wu to

come forward and wait in a side’room. A few minutes later, there she was, her brash, loud, inimitable self.

‘So! Where has my little Laurie been all this time’ Come here at once!’

Trinket dropped politely to one knee, and greeted her pleasantly.

‘I missed you so much, Princess. But His Majesty sent me on a long mission, all the way to Russia in fact, and I have only just returned.’

‘Missed me so much, did you’ Pooh!’

Her eyes were already red; now they produced a great flood of tears.

The Princess looked haggard and drawn. Married life was clearly taking its toll

on her. Poor girl, Trinket reflected, stuck with her eunuch of a husband. He suddenly found himself feeling very sorry for her. He rose to his feet.

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‘His Majesty misses you a great deal’ he began, rather feebly. ‘In fact, he’s planning to invite you to the Palace in a few days, for a reunion.’ (He made a mental note that he’d better remember to let Kang Xi know of this when he next saw him.)

The Princess brightened up the minute she heard this. She stood up.

‘Laurie, I’ve not seen you for absolutely ages! How you’ve grown! They tell me you had a lover in Russia. Did you’

Trinket laughed.

‘Of course n-’

Before he could finish, he felt his cheek stinging. The Princess was back in form, and had given him a sharp slap in the face. He let out a cry and jumped in the air.

‘How dare you lie to me’ cried the Princess.

She was all poised for a second slap. But Trinket succeeded in side’stepping this one.

The Princess turned to her husband, who was still there lurking in the background.

‘I want to see Laurie in private. Go on, get out.’

Wu smiled sheepishly and took his leave, only too relieved not to have to witness his wife humiliating the Imperial favourite.

As soon as he was out of the room, the Princess took hold of Trinket’s ear and gave it a nasty little tweak.

‘You little monster! You forgot all about me, didn’t you!’

She carried on tweaking, harder and harder. Trinket howled with pain.

‘No! It’s the truth! I’ve come specially to see you-’

The Princess landed him a vicious kick in the groin.

‘You good’for’nothing!’ she cried. ‘I’ve a good mind to hack you into pieces! You’d never have come to see me if I hadn’t sent for you-not in ten years, and you know it!’

Trinket took a quick look round to make sure there was no one else in the room.

Then he wrapped his arms around the Princess, and gave her a quick cuddle.

‘Stop making such a scene!’ he whispered in her ear. ‘Wait till we have a moment together in the Palace. We can "chat" properly then.’

She flushed.

‘Chat about what’ About your Russian doll!’

She gave him a sharp poke on the forehead. Trinket took both her hands in his’

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‘I think I’ll try a move on you,’ he said. Two Dragons Wrestling for the Pearl.’

She spat in his face, and struggled free.

‘If we do anything here,’ said Trinket, ‘I’m afraid your Princely Lord and Master might get suspicious ... Seriously, let’s keep it for when we meet in the Palace.’

The Princess blushed fiercely.

‘Do what here’ What is there he could possibly get suspicious about”

She gave him one of her crafty, irresistible, seductive glances, and then said, half laughing’

‘Go on! Out of my sight, you little monster!’

For Old Time's Sake

The next day, Trinket called on the Emperor in his Library after the morning audience. Kang Xi seemed in the best of spirits.

'Good news, Laurie!' he exclaimed. 'Two of the Three Big Baddies-old Shang and

Geng-have "accepted" my "acceptances" and will be leaving any day now for Peking.'

'Congratulations, Majesty! So that leaves Wu on his own.'

'And as the old saying goes, a single hand cannot clap.'

'Exactly! We'll soon have him in our power! And as another old saying goes, he'll be as helpless as falling flowers and running streams.'

Trinket was never one to be outdone when it came to 'old sayings'.

Kang Xi laughed'

'And supposing he "accepts" as well'

Trinket stared at Kang Xi for a second. Then'

'Why, if he does, so much the better. Let him come to Peking. He'll be like a sea'dragon stranded on the beach.'

'I think you understand it well,' commented Kang Xi.

'But Majesty, supposing things work out for the best and the Satrap doesn't take

up arms against you, do you still want to go ahead and build this Martyrs' Temple in Yangzhou'

'Most definitely. Don't forget, we still don't know what Wu's response will be. But even if he does decide to go quietly, it's always a good thing to proclaim the virtues of loyalty and devotion.'

'Yes, Majesty.'

The two of them chatted idly for a while. Then Trinket brought up the subject of

the Princess, and Kang Xi dispatched one of his eunuchs to bring her to the Palace at once. He and Trinket embarked on a conversation about Russia, but before they had got very far, the Princess arrived. She fell at Kang Xi's knees, threw her arms around him, and burst into tears.

'Dearest brother!' she sobbed. 'Save me! Let me come back! Let me spend the rest

of my days here in the Palace waiting on you! Please! I never want to live with him again!'

Kang Xi stroked her hair.

'What's the trouble' Is your husband treating you badly'

'It's not that. . . It's

She broke down altogether. As he looked at her, Kang Xi (who knew her story) was thinking to himself

‘This is your own doing, dear sister. You’re the one who castrated him in the first place. If he can never be a proper husband to you, you have no one to blame but yourself.’

He spoke a few comforting words, and invited her to stay on in the Palace and have lunch with him.

There was never any fixed time for the Emperor’s meals. He ate as and when he felt like it. The Imperial Catering Department (with its fabulous repertoire of delicacies) was always ready to oblige at a moment’s notice. This it now did, and one of the Department’s eunuchs brought in a dazzling array of food. Trinket, however much of a favourite he may have been, was never allowed to sit down at table with Kang Xi. He stood in waiting to one side, and the Emperor graciously ‘bestowed upon him’ a dozen or so main dishes, which one of the court eunuchs was instructed to deliver to Trinket’s town mansion, for him to eat later in the day.

The Princess consumed several cups of wine, and became somewhat flushed. Her eyes began to swim, and she kept glancing in Trinket’s direction, which he found most disconcerting. They could not allow the slightest suggestion of misbehaviour in the Emperor’s presence, or he would never emerge from the Palace in one piece. He did his utmost not to meet the Princess’ gaze. But his heart was thumping. ‘If she gets really drunk and lets our secret out of the bag, I’m done for!’ His earlier cavorting with the Princess, on the way south to Yunnan, if it had ever been discovered, would in itself already be considered a capital offence. He had, in effect, helped himself to the very commodity he was supposed to have

been protecting from all comers. He was Degimimg cu i^6,.^ "" -0 encouraged the Emperor to invite her to the Palace.

‘Laurie,’ she suddenly blurted out, ‘give me some more rice!’

As she said this, she held her bowl out towards him.

‘You seem to have a good appetite today, at least’ said Kang Xi, trying his best

to sound cheerful.

‘Seeing my brother makes me feel like eating again,’ she replied.

Trinket filled her bowl with rice, and placed it politely before her on the table. She let her hand fall onto his thigh, and gave him a hefty pinch. Trinket dared not utter the slightest cry of pain, but kept an unchanged smile on his face.

‘Filthy little slut!’ he was thinking. ‘Just you wait till I have a go at you! Even as he was cursing her silently in his mind, he felt his head being jerked back’ she had grabbed him by his pigtail.

This time Kang Xi had spotted her. He laughed.

‘Sister, you are a married woman now. You should leave such childish nonsense

behind you!’

‘It’s his fault!’ she cried, pointing at Trinket.

Trinket was terrified she was about to blurt out something terrible. But he needn’t have worried. What followed was a series of harmless enough exchanges

between the Princess and her brother, until suddenly she announced that she wished to go in and visit her mother, the Empress Dowager.

Both Trinket and Kang Xi knew that the Princess’ natural mother, Mao Dongzhu,

the Fake’Empress Dowager, otherwise known as the Old Whore, had vanished. The

true Empress Dowager, who had now been reinstated in her proper place, would be

a total stranger to the Princess. (After all, she had spent all those years out of sight, cooped up in a wardrobe.) It would be far better to avoid the shock of such an encounter.

‘Your Mother has not been well recently’ said Kang Xi (which for all he knew might well have been true). ‘Go as far as the entrance to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity, and do your curtsy to her there.’

He gave Trinket a look, which Trinket interpreted (correctly) to mean, ‘Go with her and make sure nothing untoward happens’.

The two of them made their way together to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity.

The Princess was insistent that she should go in and see her mother, after such a long absence. No amount of

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pleading from Trinket and the maids and eunuchs could succeed in holding her back.

As she approached the Dowager’s bedstead, with its great embroidered curtain

closed, the Princess said in a barely audible whisper'

'Your Majesty, Mother, I kowtow to you.'

So saying she knelt and performed a series of prostrations before the bed. She heard a faint mumbling from within the curtains, and insisted on going right up to the bed and drawing the curtains aside a crack. The Empress Dowager was lying with her face to the wall, apparently in deep slumber.

'Your Majesty' whispered the Princess again.

But there was no reply.

Trinket was hugely relieved to see that she had been unable to detect the change. The Princess, having let the curtain fall back into place, tiptoed out of the room and was so overcome with emotion that she began sobbing loudly. Trinket comforted her by saying that she could return some other day, when her mother was fully recovered. After all, she only lived just around the corner.

'I want to go and see my old rooms,' announced the Princess, wiping away her tears.

Trinket followed her. Her rooms were just beside the Empress Dowager's, and in no time they were there. The Princess noticed how immaculately clean the place had been kept by the eunuchs and maids since her departure. She also noticed Trinket dawdling awkwardly in the doorway, and flushed again.

'Go on, you silly little eunuch! In you go!'

Trinket gave a laugh.

'You know perfectly well I'm not a eunuch. And you know I'm not allowed into your private chambers.'

She grabbed him by the ear and cried'

'If you don't come in, I'll pull your ear off!'

So saying, she yanked him inside, and closed and bolted the door after them.

Trinket was absolutely petrified. His heart was thumping in terror.

‘Princess!’ he pleaded in a strangled whisper. ‘You really mustn’t try anything inside the Palace. It would be more than my life’s worth.’

Her eyes were swimming. She looked as if at any moment she would burst into tears.

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‘Dearest lord and master,’ she said finally, squeezing the words out in her sweetest and most seductive voice. ‘I am your willing slave. Your word is my command.’

And so saying, she threw her arms around him in a passionate embrace. Trinket gave a panicky laugh.

‘No! Not here!! Please!!!’

‘All right then, I’ll tell my brother the Emperor all about what happened on the way to Yunnan; how you seduced me, how you made me cut off poor Wu’s ding’dong, and how you’ve, now gone and abandoned me!’

And by way of punctuation, she dug her fingers into his thigh and gave him a good pinch.

It was quite some time before the two of them finally emerged from her bedchamber. The Princess was all smiles, her face a picture of contentment. But she still managed to find cause to grumble and tease.

‘My brother said you’d tell me all about that Russian Princess of yours. Come on-’

‘I’m much too tired now,’ returned Trinket. ‘You’ve quite exhausted me.’

‘Next time, then. I want to know all about her.’

They both returned to the Emperor’s Library, where they found Kang Xi busy studying a map of the South’West. He posed Trinket several questions about

the mountainous terrain on the way to Yunnan, and its suitability for heavy military hardware. Then he sent word for the official in charge of transportation at the Board of War to be brought before him. Clearly his mind was completely occupied with great affairs of state. The Princess reluctantly took her leave, to set off back to her husband's mansion. As she left, she caught Trinket's eye and pointed first at him, then at herself. The message was clear' come and see me more often. Trinket responded with a barely perceptible nod.

The Hunting of the Little Traitor

With the impending storm brewing around his father the Satrap, Young Wu was not at all confident that his life was assured in Peking. One day it came to the notice of the Emperor's staff that the young man had left the city and gone out hunting. Trinket offered to go in pursuit, and the Emperor authorized him to do so, providing him with an escort of cavalry.

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They discovered that Wu was already on his way to the northern port city of Tianjin, evidently planning to flee by sea to the relative security of the South. They would have to make haste if they were to catch up with him. Finally they came upon him heavily disguised, bogged down with his horses in a muddy field of wheat. They took him back to Peking, where the Emperor graciously decided not to kill him, but to allow him to go on living in his own residence, under a sort of house arrest. Kang Xi's intention in showing this clemency was to encourage Wu's father the Satrap to abandon his plans of rebellion. Trinket and the others involved in his capture were rewarded with substantial honours.

Throughout this, in the back of the Emperor's mind, was the need to play for time. He did not want to have to fight on all fronts simultaneously' against Satrap Wu and the two other Feudatory Warlords in the South and South'West; against the separatists in Taiwan; against the Mongols and the Tibetans.

But despite all these preoccupations of his, he still decided it was important to proceed with his plan of sending Trinket to Yangzhou, to build the temple in memory of the Ming Martyr Shi Kefa, and to deal with the Wang Wu Clan.

Before Trinket set out for the South, he received an unexpected visit from Admiral Shi Lang, and the various Triad Brothers who had taken part in the ill-fated attack on Snake Island. They were greatly relieved to find him safe and sound, having spent the months since his disappearance scouring the ocean and the seaboard for any sign of him. For old time's sake, the Triads decided to accompany their Lodge Master on his new assignment.

En route for Yangzhou' the Wang Wu Clan

In a few days Trinket and his expeditionary force reached Wangwu Mountain, on the borders of Henan and southern Shanxi Provinces. They had been obliged to deviate considerably from the direct route to Yangzhou. Trinket confided in his Triad Brothers the nature of this preliminary part of the expedition, namely, the destruction of the Wang Wu Clan. They responded with horror.

'Lodge Master Wei!' protested old Brother Li, the tall thin Triad Elder who had himself been for a time Acting Lodge Master of the Green Wood Lodge. 'We can't possibly do that! Situ Bolei, the leader of the Wang Wu Clan, is a great hero, and an important fighter in

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the Resistance. By wiping out the Clan, we'd be doing the Manchus a great favour!'

'So that's the score!' replied Trinket. 'I wondered myself, when I met them, if they were on our side. This is a tricky one. What are we to do?'

It also occurred to him how ironic it was that Kang Xi should send him off to atone for one massacre and commit another, all in the same expedition.

Father Obscurus was for taking this opportunity to link up with the Clan, and openly declare rebellion. Now was the time for their Lodge Master to show his true colours. Tertius protested that their first priority must be to deal with the Satrap. If Lodge Master Wei were to lead an open rebellion now, this might drive the Manchu Emperor into the arms of the Satrap, and the Ming Resistance

would face a dangerous 'United Front'. This line of thinking was more to Trinket's liking (he had no desire to rise up against his friend Kang Xi).

'You're right,' he said. The Satrap is the top priority. The Wang Wu Clan is a minor element in the big picture.'

The question then was how to avoid dealing a blow to the Clan, without alerting the suspicions of the Emperor. All eyes turned to Trinket.

'Perhaps we should get a message through to them, warning them to keep well

out
of our way,' he suggested vaguely. His own memories of the Clan were dominated
by the image of the fifteen-year-old Zeng Rou, whose pretty face and lustrous eyes had so beguiled him on that previous occasion. Perhaps he could deliver the
message to her, which would offer him a chance of renewing their brief, but memorable, first encounter . . .
As he was musing on this possibility, word came from his second in command, Lieutenant Colonel Zhao Liangdong, that the Clan's mountain lair was already completely surrounded. Traps had been dug, barbed with arrows and spears, and
devices for tripping horses had been laid on the various roads leading up the mountain. They were only waiting for Lord Wei's command to launch the attack.
Trinket racked his brains for a way out of this dilemma. It was clear to him now that he must stand by his Triad Brothers, and somehow save the Clan from their
perilous predicament. At that very moment, there were cries from outside. Some
of the Clan

were already hurtling down the mountainside, intent on fighting to the death!

Trinket pulled himself together, and issued the following order 'They are all to be taken alive! No one is to be killed!' (Especially not the women, he thought to himself.) He stationed himself with some of his Triad Brothers on a knoll to the east, and watched. They could see more than a hundred men come charging down the mountainside. The government troops, in obedience to their commander's orders, refrained from letting fly their arrows, but stood firm, blocking their descent. There were agonizing cries as the men fell into the traps set for them, and were impaled on the arrows and spears, before being taken away. From a distance Trinket could not tell whether the fair Zeng Rou was
among them.

Suddenly they caught sight of a man leaping with extraordinary agility from tree
to tree, undeterred by the lines of Manchu troops that tried to block his advance.

'Excellent kungfu!' muttered Father Obscurus. The man was almost at the foot
of
the mountain. That must surely be their leader, Situ Bolei,' ventured Butcher

Qian. Apothecary Xu was of the same opinion. But one of Trinket's officers, Colonel Sun Sike, thought he recognized him as a commander of the Satrap's.

'Whoever he is, capture him!' ordered Trinket. The Triads rushed forward to surround the man. As they came closer, Colonel Sun called out

'Ba Langxing, what are you doing here' Colonel Sun had been right' the man was indeed one of the Satrap's top guards.

'I am here on the Satrap's orders,' the man called back, 'to wipe out the Wang Wu Clan, and to save his Majesty the Emperor from the harm they were plotting against him! Why are you trying to prevent me from doing my duty'

As he was speaking, they were able to distinguish a round, murky-looking object suspended from his sash' it was a dripping, bloody human head. Their immediate thought was that it must be the head of Situ Bolei, the Clan leader.

'Lord Wei is in command here' called out Colonel Sun. 'Lay down your weapons, and hear what he has to say about this.'

Ba Langxing went through the motions of obeying this

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command, but no sooner had he come near Trinket than he leapt into the attack

again. It took the concerted efforts of several Triad Brothers to subdue him.

'Just wait till the Satrap's forces arrive!' he cried defiantly. 'You'll die then, every one of you!'

'So the Satrap has already given his army their marching orders, has he' replied Trinket coolly. 'I had no idea. How is the old man, anyway'

Ba mistook this for a sign of friendship.

'Lord Wei, you've been to Kunming. My master the Satrap thinks highly of you, I

know he does. Why waste your time with the Manchus' Come over to us!'

Apothecary Xu rewarded this with a good boot up Ba's pants.

'The Satrap is a filthy, low-down dog! And you're his lackey, so you're even worse!'

Ba spat in Xu's face, but Xu turned aside and the spittle landed on the face of

one of the guards.

‘Let’s all calm down,’ said Trinket, ‘and talk this over properly. What are you doing here’

‘What’s the point talking about it’ Take a look at this instead! It’s Situ Bolei’s head!’

Trinket looked down at the object hanging from Ba’s waist.

‘Why did the Satrap want him dead’

‘You come with me and see the Satrap, and no doubt he’ll tell you himself.’

The Triads were enraged by the man’s behaviour, and Trinket had difficulty restraining them. He ordered his guards to take Ba down to the camp for questioning. At length, by dint of torturing some of the other men (Ba himself was too proud to talk), they ascertained that Ba was indeed on a secret mission from the Satrap, who was planning to launch his rebellion any day now. Ba’s job

was to contact Situ Bolei (an old comrade in arms of the Satrap’s, from Ming times), and try to persuade him to throw in his lot with the Three Feudatories.

If Situ went along with the idea, well and good. If not, he was to be killed.

Those were Ba’s orders. In the event, Situ had been excited to learn of an imminent rebellion against the Manchu house, but when he enquired further and

discovered that the Satrap was planning to install himself on the throne instead of a scion of the Ming Imperial family, he reacted with indignant fury, though not with undue surprise. After all, was it not the Satrap

who had been responsible for the death of the Ming Pretender, Prince Gui’ He refused to have anything to do with his planned uprising, and assured Ba that every loyal supporter of the Ming Restoration would do likewise. His master the

Satrap, Situ had told Ba, was a traitor who had sold his own country to the Tartars, a crime for which history would never forgive him. That very night, Ba had taken him unawares, cut off his head, and made his getaway with his men. The

Clan had not been able to catch up with them. It had been the unlucky fate of Ba

and his men, however, to run right into the trap set for the Clan by the Manchu troops.

Trinket’s Triad friends insisted that Situ Bolei was a hero in their cause, and that as such should receive a fitting burial. Trinket agreed, and intimated that this would fit in very well with certain plans of his own, which he then proceeded to share with them.

Obsequies on the Mountain

The following day at dawn, Trinket led a detachment of men, consisting of his

Triad Brothers and certain hand-picked Valiants, halfway up the hill. There he told the Valiants to await his further orders, and proceeded on up with the Triads.

They had climbed less than half a mile, when they saw that the way ahead was blocked by a number of heavily armed Wang Wu Clan-members. Apothecary Xu went on

ahead, bearing a large white card on which was written 'Trinket Wei, together with his friends Li, Obscurus, Tertius, Feng Jizhong, Qian, and Ma, respectfully request permission to pay their last respects to the mortal remains of the great warrior, Situ Bolei.' The Wang Wu men were taken aback to see this delegation bearing a coffin and all the paraphernalia for a funeral-candles, paper money, and so on. They told them to wait while they went up the hill for further instructions. It was not long before a small group descended from higher up the

mountain, with in their midst Situ Bolei's son, Situ He, the young man whom Trinket remembered from his previous encounter with the Clan. He was clearly now

in charge. But Trinket's eyes had already been caught by the figure walking behind him, a slender young girl with white flowers of mourning in her hair. It was Zeng Rou.

'What brings you here' asked Situ He, his hand on his sword hilt.

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Butcher Qian spoke for the rest of them, bringing his hands together in respectful salutation.

'Our leader, Lodge Master Wei, hearing of the death of your father, the great warrior Situ Bolei, at the hands of a cowardly traitor, has brought us here to express our respect for the departed and our condolences for the living.'

Situ He glanced suspiciously at Trinket.

This man is a Tartar official. He has come here to destroy our Clan. Don't expect us to fall for this trickery.'

Butcher Qian replied'

'We understand your doubts. But tell us' who was the man that killed your father''

Young Situ gnashed his teeth angrily'

'It was that scum Ba, and other of the Satrap's men!'

Even as he was saying this, Qian gave the order for his men to come forward.

They were dragging a man in their midst, his hands and feet shackled, his face wrapped in a black cloth.

'Sir, I beg you to behold-'

And so saying, he withdrew the black cloth, to reveal the figure of Ba Langxing.

The Clan shouted with one voice'

'Kill the traitor! Kill him!'

They would have sliced him up into pieces there and then, had Situ not prevented them.

'Stay your hands!'

He turned to Butcher Qian'

'What would you have me do with this man''

'It is my Master's wish,' replied Qian, 'that you deal with him as you yourself see fit. My Master remembers a previous encounter with you. He feels that it would be fitting if this man and his associates were to be put to death in front of the mortal remains of that great warrior your father, whom they so ignobly slaughtered!'

Situ He could not decide whether to believe this or not. It might all be a crafty Tartar plot. Then Ba himself burst out'

'Fuck the lot of you! Do what you bloody well like! One thing's for sure' your old man's well and truly dead! I killed him! Nothing's going to bring him back!' Qian struck him hard in the small of the back, and followed up with a great boot

to his backside. Ba tumbled forward into the mud at Situ's feet.

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'Take him up the hill,' commanded Situ. Qian's men handed over Ba's whole contingent, all of whom had their heads wrapped in black. Situ bowed to Trinket

from a distance, and expressed his appreciation of this act. But he was still wondering to himself what it was the Tartars were after. Perhaps they thought they could buy his cooperation by this gesture. If so, they were wrong!

Trinket walked towards him and returned his salutation.

'I still remember that day when we played at dice together. Miss Zeng was there on that occasion too, I believe.'

He pointed towards the coffin that they had carried up the hill.

'Inside that coffin, you will find your father's severed head. It is right that it should be reunited with your father's body, and that the great warrior should rest in peace.'

Situ walked up to the coffin, and when he saw the head inside it, he broke down and fell sobbing to the ground. His men all followed suit.

When he had recovered from this fit of grief, Situ needed no more convincing. He invited Trinket to accompany him up the hill, and pay his last respects to his father's remains. Trinket gladly accepted, taking Doublet and the Triad Brothers with him, and bidding the others to await his return.

As he passed by Zeng Rou, Trinket whispered'

'How are you, Miss Zeng'

The tears were still wet on her cheeks. Her eyes were red from weeping. She raised her head and looked at Trinket'

'Aren't. . . you . . . General Wishy'Washy'

She sobbed as she spoke.

'You still remember my name'

Trinket was delighted.

Zeng Rou lowered her head, but gave the faintest little sound of acknowledgement. Trinket was pleased to detect a slight flush on her cheeks.

'I wonder if she still has the dice I gave her' he thought to himself.

He asked her this very question. She flushed again, turned away, and murmured'

'I'm afraid I can't remember.⁷

Trinket was disappointed, and he sighed. But then she turned her head back, and smiled faintly.

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During the mountain obsequies for Situ pere, Trinket put on a terrific show of grief (largely to impress the pretty young girl). He then asked young Situ to avenge his father's death. Situ needed little encouragement. He proceeded to

slice off Ba's head, and placed it before his father's coffin as an offering. Finally, Butcher Qian decided the time was right to let Situ in on the secret of who they all really were. He persuaded the Wang Wu Clan to throw their lot in with the Triads, and to fight in a common cause against the Tartars. In order to escape, the Wang Wu Clan were all to dress up as Manchu troops. The fighting members of the Clan were to accompany Trinket to Yangzhou, while the women and infirm were to move to the provincial city of Baoding, where they would all be taken care of.

Zeng Rou herself donned guard's uniform, and announced that she wanted to form

part of the detachment moving on to Yangzhou. Trinket was delighted to hear this. All the way to Yangzhou he sought out every possible opportunity of getting close to her, but she always kept a distance, and rewarded him with nothing more than coy (and tantalizing) smiles. He would have to bide his time.CHAPTER 24

In which Trinket returns in Triumph to the City of his Youth, and ends up in a very Large Bed with several Delectable Ladies all at the same time; the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories finally breaks out; and Trinket is summoned back to Court

The Fair City of Yangzhou' of Peonies and other Flowers

As Trinket continued his journey southwards, his progress was greatly impeded by the need to humour the local officials along his route, all of whom were anxious to ply him with banquets and weigh him down with bribes. Trinket was never one to refuse a gift, and he succeeded in justifying this to his Triad Brothers by saying that the more bribes he accepted, the more odious the local

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officials would appear in the eyes of the populace, and the more resources he would have to contribute to the eventual popular uprising the Triads still had in mind against the Manchus. Apothecary Xu and the others were deeply impressed

by their Lodge Master's strategic foresight and financial acumen.

They finally reached the bustling city of Yangzhou, from which (it will be remembered) our hero set off at the very beginning of our tale. On that occasion

he had been not much more than a boy, and had been obliged to leave the city

of
his birth under extremely different circumstances, accompanied, not by a
regiment of Imperial troops (and a detachment of Triad Brothers in disguise),
but by a single person-Whiskers Mao. For Trinket it was, as Kang Xi had
anticipated, a splendid home'coming, although none of the welcoming party
had
the slightest inkling of the fact that they were receiving back into their bosom
one of the borough's most distinguished sons. The entire corps of the local
mandarinate turned out for the occasion, including Malji, the Manchu Viceroy
of
the Three Provinces of Jiangsu, Anhui, and Jiangxi; Ma You, Governor of
Jiangsu
Province, based in the Provincial Capital Nanking; Mu Tianyan, the Provincial
Treasurer; the Censor, and Literary Chancellor, the Intendants of the various
local districts, the Grain Supervisors, the River Conservancy Supervisor, the
Prefect of the Municipality of Yangzhou proper, the District Magistrate of the
Yangzhou District of Jiangdu, and sundry military mandarins of every rank.
They
were all lined up several miles outside the city gates to welcome the Emperor's
Special Envoy, Lord Wei.
His Temporary Quarters (furnished to the level of luxury appropriate for a
representative of His Imperial Majesty) had been set up outside the yamen of
the
Intendant for the Circuit of Huaiyang, the larger administrative area made up
of
the twin Zhejiang boroughs of Huaian and Yangzhou. Trinket found the place
altogether too formal and constricting, and had a word with the Intendant,
expressing his desire to move elsewhere. In the back of his mind was the
thought
of setting himself up in his childhood home, the Vernal Delights bordello. But
on reflection he decided it might not be quite appropriate for an Imperial
Envoy
to be billeted
with singsong'girls'"And then another childhood memory began
to stir. He remembered how, as a small boy, one of his great dreams (apart
from
the main one, of setting himself up as the proprietor of a plush whore'house)
had been to rip out every single one of the
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peonies growing in the great ornamental flowerbed outside the Zen temple
known

as the Shrine of Enlightenment a mile or two east of Yangzhou, a temple made famous by the lines it inspired from the great Tang poet Du Mu, under the title ‘The Shrine of Enlightenment’

After rain-the call of a single cicada; The wind sighs through fine and cassia;
Green moss grows on the stone steps; White birds loiter, loth to go. Evening
mists enfold the trees, The sun aslant on little towers. , Who knows the road to
Zhuxi’ Song and music are Yangzhou.

The Peonies of Yangzhou have always been renowned throughout China for their

beauty. And the peonies growing outside this particular temple were among the most famous of all, for the sheer size of their blooms, and for their extraordinary variety. One day, when he was a boy of ten or so, Trinket had been

mucking around with some of his ragamuffin friends in the vicinity of the temple, and seeing some pretty flowers had picked a couple of blooms and made

off with them. One of the monks saw him doing this, hastened to retrieve the flowers, and gave Trinket a good box on the ears. Trinket gave as good as he got, kicking and biting his fat assailant and generally tussling with him until finally he had him down on the ground, and was able to land him a few well’aimed

kicks. His ragged comrades now came surging forward, and set to with a vengeance

on the rest of the peonies, uprooting them left, right, and centre. The monk began yelling for help, and soon a throng of Zen clerics emerged from the temple, reinforced by a number of gardeners and other menials, all of them armed

with clubs. They succeeded in chasing away the young hooligans. Trinket came out

of it with bruises all over his body and a big bump on his head, and when he finally made it home, his mother gave him a good scolding and made him go without his supper (although he did manage to sneak a steamed bun from the whore’house kitchen). The whole episode was deeply and painfully imprinted on

his young mind. The following day he had returned to the temple and had shouted

all manner of abuse at the monks, reviling everyone he could think of, from Buddha’s mother

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to the monk’s love’children, swearing loudly and publicly that he would ‘be

back

one day, to rip up every single peony in front of their foul, putrid pigsty of a temple, and then flatten the place to the ground and leave nothing but a hole for dumping shit in!' His catalogue of threats only came to an end when the monks emerged again from the temple and chased him away.

The years went by, and Trinket had forgotten all about the temple and its peonies. But now it all came back, and he felt a powerful urge to install himself there in his new incarnation- Urchin Metamorphosed into Imperial Envoy.

He would have his revenge. He duly suggested this new choice of locale to his present host, the Huaiyang Circuit Intendant, who (needless to say) was horrified at the thought of polluting the purity of the famous Zen precinct with the large quantities of Red Dust that inevitably followed in the train of a large official delegation such as Lord Wei's. He expressed this concern of his, and Trinket's proposed solution was that in order to preserve the Buddhist inmates from the Red Dust the Intendant should evacuate all the Buddhist paraphernalia- statues of Buddha, altars, monks, everything-for the entire duration of his stay. In other words, he thought gleefully to himself, kick them all out! The Intendant searched feverishly for some way of distracting his distinguished visitor from this potentially of sacrilegious course of action.

'Lord Wei, I really feel the temple might not be the most appropriate place for you to pass your days in our city-days which I trust will be filled with all sorts of pleasure-'

'What do you mean, not appropriate' And what sort of pleasure do you have in mind''

'Well, Your Lordship, the accommodations in the temple are somewhat austere, the

beds, shall we say, a trifle on the hard side. We had in mind introducing you during your stay to one or two of our more delectable singsong'girls, whose skill as ... er ... musical entertainers has earned such fame for our city.'

Trinket was beginning to see a certain logic in this line of thinking.

Well, where do you suggest I go then''

'If I may be so bold, Your Lordship, one of our city's most prominent salt'merchants, a certain Mr Ho, possesses a garden which ranks among Yangzhou's

finest. He has agreed to put this garden of his entirely at your disposal.'

Now even as a young boy Trinket had heard of this gentleman and his fabulous wealth. Indeed he had several times passed by the walls of his mansion, and had

heard the sweet strains of music emanating from within. How often he had dreamed

(idle, boyish dreams) of one day having a chance to potter around inside that luxurious world! And now that very chance was being handed him on a plate!

‘Very well’ he replied, affecting a nonchalant air. ‘I suppose I’ll give it a try. If it doesn’t seem quite right, I can always move somewhere else. After all, there are plenty of other rich salt’merchants in Yangzhou.’

On arrival, Trinket found the Ho Garden to be the very picture of the old’s style gentleman’s pleasure’garden, laid out with the most delightful pavilions and walkways, quaint little nooks and exquisitely conceived vistas, interspersed with ornamental rocks in all sorts of fascinating shapes and sizes, the whole ensemble enlivened with the gurgling waters of spring and pond. It was clear at first glance that a fortune had been lavished on the conception and execution of this masterpiece of landscape design. Trinket was ecstatic in his praise of the garden, and promptly gave orders for his entire retinue to install themselves within it.

Yangzhou had always been famous as a city of opulence and elegance. In this respect it held the prize among Chinese cities. Already in the golden age of the Tang and Song dynasties, the poets sang of its ‘mile upon mile of pearly blinds’, its ‘twenty’four bridges . . . beneath the bright moon’. In the early years of the Manchu dynasty, large numbers of rich salt’merchants from the central Huai River region (who made their fortunes from the salt monopoly) settled in Yangzhou, and it grew more prosperous than ever. Many of these merchants used their wealth to create fabulous gardens, and Mr Ho was one of the wealthiest of them all.

The following morning, at first light, a procession of every local mandarin-of high, middling, and low rank-was queuing up outside the Ho Garden to present their respects to Lord Wei. Once he had received them all, Trinket recited the Imperial Edict aloud (not being able to read the actual words himself, he had been obliged to learn it by heart, with the help of one of his more educated colleagues). His memory served him well enough, and he was able to get through from the beginning to the end of the Edict without any major mishaps (unless one counts as a mishap the fact that he

was holding the scroll itself upside down-but nobody appeared to notice that). The assembled officials ‘were delighted at the Edict’s contents’ remission of taxes for three years, special financial assistance for orphans of the Yangzhou ‘troubles’, and construction of a memorial temple for Shi Kefa the Martyr. They all applauded the Manchu Emperor’s compassion and magnanimity. Trinket followed up the reading of the Edict with a few casually dropped (and none too subtle) hints about ‘certain shortcomings that had come to light’ in the civil and military administration of the Yangzhou area, hints which were

designed to sow seeds of fear in the minds of the local mandarins, and which were intended to generate a correspondingly large flow of bribes in his direction. This had been his friend Songgotu's idea.

The subsequent days were spent by Trinket being lavishly wined and dined at every yamen in the city. His official programme was so full that at first he was unable to find time for his own private mission' to visit Vernal Delights and seek out his own mother. He obviously could not do this openly; an Imperial Envoy could hardly pay an ordinary courtesy call on his mother if that mother happened to be a singsong'girl working in a whore'house. Quite apart from the general disgrace it would bring on himself and the Court, Trinket might actually

be impeached by some meddling Censor for lack of filial devotion if it ever came

to light that during all these years he had never once sent for his old mum to come up and share a little of his success in the Capital, but had left her to moulder her life away in the pleasure quarters of a provincial city. Not even Kang Xi could save him then. No, what he envisaged was a private little incognito reconnaissance visit, after which he could find a way to move his mum

to Peking and set her up somewhere in style. But it had to be done with the utmost discretion. He was much too prominent now to be able to risk doing things

in the casual style of his former escapades.

A few days later, the Prefect of the City of Yangzhou itself, Wu Zhirong, laid on a very special welcoming banquet for Trinket. He had come up in the world as

a result of his sinister role denouncing the Ming History scholars, an earlier episode narrated at some length in the Prologue to our story. Having heard from

the Circuit Intendant that the Imperial Envoy had expressed an interest in staying at the Zen Shrine of Enlightenment, Wu had gone to

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enormous lengths to construct-right beside the famous peony beds in front of the

temple-an extraordinary and most fantastic environment in which to entertain his

distinguished guest. The structure of this innovative 'marquee' was made from pine trunks complete with their bark (indeed complete with their every branch and needle), and within this forest'structure were placed tables and chairs made

from logs and rocks of the most ingeniously contrived 'naturalness',

interspersed with flowers and plants of every hue and variety. Bamboo conduits carried gurgling rivulets of water between the various parts of this installation. It was all most intricate and ingenious. To eat within it was like going on some extravagant picnic in the wilds of nature. It made the luxurious pavilions and jade balustrades of the typical salt'merchant's garden seem positively banal and ordinary.

All of this was utterly lost on Trinket, who was a connoisseur of nothing (except perhaps of his own particular art of skulduggery). His first remark on entering Prefect Wu's pleasure'dome was'

'I suppose this weird place must be where the monks come to feed the Hungry Ghosts of the Dead.'

Prefect Wu looked more than a little crestfallen. He expressed his regrets that his creation had fallen short, and had failed to please the Imperial Envoy.

Malji, the Manchu Viceroy, had already spent several days entertaining Trinket, and had by now returned to his administrative seat in the nearby city of Nanking. As for other senior officials, such as the Provincial Governor Ma You, and Mu Tianyan, the Provincial Treasurer, whose residences were in Suzhou, they had stayed on in Yangzhou to wait upon their distinguished guest and were present on this occasion, together with a selection of Yangzhou's most illustrious scholars and salt'merchants.

Yangzhou cuisine is famous for its rich variety, and especially for the wonderful array of hors'd'oeuvres-both sweet and savoury-that accompany the earlier stages of any banquet. Though himself born and bred in Yangzhou, Trinket now found himself tasting many local delicacies he had never encountered in his youth.

As the guests drank their tea and nibbled their sweetmeats, the evening drew on and the sun began to set. The magnificent bed of peonies visible just outside the 'marquee' glowed like a stretch of richly embroidered brocade. But it was a spectacle that aroused in Trinket's breast feelings not of aesthetic delight but of intense personal

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resentment, dating back to his childhood scrape with the monks. Now was his chance for revenge, he thought to himself. He could have the entire confounded bed of peonies dug up and burnt! But he needed some sort of pretext. Even as he

was brooding over this, he heard the Provincial Governor's voice purring at his side'

'Your Excellency, I do believe I detect a touch of the Yangzhou accent in your intonation. Ours is indeed a rich and wonderful region, to produce not only such

a wide variety of natural products, but also such a rich crop of great human talents to match them- persons such as your distinguished self.'

Governor Ma had spent quite some time with Trinket over the past few days, and

had indeed detected the remains of a Yangzhou twang, a hangover from his childhood that all Trinket's years in the Palace had failed to obliterate.

Others simply thought of the Envoy as a pampered Peking Manchu of the Plain Yellow Banner. The Governor knew better, and was now seeking to ingratiate himself by demonstrating this knowledge of his.

There's one thing I don't like about Yangzhou,' replied Trinket abruptly. 'The monks. The monks of Yangzhou stink.'

This totally unexpected response left the poor Governor totally bewildered and at a loss. His widely read and quick-witted friend the Provincial Treasurer, Mu Tianyan, came swiftly to his rescue' 'Your observation is, alas, only too true, Excellency. Our Yangzhou monks have indeed long enjoyed a regrettable reputation

for their ill-judged involvement in worldly affairs, for courting the powerful and exploiting the poor.'

Trinket was delighted at this response.

'Indeed, Treasurer, you seem surprisingly well-informed in this matter.'

The Treasurer continued to exhibit both his wideness of learning and his diplomatic finesse, and by dint of telling a number of entertaining stories, succeeded in humouring Trinket and distracting him from his secret plans of revenge on the temple's peonies and monks.

As the evening wore on, and the dishes kept coming, Trinket thought it becoming

for him as the guest of honour to call for players and a little vocal entertainment, a suggestion that was greeted with great enthusiasm by the assembled company. Needless to say, Prefect Wu had anticipated this request, and

minutes later the sound of tinkling ornaments was heard outside the 'marquee' and the

guests became aware of a feminine fragrance wafting in on the evening breeze. Trinket looked on with a certain degree of interest as a singsong'girl made her way daintily through the company, and performed a little bow before him.

'I wish to present my respects to His Excellency the Imperial Envoy' she piped, 'and to all the other gentlemen here this evening, by singing a song.'

She must have been thirty'odd years old, and was gorgeously attired, if somewhat average in terms of physical charm. Her accompanist blew a short introductory air on the transverse flute, and she began to warble'

Green lie the hills,

In darkling folds,

The distant waters gleam;

Autumn comes to a close,

But the southern lands

Have kept their verdant sheen.

The twenty'four bridges still stand

Beneath the bright moon;

Where does she blow her flute tonight,

My jade'like fair'

On southern streams and lakes

I wandered,

Spirits low,

Wine my freight,

Beguiled by the slender waists

Of this land of lakes!

And then one day

From my Yangzhou Dream

I woke at last-

Ten years a rake,

Ten years gone so fast!

The words were those of the same poet of the Tang dynasty who had written about the temple, Du Mu, famous for his many evocations of Yangzhou, a city he lived in and loved. It was a touching performance, the woman's soft voice trailing sinuous curves of melody around the delicate trceries of the flute

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accompaniment. Trinket just wished the girl herself had been a bit prettier. Her place was taken by another female performer, if anything a year or two older, but possessed of a mellow voice that filled even the daintiest contours of her song with an extraordinary richness and variety of expression. The words

she sang were from a lyric by the much-loved poet of the Song dynasty, Qin Guan,

to the tune 'Gazing at the Tide'

Stretching afar

Beneath the starry night,

Yangzhou the Fair,

City of flowers and fragrance,

Of bird'call,

Of yearly blinds

Tinkling

In the spring breeze.

Yangzhou the Bold, City of heroes, Bright as gold, Their rainbow'spirits Soaring in the sky. Down the streets Carriages rumble; Willows line the lanes; Painted bridges Call to mind The glories of the past.

It was a superb rendering of the famous lines, but Trinket was by now visibly bored and could not succeed in stifling a noisy yawn. Before the singer could begin the next stanza, Prefect Wu, observing his guest's growing lack of

interest, waved her away. She bowed, and took her leave.

‘How does Your Excellency find the two singers’ he enquired, adding that they had been selected from among Yangzhou’s most famous courtesans, and that the

songs they had sung were specially chosen because they celebrated aspects of Yangzhou’s rich history and culture.

““..6 nuui yawning the whole way through. His

own idea of being well entertained by a singsong’girl was firstly, that the performer should be considerably younger, prettier, and sexier; and secondly, that the lyrics should be easier on the ear, easier to understand, and preferably a good deal saucier.

‘A bit on the antique side, I thought,’ he continued for his host’s benefit.

‘Not quite to my taste.’

‘Ah yes,’ replied Prefect Wu. ‘Something a little more recent than verses from the Tang and Song dynasties would certainly make a change.’

(Trinket had been referring to the singer, not the song.) ‘I suggest we listen to a piece by a talented younger writer of our own time, Mr Zha Shenxing. In one

of his poems he evokes the charm of the simple peasant girls of the Yangzhou region. The piece is called "The Hills of Huai".’ (This was a reference to the rich Huai’river lands north of Yangzhou city proper.)

Wu snapped his fingers, and the ushers showed in a third singsong’girl. Trinket had registered the last few words of his introduction, the bit about the simple peasant girls, and showed renewed interest, thinking that he was about to see a local rural beauty.

But then, as the third performer walked into the ‘marquee’, he was simply appalled and angry. This creature was fifty if she was a day; her face was wrinkled, her hair was greying at the temples, she had small, squinting eyes (when they should have been big and lustrous), and a big mouth (when it should

have been small). She started to play her lute, the very same instrument, Trinket reflected, that the incomparably beautiful Chen Yuanyuan had played on

that memorable earlier occasion in Kunming-how dare this ageing Yangzhou trollop

hope to compete with the Peerless Consort! However, when she opened that big

mouth of hers, the cascade of rippling melody that poured from it was truly a

joy to hear (for those with any ear at all for music).

Hills of HUM, Vistas of green, Waters of Huai, Deep folds of blue; When she climbs the stair,

‘ Her very shadow

Breathes the scent ‘ “ Of country flowers; Beyond the city gates, Her cottage still stands As once it did; Her make’up Still so plain, Her long skin Still trailing ‘ Darkly.

Melody and accompaniment were in perfect harmony with one another, the music at

one moment lapping sensuously like waves on the shore, the next dropping in crystalline drips, with a tinkling clarity that enchanted the ear. Her audience (with one notable exception) was quite enthralled. Some closed their eyes in rapture and reverie, others moved their heads in time to the lilting melodic cadences. When the last strain on the lute had died away, a roar of applause rose from the tables.

‘Oh my, what a superb performance!’ enthused Treasurer Mu. ‘Such marvellous lyrics, such a gorgeous melodic setting, such exquisite finger’work on the lute! A positive miracle!’

Trinket delivered himself of a less than appreciative grunt, and then addressed himself directly to the lady artist’

‘I don’t suppose you happen to know “The Eighteen Touches” by any chance’ Sing

it for us, go on, there’s a darling!’

A terrible silence descended on the ‘marquee’. The woman’s face fell, and suddenly great tears gushed from her (heavily made’up) eyes, and she turned and

fled. There was a ‘clunk’ as she let her instrument fall to the ground, but she was in too much of a hurry even to retrieve it.

Trinket laughed loudly.

‘Come along, darling, if you can’t sing it it’s not the end of the world! I’m not going to eat you up!’

‘The Eighteen Touches’ can best be described as an extremely vulgar and obscene

ditty, detailing eighteen of the most private (and no doubt delectable) parts of a woman’s person, and going on to describe in figurative language the joys of touching each one of these eighteen parts. There were few among the distinguished (and

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pleasure’loving) company present who had not heard it, but not one of them would

have dreamt of mentioning it on this formal and elegant occasion. The

courtesan
who had just performed was probably Yangzhou's most celebrated singer and musician, and was

known to compose verses herself of considerable literary distinction.

It had been a rare privilege for the mandarins and merchants to hear her sing, and it came as a shock to them to see her insulted so crassly by their guest of honour.

Treasurer Mu tried his oily best to smooth things over, by suggesting that another occasion might present itself, more suited to the singing of such 'idle snatches' as Trinket had proposed. Trinket was not to be appeased.

'For goodness sake, if that old whore can't even sing "The Eighteen Touches", she's no good for anything! One of these days I'll take you down the Alley, to Vernal Delights. Some of the little whores there can really sing!'

Trinket raised his cup, and his hosts eagerly drank, endeavouring to conceal the terrible faux pas in a wave of noise and merriment.

As he was drinking, something odd caught Trinket's eye' he saw one of the attendants at the banquet slink suspiciously out of the 'marquee', and noted something strangely familiar about him. But the man did not return, and Trinket soon forgot all about him.

The banquet began to bore Trinket. There were no plays, there was no gambling-in short, there was no real fun to be had. He kept finding himself singing the verses of The Eighteen Touches' over and over inside his head'

Touch her here, Touch her there, Touch her on her lovely hair. . .

Finally he could endure the boredom no longer, and his feet.

rose to

you.

‘Gentlemen, I think I have drunk my fill, and must be leaving

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They all lined up to see him out of the ‘marquee’.

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Trinket back in the Alley

Once back in his Temporary Residence in the Ho Garden, Trinket instructed his

personal guards that he was on no account to be disturbed. He went into his bedchamber, and changed into a suit of tattered old rags. He had already sent Doublet off a few days earlier to procure some clothes from a second-hand clothes’stall in one of the Yangzhou markets, and had then set about cutting them up still further into rags, trampling them in the mud, and soaking them in

oil, so as to look thoroughly filthy and disreputable. He made sure his various accessories were on the same level’ broken down hat and shoes, grubby detachable

pigtail plait. Then he took a handful of ash from the charcoal brazier, moistened it, and smeared the resulting paste all over his face and hands. He looked at himself in the mirror, and saw once again the urchin from Vernal Delights.

Doublet urged him to take her with him, wherever it was he was planning to go.

‘You won’t be safe out there all on your own’ she insisted.

Trinket laughed.

‘My sweet, where I’m going is no place for innocent young girls like you!’

And he started to sing’

Touch her here, Touch her there, Touch the face of Doublet the Fair. . .

And as he sang he reached out his hand and began to stroke her face. Doublet blushed, and ran giggling out of the room.

Trinket stuffed a wad of notes in the inside pocket of his ragged jacket, and a bagful of silver in his trouser pocket. He went out and found Doublet, gave her a kiss on the cheek, then vanished out of a back gate. The guard on the gate

challenged him'

'Who goes there'

'The husband of the younger sister of the cousin of the son of the Ho family nurse-so mind your own business!' replied Trinket cockily.

The guard stared at him in disbelief, and before he could work out the intricacies of the relationship, the little urchin had gone on his way.

Trinket still remembered the streets of Yangzhou like the back of his hand, and could have found his way around the city blindfolded. In no time he was by the shores of Slender West Lake, and walking up the Alley of Chiming Jade. Once again he heard the beguiling sound of music coming from upper rooms, mingled

with cries of pleasure and peals of laughter-best of all, the old gambling calls-all the familiar sounds of his youth. He was in heaven again. A delicious feeling of well-being wafted over him.

This was his real world.

He came to Vernal Delights and saw that from the outside it was the same as ever. Nothing had changed. He crept up to the main entrance, sneaked around to

the side, and pushed open one

of the side doors.

He tiptoed inside and up the stairs to what had always been his mother's room. It was empty. She must be out, he reflected, elsewhere, busy with a customer.

'Hot popping mamma!' he thought to himself. 'I wonder what scabby old toad is

poking my old mum tonight' Who's my stepdad

this time round'!

He sidled into the room. Nothing seemed to have changed. The same old quilts lay

on his mother's bed, tattier than ever.

'Looks like business isn't too good for old mum,' he reflected. 'Looks like I might be running short of stepdads.'

In a corner of the room stood his old bed. There was even a pair of his shoes on the floor beside it. The bedding had been carefully laundered. His favourite long cotton gown, the one with the bamboo pattern, was lying neatly folded on the bed. A little pang went through his urchin's heart.

‘My mum’s still waiting for me to come home! Tamardy! All this time I’ve been leading the good life in Peking, and I never sent

for her!’

He stretched himself out on the bed, and waited for his mother

to return.

It was the normal custom in the pleasure’houses for the girls to entertain their customers in specially appointed rooms. Their own private quarters were usually

simple and sparsely furnished. The younger, prettier girls might have smarter rooms, but the older ones, like Trinket’s mother Spring Fragrance, whose charms

and popularity with customers were waning, were often treated by the i

" ..Uir^.HaQt! members of the establishment, and had to

next door; he thought he could distmguibu unv.

Madame, berating one of her girls’

‘To think of the good money I’ve laid out on you, and you’re always finding excuses not to go with a customer. Who do you think you are’ Our Holy Lady of Mercy or something’ I’ll teach

you a thing or two-’

Sounds of beating followed, cries of pain, more words of abuse. It was all so familiar to Trinket from his youth. Whenever the fresh recruits made a fuss about sleeping with a customer, the Madame would lay into them, using all manner

of physical torture-poking their nails with needles, branding their flesh with hot irons-to force them into the fray. The scene struck Trinket with the force of an old familiar dream. This had been such a regular part of his life as a child, he didn’t even feel particularly sorry for the girl.

‘Kill me if you like!’ the young girl was crying. ‘I’d rather die than sleep with one of them! I’ll dash my brains out, see if I don’t!’ The Madame ordered one of her sewing’women to carry on hitting the girl. Twenty or

thirty strokes later, the girl was still sobbing and defiant.

‘That’s as much as I can do today, ma’am,’ muttered the serving’woman. ‘I’ll give her some more tomorrow.’

‘Take the little slut out of my sight!’ barked the Madame. The serving’woman dragged the girl out, and came back into the room. ‘Clearly beating her isn’t

going to work,' said the Madame. 'We'll have to try subtler methods. Drug her!' 'But she refuses to drink!' 'Idiot creature! Mix it in with her food then. Put it in the meat.

That should do the trick.'

'What a clever one you are, ma'am!'

Trinket peeped through a crack in the wooden partition, which was all that separated the two rooms. He could see the old Madame opening a cupboard and

taking out a bottle of some liquor. She poured out a cup and gave it to the sewing woman.

'Those two young gentlemen downstairs, drinking with Spring Fragrance,' she began saying. 'They look loaded. They say they want to stay the night, something

about expecting friends in the morning. Well, I doubt they'll want to get up to anything serious with Spring Fragrance-they're far too young for her. I'll go down and hint that they might get a go at this wretched little troublemaker's

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maidenhead. If we're lucky, that should bring us in three or four hundred taels of silver.'

Trinket knew about the kind of drug she was planning to use- it left a person more or less unconscious, and was often used in the whorehouses with reluctant

first-timers. As a boy he'd thought it something rare and wonderful. Now he knew

better. It was no different from the common or garden opiate used by fighters of

the River and Lake fraternity, to render their opponents incapable of combat.

Curious to know who the two loaded young gentlemen were that his mother was

entertaining, he sneaked down to the corridor outside the main parlour (which rejoiced in the name Hall of Sweet Dew), where wealthy customers were always received, and climbed onto the round stone tabouret (his old vantage point for spying what was going on inside). There was a good-sized crack in the paper window here, from which he had a commanding view of the interior. Countless times he had spied from here as a boy, without ever being caught.

The interior was brightly lit with red lanterns, and there in the middle of the room he saw his mother, heavily made up, dressed in a pink embroidered gown,

with red flowers in her hair. She was pouring wine for two gentlemen. Trinket gazed at her.

‘Poor old thing! So business is that bad these days. And she never could sing to save her life. I must admit, if I were a customer, I wouldn’t go with her if they offered me a thousand taels!’

Just then he heard his mother asking the two gentlemen if they would like to hear her singing ‘The Five Faces of Love’. Trinket heaved a silent sigh.

‘Still the same old repertoire! She only ever did have two or three songs, and just kept on singing those same ones over and over again. She really should have taken her training a bit more seriously!’

As he was thinking this, he narrowly avoided letting out a little chuckle.

‘Bit like me, really, and my pathetic attempts to learn kungfu. I never could take it seriously. Same old tricks every time. Like mother, like son!’

In the midst of these musings, he suddenly heard one of the two gentlemen say to
Spring Fragrance’

‘No more wine for me, thank you.’

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Something about that voice took Trinket’s breath away. It was so soft, so familiar, so ... girlish! He looked carefully at where the voice was coming from, saw the delicate hand declining the proffered cup of wine, followed the sleeve up the arm to the prettiest profile-and there it was! Green Girl! Green’s face! Trinket nearly tumbled off his perch. His heart missed a beat, his whole being thrilled with uncontrollable excitement’

‘What’s Green doing in Yangzhou’ And what’s she doing at Vernal Delights, of all

places, being entertained by my mum, of all people’! She’s dressed herself up in man’s clothes, and come looking for my mum-she must be trying to find me! Oh

joy! She has finally seen the light and decided to come back to be with me! Her

betroted! Oh bliss!' (Trinket even started thinking to himself in romantic clichés.) 'Tonight we shall consummate our union, amid glowing red candles. I shall hold her hands close to my heart as we lie together in the bridal bower. . .'

And so on, and so forth. And then Trinket's overheated fantasy was rudely interrupted by a real man's voice'

'We must stay awake to await the arrival of our Mongol friends.'

Something about that voice set off an instantaneous (and extremely unpleasant)

buzzing in Trinket's head. The nuptial dream was shattered, the nightmare had begun. The whole world swayed wildly before his eyes, everything went black for

a moment, then he collected himself, opened his eyes, and looked' there was no mistaking it, the person sitting beside Green, the person who had just spoken, was the Unspeakable, the Execrable, the Insufferable Zheng Keshuang.

Trinket's mum turned to Sir Zheng'

'If your young friend will not drink, sir, perhaps you would like to'

And so saying she plumped herself down on the Insufferable's lap.

'Watch what you're doing!' said Green.

Spring Fragrance gave her a big smile.

'Oh dear, this young gentleman is clearly not familiar with our local customs.

You should come more often. You'd soon get used to things. Would the young gentleman like me to send for one of the other girls'

'No, no!' Green hastened to reply. 'Just get off his lap and sit down over here.'

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'Oh dearie me!' exclaimed Spring Fragrance. 'I do believe the wine has made you jealous!'

So saying, she got up and plonked herself down on Green's lap.

Trinket was torn between angry indignation, and amusement. 'Did you ever see anything so strange in all your life!' he apostrophized himself. 'My own wife being persuaded to have it off with my own mum!'

But Green was busy pushing Spring Fragrance away, with such determination that

the poor woman tumbled to the ground. Trinket muttered angrily to himself'

'Knocking your own mother'in'law to the ground! What's the world coming to'

But Spring Fragrance was not in the least put out. She raised herself from the

ground, and chuckled good'humouredly'

'Come my dear, why don't you sit on my lap' It'd be a lot comfier.'

'No thank you!' snapped Green. Then to Sir Zheng' 'Why do we have to hang around here' Can't we wait somewhere less objectionable"

'This is where we said we'd wait, so we'll just have to stay here until they turn up. I had no idea it was such a squalid place. You, go over there and sit down.'

This brusque remark was addressed to Spring Fragrance. Trinket was fuming.

'Why, you little runt! That day in Guangxi, on the river, when I spared your life, you took an oath never to have anything more to do with my wife, never to speak another word to her, and here you are messing around with my motherll And obviously you've been talking to my wife. Flat out. Talking your head off. For all I know hundreds of thousands of words, no millions, have passed between the two of you since we last met. I knew I should have cut your tongue out there and then!'

Spring Fragrance made one more valiant attempt to cuddle Sir Zheng, but this time she was sent packing, and told firmly to wait outside.

'Ah Kor,' said Sir Zheng, once she had gone, 'you must try to be patient. Otherwise you could spoil everything.'

'Prince Galdan must be up to no good, to want to meet in a horrible place like this.'

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When Trinket heard the name 'Prince Galdan', his ears pricked up'

'So that pickled Mongolian egg Galdan is on his way here too! Excellent! They're obviously involved in the rebellion together, and I can send in some of my men and catch them all red'handed!'

Sir Zheng replied to Green'

'There's very tight security in Yangzhou at the moment. They're cross-questioning every traveller, and all the inns are insisting on identifying their customers. It would be very difficult for a Mongol like Prince Galdan to pass unobserved. That's why he decided to stay here. The police never bother with places like this. Besides, in an ordinary inn, a lady as beautiful as you would find herself constantly being stared at and pestered by strangers.'

Green smiled the faintest of smiles.

'Don't start your sweet'talking now-'

'It's not sweet'talk.' Sir Zheng put his arm round her shoulder, and kissed her lightly on the mouth. 'It's the simple truth. You're as beautiful as a fairy. In fact, if there really were beauties like you in heaven, none of those Immortals would ever have bothered to come down to earth. They'd all have stayed up in heaven, to ogle my darling.'

Green laughed softly, and lowered her head coyly.

Trinket was boiling. Out of control, he reached instinctively for his dagger, and was about to go bursting into the room and have it out with Sir Zheng once and for all, but managed to think better of it.

'His kungfu is far better than mine, and besides he'd have her on his side. I'd be one man against the combined forces of my faithless wife and her vicious lover.'

He had no choice but to close his eyes and pretend not to see them as they exchanged sweet endearments. But he could not help overhearing what they said'

'Don't you worry, my sweet. This time I swear I'll cut him up into little pieces.'

It was Sir Zheng speaking again.

'He has really gone too far!' replied Green. 'I must have my revenge! I should never have agreed to acknowledge the Satrap as my father-but at least he promised to send eight of his strongest men to help me seek vengeance!'

'Who can she be talking about' Trinket wondered to himself. 'Who has wronged

you, dearest wife! Tell me. I'm your man-I'll go to the ends of the earth to avenge you! There was no need to call the Satrap your father!'

'Actually killing him is no problem' said Sir Zheng. 'But he is surrounded by Tartar guards, and getting out alive may be difficult. We have to think of a foolproof plan.'

'Father's idea, of sending some of his men to kill him, was not only to avenge me,' said Green. 'It is also part of his plan for the uprising against the Manchus. This creature is one of the obstacles standing in his path. He must be got rid of. It all has to be kept very secret, which is why father made me promise not to breathe a word to mother about it.'

Trinket was more puzzled than ever.

‘Who ever can this person be, that they all want to kill’ And why is he such an obstacle to the Satrap’s plans”

Sir Zheng continued’

‘I have been keeping an eye on him these past few days. They’ve got him very closely protected. But I know his weak point. Women. All we have to do is dress someone up as a singsong’ girl, and it’ll be easy to get to him.’

‘Wonder who it could be, this womanizer” thought Trinket idly to himself. The Governor’ The Treasurer”

‘My sister’in’ arms and I could have done it’ replied Green. ‘But I hate the thought of dressing up like a whore. I couldn’t.’

‘Another way might be to bribe his cook, and put poison in his wine.’

Green was adamantly against this proposal.

That would make it too easy for him to die! I want to see him suffer! I want to chop off his horrid hands, one at a time, and then cut out his dirty lying little tongue! The horrible monster! I hate him!’

Suddenly the truth dawned on Trinket.

‘Yikes! It’s me she’s talking about! It’s her own husband she wants to kill!’

He’d always known she was infatuated with Zheng Keshuang, but he’d never realized until this moment how bitterly she hated him.

‘What have I ever done to make her loathe me so much”

This question was answered for Trinket, but not by Green.

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‘My darling’ said Sir Zheng, ‘the truth is, the monster you hate so much never did anything to offend you. You know that. He’s always been too besotted with you to think of hurting you. I know why you hate him so. It’s because of what he did to me. It’s for my sake, isn’t it’ I don’t know how I can ever repay your

love.'

To Trinket's huge chagrin, Green confirmed the truth of this hypothesis of Sir Zheng's'

'By humiliating you, my darling, by insulting you, he hurt me more than he could ever have done directly. After all, he and I are disciples of the same Shifu, and I would have endured any amount of abuse and cruelty for her sake. But to see you treated so rudely made my blood boil!'

'My dearest girl' said Sir Zheng, 'let me show you a little of how I feel.'

She let him put his arm around her once more, and buried her face tenderly in his bosom. Trinket looked on in a furious agony of rage and jealousy.

He was rudely jolted out of his suffering by the unpleasant sensation of his pigtail being pulled very hard from behind, and one of his ears being sharply tweaked. He was about to cry out in pain, when he heard a very familiar voice whisper in his ear'

'Come with me, you little no'good, putrid turtle'egg! Whoever you are, you've no business snooping here!'

He found himself obeying instantaneously. That familiar voice, that familiar hand (a hand that had pulled his pigtail and tweaked his ear countless times in the past), belonged to none other than his mother, the ageing trollop, Spring Fragrance Wei.

Mother and Son Reunited

When they arrived in her room, Spring Fragrance kicked the door to and let go of

Trinket's pigtail and ear.

'Mum!' cried Trinket. 'I'm back!'

She stared at him. Then suddenly she hugged him, and burst out sobbing.

'Mum!' laughed Trinket. 'I'm back! I've come to see you! What are you crying for?'

'Where have you been all this time?' she sobbed. 'I searched for you everywhere. I prayed for you. Heaven knows how many vows I made to Lord Buddha, how many

times I kowtowed in the

temple-just because I wanted to know where you were, and whether you were safe

and sound. My darling little Trinket, you're back with your mum now!'

'I'm not a little boy any more,' replied Trinket with a happy smile. 'I've just been out and about in the big wide world, mum. You didn't need to worry so.'

Spring Fragrance looked at him through her tears. Her son had indeed grown up,
he was a healthy-looking young man now. She felt both happy and proud. But still
she couldn't help shedding a few more tears.

'You rotten little turtle'egg!' she cried. 'Out in the big wide world, you say, and not so much as a word to your own mum in all that time! You deserve a good
smack on the bum, that's what you deserve!'

Actually, the homely expression she used for a 'good smack' was 'fried meat with
bamboo shoots'-and Trinket had been dished up quite a few servings of that in his youth. But it was so long since he had last heard the expression coming from
his mother's lips, it now made him positively laugh out loud hearing it again. She laughed too, and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his grimy face. Then she
looked down at the front of her own dress, and saw the mess of tears and mucus,
all blackened with the ashes from her son's face-and off she went again, scolding him and slapping him and boxing his ears.

'There, you've gone and spoiled my only good dress! Trust you! What am I going
to wear for my customers now''

Trinket could see that she was getting all upset again.

'Don't you fret, mum. Tomorrow I'll take you to have a hundred new dresses made
up, and they'll all be ten times nicer than this one-I promise you!'

'Stop talking such rubbish!' She still sounded angry. 'Since when has a little turtle'egg like you ever been able to earn enough money to buy his mum anything''

'I may not be clever enough to earn it,' replied Trinket. 'But I might be clever

enough to win it at cards.'

'I know you,' said his mum. 'However much you won, you'd still manage to lose it all again in less than an hour.'

'Not this time, mum. This time I've won such a big stash, I couldn't ever lose it, however hard I tried.'

Off she went again, boxing his ears. This time Trinket let it pass.

The minute she sees me again,' he thought to himself, 'the only thing she wants to do is hit me! She's as bad as the Princess!'

He was just about to reach into his inside pocket, and produce a fat wad of notes to prove her wrong, when one of the whorehouse serving'women called out'

'Spring Fragrance! A customer for you! Straight away!'

'Coming!'

She straightened herself in front of the table mirror, and hurriedly patched up her make'up.

'You have a little lie'down,' she said. 'Til be back presently, and I'll want to know the whole story. And whatever you do, don't go running off anywhere!' Trinket could read in her eyes her genuine concern that he would disappear again, this time for good.

'Don't worry, mum. I'm not going anywhere.'

'Little turtle'egg!' she muttered, a happy smile lighting up her face, and bustled out of the room.

Trinket lay down under the covers. It was only a short while before his mother looked in again, bearing an empty wine jug. She seemed relieved to find him still there, and made to hurry off once more. Trinket was sure that the 'customer' sending for a refill of wine must be Sir Zheng, and he had a sudden idea.

'Mum,' he said, 'are you taking the customer some more wine''

'Yes, I am. Now you just lie down quietly like a good boy, and I'll bring you back a nice little something to eat.'

'Bring us a drop to drink on your way!' he said cheekily.

'You devil!' she retorted humorously. 'Since when did a little boy like you drink wine!'

The minute she was gone, Trinket peeped through the crack in the partition wall,

and seeing that the room next door was now empty, dashed in there, opened the

cupboard, and took out the bottle of opiate that the Madame was planning to soften up her new girl with. He hurried back to his mum's bed and buried

himself
under the covers again, complete with the bottle.
'So, you nasty Zheng piece of shit!' he muttered to himself, taking the stopper out of the bottle. 'So-you were planning to poison my wine, eh' Well, it looks as if I may have got there first!
Presently his mother hurried in with a full wine jug.
'Quickly,' she said. 'Have a couple of swigs while you can.'
She handed him the jug.
'Mum,' he said quickly, 'your face is all smudged.'
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As she turned to look in the mirror, he quickly poured out some of the wine and replaced it with the opiate. It only took a second. And in that second, Spring Fragrance was able to verify that there 'was in fact nothing smudged on her face.

'You little rascal!' she said. 'I know you and your tricks! You haven't changed a bit! Now, hand over that jug!'

Trinket laughed.

'Mum, when you go back down there, be sure to give the younger of the two gentlemen plenty to drink. When he's well and truly drunk and out for the count, it'll be easier to cheat the other one of his cash!'

'I don't need you to teach me my trade, boy!' quipped Spring Fragrance, secretly thinking to herself that her son's idea was quite a smart one. She was looking forward to being able to celebrate his home'coming later on in the night.

When she left the room, Trinket lay there dreaming of how, once Green was unconscious, he was first of all going to chop the Insufferable Sir Zheng (made all the more insufferable by the fact that he was being 'entertained' by Trinket's own mother, thereby entering into some sort of disgusting stepfather relationship to Trinket-ugh!) into pieces, and then melt him down, using his patent Decomposing Powder! Tamardy! Green could call the Insufferable 'darling' as many times as she liked then, he'd be a darling pool of stinking pus!

He could not resist the temptation to get up and go downstairs, to spy on what was happening in the Sweet Dew Parlour. He saw his mother plying both of the

gentlemen with wine. When they finally dismissed her, she put down the wine jug and managed to slip a nice little plate of succulent ham slices into her sleeve.

‘Mmm,’ thought Trinket happily, ‘scrummy ham for Trink!’ He hurried back to his mother’s room.

She soon came in with the ham, and took great delight in watching him wolf it down.

‘Mum’ said Trinket, ‘tonight I want to cuddle up with you. It’s been such a long time. Don’t go off and spend the night with one of those nasty men. Stay here with me.’

Spring Fragrance was deeply touched, and promised to stay with him all night.

‘I missed you all the time, mum,’ said Trinket, ‘while I was out there in the big wide world. Come, I’ll undo your dress for you.’

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And so saying, he proceeded to help her take off her dress. Spring Fragrance had

spent so many nights with a wide variety of customers over the years, she had slept with so many different men, that she had become totally desensitized to their roving fingers. But her own son’s fingers sent a strange frisson through her. She found what he was doing unbearably ticklish.

When he set about removing her underwear, she gave him a little slap on the hand.

That’s quite enough! I’ll do the rest myself, thank you very much!’

She hid coyly under the covers, and threw her underclothes out one by one.

Trinket meanwhile extracted some pieces of silver from his pocket, and stuffed them into his mother’s hand. It was about thirty taels’ worth.

‘There, mum, that’s for you.’

She looked at him in a mist of happiness, and then the tears started tumbling down her cheeks.

‘My darling boy, I’ll... I’ll keep these for you, for the day you get married!’

Trinket thought to himself

‘Which may be a lot sooner than you think, if I have my way with Green tonight!’

‘You go to sleep, mum,’ he said. ‘Til wait for you to fall asleep.’ Spring

Fragrance needed little persuading. It had been a tiring and eventful day, and she had knocked back a few cups of the drugged wine herself. She was soon snoring her head off. Trinket tiptoed to the door. A thought suddenly occurred to him, and he dashed back, grabbed her underwear, and hung it up on top of the canopy of her bedstead.

That way, if she wakes up and wants to come searching for me in the middle of the night, she won't be able to.'

The minute he glanced in at Sweet Dew Parlour, he could see Sir Zheng slumped

back in his chair, and Green slumped forward on the table. The opiate had clearly taken effect. He waited a moment, and they were still both totally motionless. He went in and, holding his dagger in his left hand as a precaution, prodded Sir Zheng with his right hand. There was no response whatsoever. He was

well and truly unconscious. Green, on the other hand, gave a few indistinct groans when he prodded her. Slipping his dagger back into his boot, he propped

her up and tried feeding her a little more of the 'grog'. She mumbled, 'Darling, I can't drink a

drop more . . . ' To which Trinket mumbled in reply, 'Sweetheart, just a mouthful

. . .', at the same time holding her mouth open with his left hand, and force-feeding her a good cupful straight down her throat. As she swallowed the wine, Trinket thought to himself 'We are husband and wife, damn it! Since you wouldn't do things properly, I'll just have to treat you as if you were one of the girls here, and spend the night with you as if I was one of your customers.'

She looked prettier than ever, sitting there in the red lamplight. Trinket felt himself choking with desire for her. Throwing caution to the winds (who could tell when Sir Zheng would come round'), he picked her up bodily and carried her

into the chamber next door.

This was a luxuriously appointed bedroom, kept for the better-heeled customers

who wanted to stay the night. The large bed (at least six feet wide) was covered with a beautifully embroidered brocade quilt. Trinket laid Green gently down on

the bed, and went to fetch a lamp, which he placed on one of the bedside tables. Her beautiful face, flushed with the wine, glowed in the lamplight. He was beside himself. His heart started thumping wildly. He lent over her, and removed

her gown. Now she had nothing on but a flimsy, pale-green undergarment.

He was starting to undo the buttons when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Someone had come into the room. Before he could turn around, he felt his pigtail tighten, and his ears twisted in a vice-like grip. It was Spring Fragrance again, en deshabille. His precautions had been in vain.

‘Mum!’ hissed Trinket. ‘Let go!’

‘You rotten little turtle-egg!’ cried his mother. ‘We may be poor folk, but whore-house rules are whore-house rules, and they mustn’t be broken! This is one of Yangzhou’s top nine establishments, and we pride ourselves on never stealing a customer’s money!’

‘But mum!’ wailed Trinket. ‘I wasn’t stealing!’ Spring Fragrance would not let go. She gave him another tug on the pigtail and dragged him back to her room.

‘If you weren’t stealing, what exactly were you doing, taking off a customer’s clothes like that, and going through his things’ I’ll bet those thirty taels you gave me were all stolen too! When I think of the years I spent rearing you, and look what you’ve turned into’ a common thief!’

She started bawling her heart out, and threw the silver Trinket had given her on the floor.

Trinket was in a bit of a fix. It would take him an age to explain to his mother that the gentleman-customer was actually a woman dressed as a man, and that she was in fact his duly betrothed. And she wouldn’t believe one story anyway. It sounded about as unlikely as any story could. He tried another tack.

‘Why should I want to steal other people’s money’ I’ve got plenty of my own. Look!’

So saying he took out a great wad of notes from his inside pocket.

‘Mum, this is all for you! I’d have given you more, but I was afraid it might have been too much of a shock, all coming at once.’

Spring Fragrance was looking at twenty or thirty notes, each one worth several hundreds of taels. It was a fortune. She just stared.

‘What. . . the . . . Did you steal all of this from those two gents’ You could never earn this much-not even if you hatched out of your turtle’egg ten times over! Go on, give it back to them! It’ll only bring trouble! You’ll only get caught! They’ll only have you beaten! Trinket my boy, we don’t want to take all this money from other people!’

She meant every word of it. There really seemed no way round it but to humour her. So Trinket took her by the hand and led her down to Sweet Dew Parlour, where he solemnly stuffed the notes into Sir Zheng’s pocket. Then he patted his own pockets to show that they were empty.

There, mum. Happy now”

She breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Yes, my boy. That’s much better.’

A Strange Brotherhood

Trinket sneaked back to his Temporary Residence in the Ho Garden, and told Doublet to help him wash and change back into his formal mandarin attire.

‘Well’ she said quizzically, ‘was your tour of inspection successful”

‘Very,’ he replied. ‘And now we are going back to make some arrests. You’d better get into a guard’s uniform yourself. And call out eight other guards to come with us.’

‘What about Mr Xu and the others” asked Doublet. She was referring to Apothecary Xu and the other Triad Brothers.

‘No need to bother them’ was Trinket’s reply. The truth was, he didn’t want to have his hands tied when dealing with Zheng Keshuang. He knew the Triads would not stand by and watch the grandson of their great hero Coxinga being harshly treated.

Doublet put on her uniform.

‘Should we ask Zeng Rou to come with us” she asked. The two girls had spent a lot of time in each other’s company, since becoming the only two female members

of Trinket’s guard, and had struck up a close friendship. Trinket reflected for a minute. He might need an extra pair of hands to help carry Green back.

‘Very well. Tell her to come along. But don’t go disturbing the whole Wang Wu Clan.’

Zeng Rou was already in her guard's uniform, so in a matter of minutes they were able to set off in the direction of Vernal Delights' Trinket, the two girls in disguise, and eight of his regular Palace Guards.

Two of his guards knocked on the brothel door, proclaiming 'His Excellency the Colonel wishes to inspect these premises! Open up!'

They were under instructions to limit Trinket's rank to that of a colonel. That would already be sufficient to overawe the Madame and her womenfolk.

It took a fair amount of knocking to arouse a response from within, but finally the door creaked open and one of the old serving women poked her head out.

'Visitors!' she announced in rather an unenthusiastic tone of voice.

Tell your Mistress to come down. The Colonel wishes to see her.'

The Madame received them in the main hall. Trinket thought there was something a little odd, almost offhand, about the way she was behaving towards them. They proceeded on to the Sweet Dew Parlour. There Trinket saw Sir Zheng still slumped in his chair, and was about to give orders for his removal, when he was interrupted by a voice behind him'

'Lord Wei! How are you keeping'

Trinket spun round, to behold a richly attired man bearing down upon him. He sensed danger, and reached instinctively for

the dagger in his boot. But before he could lay a hand on it, he felt his arm caught in a tight grip from behind, and was heaved up into the air by both wrists.

'Sit down, and don't try anything!'

The person behind him had now gripped his neck with his left hand, and proceeded to dump him unceremoniously in a chair. Trinket winced with pain. At the same

time he heard Doublet give a short cry, and saw her throw herself at his assailant. Zeng Rou also joined the fray, and was soon exchanging blows with a smartly dressed young man to the side.

Trinket glanced briefly at this young man, and knew at once that 'he' was yet

another girl dressed in man's clothes. It was only a matter of seconds before he recognized this person as Green's older (but only just) sister-in-law, Ah Ki, otherwise known as Blue. The man now tussling with Doublet (the man who had

dumped Trinket in the chair) was the wiry Tibetan Lama Sangge (such was the name

he went by among the Chinese, his actual Tibetan name- sDe'srid Sangs'rgyas'rgya'mtsho-being considered a trifle unpronounceable), whom he had

last seen running off into the distance with yellow liquid oozing from all his decomposing fingers. On the present occasion he was wearing ordinary non'lamaist

clothes, and a hat with a false pigtail attached to it. As for the very first person, the man in the rich attire, he on closer inspection turned out to be the Mongol Prince Galdan.

Trinket cursed himself for being such a fool. Green and Sir Zheng had referred several times to the Mongols they were expecting to meet. But he had been too blinded by his infatuation with Green to pay proper attention.

There was a thud as Doublet fell to the ground, immobilized by a blow from the Tibetan Sangge, aimed at the Vital Point in the small of her back. Zeng Rou was still locked in combat with Blue. Sangge had soon intervened and immobilized her

as well. As for the eight regular guards, within minutes they were all lying sprawled in the courtyard outside, the lucky ones immobilized by the Tibetan, the less lucky ones killed by the Mongol Prince.

Sangge laughed darkly.

'So, Lord Wei' he said, taking a seat, 'and where is your Shifu'

So saying, he held out both of his hands. He had been obliged to chop off the last joint of every one of his fingers, to prevent the decomposition from spreading any further. It was a fearful sight.

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Trinket shuddered at the thought of the kind of vengeance he would be seeking. It would certainly be more than a finger for a finger.

Sangge seemed pleased to have struck fear into Trinket's heart.

'Lord Wei, I fear I slighted you on a previous occasion. I did not realize then that such a young person could occupy such a high position at Court.'

'I owe you an apology too,' returned Trinket. 'I took you for an ordinary run-of-the-mill lama.'

Sangge cleared his throat.

‘And how do you know I am not ordinary’

‘You must have been very brave indeed to chop off your own finger’ends. A real hero!’

Sangge knew he was being made fun of. But at the same time, there was some truth in what Trinket had just said. It had required exceptional courage at the time, to chop off the last joints of his fingers; but it had been a matter of life and death. His entire mission had failed; his twelve fellow lamas, the ones who had accompanied him to China in his bid to steal the famous Sutra in Forty’Two Sections, had all perished. And he had been left alone, maimed, and capable now of executing only a highly curtailed version of his own deadly style of kungfu.

The faintest hint of a smile crossed Sangge’s brooding face.

‘Lord Wei, we knew you were coming here to Yangzhou, and that is why we arranged to gather here together. You are the one person who seems capable of causing trouble for our ally Satrap Wu. You even prevented his son from leaving Peking and travelling south. Am I right’

‘Well, you certainly seem well informed!’ commented Trinket. ‘I am deeply impressed.’ As he spoke, he was thinking fast. ‘And I suppose you know exactly what the Emperor said to me when he sent me here’

‘Pray enlighten us,’ said Sangge.

‘Well, I’ll tell you anyway. Not so sure about enlightening anyone. He just said he was worried that the Satrap might try to have me assassinated while I was in Yangzhou, in which case, he said, I was to remind the would’be assassins that he was holding the Satrap’s son prisoner, and that whatever happened to me would also happen to Young Wu.’

Sangge and Galdan exchanged a meaningful glance. This piece of information seemed to have slightly taken the wind out of their sails.

‘When Prince Galdan and I arranged to come here to meet the Emperor’s man’ began

Sangge, ‘we had no idea it would be you, someone we had already encountered! Why, even Ah Ki here seems to know you.’

Trinket smiled.

‘Oh yes, we’re old friends-’

The Blue Girl picked a chopstick off the table and jabbed it at Trinket’s forehead.

‘I’m no friend of yours!’

Sangge continued

‘We had agreed to meet here with Sir Zheng from Taiwan, in order to lay plans for your demise. But then you kindly obliged by presenting yourself to us on a plate.’

‘Indeed,’ said Trinket. ‘Of course, you’re aware that His Majesty has had the pleasure of spending three whole days chatting with that big bearded Mongol fellow who works for your Prince friend-Hatiemo, I think his name is. There’s very little His Majesty does not know by now about your plans.’

Sangge and Galdan seemed greatly shocked to hear Hatiemo’s name mentioned. They

both stood up, and asked Trinket to explain what had in fact transpired between

the Emperor and Galdan’s secret emissary.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t know,’ said Trinket casually. ‘Most of the time they were babbling away in Mongolian, and I couldn’t understand a word of it. All I know is that afterwards, His Majesty rewarded him with a large sum of money and sent

him off to work for Lord Mingju at the Board of War. I had to go over there a few days later and tell him to hurry up with some map or other he was drawing. I’m not really up on military matters, campaigns and the like. I just told the Emperor that I personally wasn’t available for any invasion of Tibet or Mongolia

that he might have planned. I said it was much too cold for me out there. I’d rather take some leave and come down south to Yangzhou for a good time. . . .’

Galdan looked extremely preoccupied by these tantalizing scraps of information

Trinket had dangled before him.

‘You mean to say the Emperor is actually thinking of sending troops into Tibet and Mongolia?’

Trinket vaguely shook his head.

‘I’m not sure. I honestly don’t understand such things. But I do remember His

Majesty saying to me that his main target was "a certain other person beginning with S", and that was my. ""

the Tibetans and Mongols were on his side in that particular conflict. Then he could think of them as friends and not bother them. But if they insisted on siding with "a certain other person", he would have no choice but to go to war against them too.'

It was crucial that he let the two of them know that their game was up, that Hatty had gone over to the Manchus, that the Emperor knew all. Trinket was frantically playing for time. As he always did when he was in a tight spot, he was improvising. And this time his plight was pretty desperate. Doublet and Zeng

Rou were lying there immobilized; his eight guards were either dead or out of action. And since this little visit of his had been undertaken in absolute secrecy, none of his other potential reinforcements (Triads, Guards) were going to turn up to save him. He felt an impending sense of doom. He felt like the raw material for a tasty dish, the main ingredient of which was well-minced meat, some sort of meatball speciality (like the famous Yangzhou Lion's Head, for example), served in a rich gravy, or steamed, or mixed with ground crabmeat. . .

. What the hell, however it was cooked, he'd rather not be part of it. And if he was to survive, he simply had to

keep talking.

'His Majesty has often spoken to me of his high regard for your kungfu, Prince Galdan.' Galdan smiled.

'Does His Majesty practice kungfu himself' How does he come to know of my own humble abilities in that field'1

'Oh, he's not a bad fighter himself, not bad at all. And I gave him a full description of your masterful display of kungfu that day when we first met in the grounds of the Shaolin Temple. As I remember, you totally outshone even the Shaolin Masters

themselves.'

Prince Galdan knew that this was far from the truth. In fact,

his visit to the Shaolin Monastery had not been a large success. But he was grateful to Trinket for inflating his reputation in this way. 'Why' continued Trinket, 'one flick of your sleeve, and you unbalanced the abbot, Pathet Wisdom.

And he's quite some fighter himself. He hit the ground so heavily, it was a mercy for him that he landed on a meditation cushion, or he'd have broken his bum'bone!'

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with the merest flick of a sleeve.

Trinket made a mental note that he should one day apologize to the old abbot for

having so misrepresented him. 'But he's bound to understand my predicament. And

after all, to a truly enlightened monk, all things are relative, even the truth.'

Even as he continued to babble on, Trinket glanced furtively around him. He noticed a barely perceptible smile on the Blue Girl's face. She fixed her beautiful eyes on Prince Galdan, and Trinket thought he could read a whole love

story in her gaze.

'Why, the little fox wants to be a Mongol Princess!' he thought to himself, and this set him off again.

'His Majesty said to me one day that he hoped Prince Galdan would find himself a

wife with the good looks and kungfu skills to match his own. Someone even more

beautiful and more talented than the Peerless Consort. Well, I'd say you'd done pretty well for

yourself!'

Much as she loathed Trinket, Blue Girl could not help feeling a little thrill of pleasure at being praised for her beauty in the presence of the man she loved. What woman would not'

Somehow Trinket managed to find flattering things to say about all three of them. Sangge's great regret was that he and his twelve disciples had been so utterly routed by Trinket's Shifu, the White Nun. Trinket even managed to turn that story around to the Tibetan Lama's credit. He soon had all three of them smiling and

laughing.

In his continuing need to keep his captors amused, Trinket succeeded in stringing out a whole series of stories concerning the Peerless Consort, including one about men having to wear handcuffs to stop themselves from touching her and getting into trouble. Each story was more fantastic than the

last, but they were all told with such flair and conviction that he never for a moment lost his audience. Then, in a momentary lull, he reached for a trump card' 'There's one extremely confidential secret that I'd like to share with you,' he whispered, contorting his face in such a way that they could almost feel the pain he was experiencing in divulging this deep and closely guarded mystery.

'What is it' asked Galdan, still open-mouthed from Trinket's previous tale.

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'It's to do with the Emperor himself.'

Short pause for effect.

'He's about to launch a strike on Satrap Wu.'

The three exchanged a knowing smirk, each thinking the same thought'

'Big secret! If he didn't strike first, the Satrap would be up in arms anyway. We all know that.'

'You'll never guess why the Emperor wants to send troops down to Yunnan-'

'Could that be to do with the Peerless Consort too' said Blue Girl.

Trinket thumped the table in a dramatic display of surprise.

'How on earth did you know''

'Oh, I just guessed.'

'What a genius you are, my dear Miss Blue! Yes, the one thing missing in His Majesty's almost-perfect life is exactly that' the world's most beautiful woman. That's the real reason he sent me to Kunming. To check her out. I had to report back to him, and tell him if she really was as beautiful as everyone said she was. And I was to sound out the Satrap himself, and see if there was any chance of his giving her up, of his loyally presenting his Great Beauty to the Throne. Well, I'm sure you can all imagine how the Satrap reacted, when I let drop the slightest hint of all this. He was livid! He jumped up and down, he thumped the table, he ...'

Trinket was off again. And extraordinarily enough, Galdan and Sangge found

the
story not in the least bit incredible. Everyone knew that it was his excessive
love of this woman that had led the Satrap to betray his own people, and to sell
his services to the Manchus. Everyone knew that the Emperor was a young
man,
with all the usual young man's romantic aspirations. Why had they never
thought
of this before? What they had seen all along as a political struggle between the
Manchus and the Chinese was in fact infinitely more complicated than they
had
ever imagined. And tangled up in it was love for a beautiful woman.

Trinket, meanwhile, was busy mentally apologizing to his friend Misty for
having
misrepresented him as lusting after this older woman, especially since she
belonged to his great enemy the Satrap. 'I'm in a real fix here, Misty-I'm sure
you understand!'

Trinket took a quick look at Galdan and Sangge, and their serious expressions
set him off again.

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'That reminds me of something else that happened when I was down in
Kunming.

Hatiemo came to see me one evening. He told me that Prince Galdan had sent
him

to liaise with the Satrap, and that he was really fed up when he found out what
it was really all about. He was proud to be a Mongol, he said, a true son of
Gengimoto Khan, or whatever his name is-and he thought it was a terrible
thing

for his master the Prince to get caught up in the Satrap's personal fight over a
woman. He asked me to tell the Emperor that this whole business about the
Peerless Consort should not concern either Prince Galdan or the Great Lama
Sangge. Prince Galdan had a ravishingly beautiful lady's friend of his own
already, by the name of Ah Ki' (more blushes of coy pleasure from Blue Girl),
'and wasn't interested in the Peerless Consort. And as for the Great Lama from
Tibet, he no doubt had . . . well, had plenty of pretty Tibetan lady'lamas up
his sleeve-'

That's enough!' cried Sangge. 'We Yellow Hats take the strictest vows of
celibacy! I'll thank you to keep the lusts of the flesh out of this, so far as I
am concerned.'

'I'm only repeating what Hatiemo said,' pleaded Trinket. 'He was probably just
trying to reassure His Majesty that you didn't have designs on the Peerless

Consort.'

Sangge grunted.

'I'll go and see Hatiemo myself, and ask him if it was him who made up all this nonsense, or if it was you. Ruining a man's reputation like that!'

'Phew!' thought Trinket. 'At least if he takes the time to go and see Hatty, he may not get round to killing me for the time being. Keep on talking, Trink.'

'Your Reverence, no offence was meant, I'm sure! Why even if you were to set eyes on the Peerless Consort, and even if you didn't have those special handcuffs on to stop yourself from fondling her, the thing is, you're so wise and enlightened, you're a Great Lama after all, you're way beyond the Red Dust.

I mean, way past anything like lust or sex. Beauty is the Void, all things must pass, and that sort of stuff . . . But-'

'But what" glowered Sangge.

'But . . . it's a known fact that in a single day thousands of ordinary monks in Kunming left their temples and renounced their vows, all because they'd caught

one single glimpse of this Most Beautiful Person.'

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Blue Girl glanced at Galdan.

'Well, I must say' she commented, 'Kunming sounds a very peculiar sort of place.

If you want to go down there and help Satrap Wu, I'm afraid you'll be going without me.'

'Who said I was going to Kunming" said Galdan hastily. 'I'm not the least bit interested in seeing this Peerless Consort. And anyway, I'm sure you're just as beautiful as she is.'

Blue Girl did not look pleased.

'As beautiful' Not more! So you do want to see her!'

She rose to her feet angrily.

'I'm leaving-'

'No! Don't go!' Galdan seemed most distressed. 'I swear by heaven's name that I'll never ever look at Chen Yuanyuan.'

Blue Girl smiled, and sat down again, casting Galdan a loving look.

‘His Majesty once said to me,’ said Trinket, ‘that he couldn’t understand why Prince Galdan and Reverent Sangge wanted to help Satrap Wu. Whatever Satrap Wu has got, the Emperor’s got ten times more of. If you were to side with him instead, he’d make you a King-and that’s better than being a Prince any day of the week.’

‘Did he really say that’

Galdan’s eyes were gleaming. His voice trembled with emotion.

‘Of course he did! Why would I lie to you’

There is no such thing as a King of the Mongols’ objected Sangge. ‘They call them Khans. Prince Galdan would, I am sure, be most grateful to the Emperor if he could help to make him the Khan of the Dzungars.’

‘Of course he can do that!’ replied Trinket (not that he had the faintest idea who the Dzungars were, or what a Khan was). ‘All he has to do is send a hundred thousand of his men and none of the other Mongols is likely to stand up to him. And as for you, Your Reverence, I’m sure that if you come over to his side, he’ll make you top dog as well-whatever they call that in Tibet!’

‘In our country, the two greatest and most powerful lamas of all are the Dalai Lama, the "Ocean of Wisdom", and the Panchen Lama, the "Great Scholar".’

‘Well, if you can have two, why not three’ His Majesty can simply make you the Third Lama-call it what you will, the Sangge Lama if you like-and then he can make the other two your juniors.’

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Sangge knew that Trinket was simply talking off the top of his head, but the extraordinary thing was that what he was saying had a certain logic. He’d even had similar ideas himself. A crafty smile stole its way across his sinister face.

Trinket was willing to promise anyone anything-provided it saved him from instant death. None of this would cost him personally anything, after all.

‘Believe me, if I propose this to the Emperor, it will happen. He always listens to my advice. And if you come over to his side, and help him against Satrap

Wu,
I'm sure I'll get promoted as well. We'll be a great team, the three of us! The sky's the limit! I think we should take an Oath of Brotherhood here and now. For better, or for worse! We should swear to stick together through thick and thin, till death us do part. We'll live and die together!' (That way, at least, they can't kill me today!' Trinket was thinking. They'd be killing themselves!')

Before coming to Yangzhou for this fateful rendezvous, Galdan and Sangge had indeed ascertained that the Imperial Envoy was a great favourite of the Emperor, a young official whose star was very much on the rise. They had not dreamt for a moment that it would turn out to be the young rascal they had once encountered at Shaolin. Bit by bit they had been won over by Trinket's plausible tales, and with this final prospect, they needed no further convincing. They could see that it was in fact in their own interests to switch sides and join the Emperor's camp. They looked at one another and nodded silently. No one was more amazed at this turn of events than Trinket himself. He thought he had better clinch the deal before they thought better of it.

'So, my brothers, let us take the oath. As for Sister Blue here, she is as good as married to the Prince already, so whether she takes the oath or not, she's one of us.'

Blue could not help finding this young rascal's way of talking appealing, despite everything. Sangge suddenly stretched out a hand and brought it down with a thump, breaking off a corner of the table. Trinket was startled.

'What's up now'

'Lord Wei, I am going to trust you today. But if you ever go back on your word, may your bones be as broken as this table is now!'

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So the three of them set up a great red candle in the room, and knelt down before it, taking a solemn Oath of Brotherhood. In this new (and strange) fraternity, Sangge ranked first, Galdan second, Trinket third. Blue poured wine, and they all raised their cups to drink a toast.

Even Stranger Womenfolk

‘Wait a moment!’ cried Trinket. ‘This wine is full of dregs—we should order some fresh! Hey there! Some wine!’

But even as he moved the jug aside and called for a servant to bring wine, he reflected to himself how strange it was that in all this time, while he had been making up one story after another, there had not been a sign of a single one of the women who normally worked at Vernal Delights. Perhaps they were lying low, afraid to become involved in a fracas that had already cost several lives.

And then in came an old crone, a strange-looking creature, who did not so much as look at him, but merely nodded and muttered

‘What do you want’

‘Fetch us a couple of jugs of fresh wine!’ ordered Trinket, and the old woman nodded and set off again. As he watched her leave the room, Trinket felt a sudden shock go through him, and a shudder run up his spine. He jumped violently to his feet.

His new-found brothers asked him what the trouble was.

‘It’s that woman,’ replied Trinket. ‘She’s one of the Satrap’s men dressed up. I’m sure she’s been spying on us. She knows everything!’

Sangge and Galdan reacted with horror and alarm.

‘Then she must die at once!’

‘Not so fast’ returned Trinket. ‘Let’s pretend not to have noticed. See how many of them there are. What they’re up to.’

His voice was trembling. If it had really been one of Wu’s men, he would never have been so frightened. The truth was that he had recognized the old woman’s way of walking, just as he had noticed something odd about the stranger leaving the ‘marquee’ the previous evening. The two were one and the same. And it was not one of the Satrap’s men. It was none other than that formidable member of the Mystic Dragon Sect known as Doctor Lu.

Doctor Lu had been with mm on emu un ..^ ,””0

ever since they had first left Snake Island together. But since Trinket's capture by the Mystic Dragons and subsequent escape to the frozen North, he'd had no news of him. This time he was cleverly disguised, but Trinket had recognized him from his characteristic way of walking. What on earth was he doing here in Yangzhou? Trinket feared the worst. He probably had Fat Dhuta and

Thin Dhuta (alias Meatball) with him. And who knows, even the Great Leader himself. Trinket broke out in a cold sweat.

Presently Doctor Lu (dressed as a woman) returned bearing a wooden tray and two

fresh jugs of wine. He bent down and placed the wine on the table.

"Where are all the other serving women?" asked Trinket.

The 'old lady' gave a little hump, and walked back out again. 'She' had not looked up once.

Trinket turned to his new friends.

'Brothers,' he whispered, 'Sister-in-law,' (that was Blue-she had acquired the title by virtue of her virtual marriage to his brother Galdan), 'wait for my signal. If I show the whites of my eyes and roll my head backwards, that's the sign for you to go into the attack and kill them all. Be careful. These people know what they're doing!'

Sangge and the others nodded. But they could not help wondering what all the fuss was about, if these were just some of the Satrap's troops in disguise.

Surely they could cope with them easily enough'

Presently Doctor Lu returned with four 'singsong girls', who proceeded to sit down next to Trinket and his friends. Trinket did not recognize a single one of them. They were certainly none of them among the original Vernal Delights girls

that Trinket knew. And they were all decidedly ugly. The one sitting by Sangge had scabs all over her legs. She winked at Trinket, and he winked back. He remarked to himself that despite the scabs, she seemed lively, and had quite a twinkle in her eye.

Trinket picked up the old jug that contained the drugged wine from before, and poured a cup for each of the girls.

'Drink up, girls! You know that's the rule here at Vernal Delights. The girls must always drink first.'

Doctor Lu and the four 'girls' assumed that Trinket must know what he was talking about, and all five of them downed their wine.

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'Come on now, where are all the other girls?' cried Trinket. 'Is this the complete roster for the night?'

One of the four 'girls' - with a podgy, dark face-threw Doctor Lu a quick glance, and the latter then left the room, to reappear shortly afterwards with two more elderly 'serving' women', both of them tall and fat. One was obviously Fat Dhuta in disguise (Trinket could tell at first glance); the other was probably Meatball, but somehow he'd been made to look a lot taller and even fatter. On closer inspection, Trinket could tell that he was actually walking on stilts!

'Drink up, ladies!' called out Trinket, filling them each a cup of 'grog'.

Fat Dhuta drank his down in total silence. Meatball seemed to fly into a rage and was about to start berating Trinket, when Doctor Lu tugged him by the sleeve and told him to drink up and be quiet.

'So, is everyone here' asked Trinket. 'No one missing'

'All present' replied Doctor Lu.

'What a shame! You mean the Great Leader couldn't make it' He isn't here in drag today too"

And with these words Trinket rolled his eyes and threw his head back.

Doctor Lu and company, all seven of them, were totally thrown by Trinket's last remark. The four 'girls' stood up as one. Sangge had meanwhile been doing some deep breathing exercises, and was ready for action. He lunged forward with both arms extended, and in one second had succeeded in jabbing both Doctor Lu and Meatball on a Vital Point in the small of the back.

Doctor Lu went down, immobilized, but Meatball came back at Sangge, swinging the edge of his palm down towards him. Sangge's skill at closing points-his Two Finger kungfu, as it was known- had always been lethal in the past, and he was totally taken aback to see Meatball so obviously still up and about. He was aware that v'ith the loss of his fingertips he had also lost a little of his agility and pressure, but at the same time the Inner Force was still there, if anything stronger than ever. Sangge concluded that his opponent must possess some extraordinary ability of his own. The truth was that because Meatball was on stilts, Sangge had misplaced his jab, striking him somewhere on the thigh instead. It had been a painful blow, but certainly not immobilizing.

By now Fat Dhuta and Galdan were locked in combat, as were the scabby 'girl' and

Blue. One of the other 'girls' descended on Trinket. She looked evil, and had all her fingers curled up like hooks. Trinket took refuge under the table, stuck out a hand, and grabbed her by the leg. She was already more than half 'grogged

out', and toppled easily to the ground, where she lay helpless. Soon the other three 'girls' were in a similar state.

Meatball had a few bouts with Sangge, and then he grew impatient with his stilts, which rendered his movements so clumsy; so he snapped them in half and

threw them away.

'Well I'll be . . .' cried Sangge. 'He's just a little round dwarf!'

'I used to be a lot taller than you once upon a time!' declared Meatball. 'What business is it of yours if I prefer being small'

Sangge roared with laughter. Throughout this exchange, they never stopped fighting. They were both formidable kungfu practitioners, and secretly admired each other's art.

Over in a different part of the room, Galdan was coming off the worse against Fat Dhuta. But Fat Dhuta was beginning to experience the effects of the wine, and was losing his agility. Blue (whose own opponent, the scabby 'girl', had already passed out) came to Galdan's aid. Fat Dhuta was starting to lose consciousness, but was still able to sense his (new) opponent strike him on the chest, though not with any great force. As he closed his eyes, he succeeded in lunging out with one final blow, separating his opponent's hands and jabbing both of his index fingers into the Vital Points just beneath her armpits. Blue felt herself go numb, and toppled slowly on top of the already prostrate Doctor Lu, only to see Fat Dhuta himself crash to the ground by her side seconds later. 'Ah Ki! Ah Ki! Are you all right'

It was Galdan who cried out. And in that same instant, Fat Dhuta summoned up one

last burst of energy, picked himself up from the ground, and hurled himself at the Mongol Prince, striking him on the chest with such force that he went hurtling across the room and smashed into the wall. The Two Dhutas had always

possessed phenomenal Inner Force in their kungfu, and the potion (which was after all of a relatively mild intensity, designed to do no more than reduce the resistance of recalcitrant novices in the whore'house) had only made them dizzy,

it had not robbed them of their true strength.

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Meatball was still up (though everything he saw melted into one great blur), and still attempting to get the better of Sangge. But the Tibetan's sheer strength and agility were too much for him, and having sustained several hefty blows, Meatball staggered roaring out of the room, pursued by Doctor Lu, who had also succeeded in tottering up from the ground.

Galdan felt his back almost crack in two when Fat Dhuta had thrown him at the wall. He "was severely winded. But seeing his opponent crouched over the table, his eyes closed and his right hand wavering before him vulnerably, Galdan too summoned up his last ounce of energy, lurched over towards him, and landed him a powerful kick in the buttocks. Fat Dhuta let out a great cry, spun round blindly, grabbed Galdan by the chest, then raised him into the air. Sangge came hurtling over to his friend's rescue. Fat Dhuta opened his eyes and stared at him for a split second, then crashed out of Sweet Dew Parlour, still clutching Galdan. He seemed literally to fly up into the air with him, and over the wall.

Tut the man down!' yelled Sangge going in hot pursuit up on to the roof. But all he could hear was the two men's cries fading into the distance.

Roll'Call

Trinket crawled out from under the table, to find bodies strewn all over the place. Doublet and Zeng Rou were lying over in one corner of the room; the four fake whores were stretched unconscious in the middle of the floor; Zheng Keshuang had remained slumped over the table from the very start. A chair had been knocked over during the fighting and was now lying upside'down under the table. Blue, who had dragged herself towards the table, had the lower part of her body draped over the upside'down chair, and the upper part on the ground. Not one of them moved. Some had had their Vital Points immobilized, others were drugged. They were all as lifeless as corpses. Trinket's first concern was for Doublet. He helped her up on to a chair, and made sure that she was still

breathing and not in any danger. Then he did the same for Zeng Rou and Blue. Next he went to his mother's room, and found her lying unconscious (but unharmed) on her bed. It seemed that the Mystic Dragon squad had immobilized the entire staff of Vernal Delights. With time, they would all recover.

CHAPTER 24

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Back in the Sweet Dew Parlour, he saw that there was absolutely no trace of the principal combatants in the recent melee; Sangge and Galdan, on the one side, and the two Dhutas on the other. All four had vanished. He turned his attention

to the various fake 'whores', and this is what he found (by dint of removing large quantities of make'up)' the scabby one, who had winked at him, obviously in an attempt to warn him that he was in danger, turned out to be the Little Countess; the one with the dark, plumpish face turned out to be the Great Leader's wife, the beautiful Su Quan, Madame Hong (Trinket made a mental note

that she seemed if anything prettier than ever); the remaining two were both quite corpulent. One of them had tried to attack him. Trinket poured wine on her

face, and after wiping clean the make'up, recognized her with a start of amazement as the Fake'Empress Dowager.

The Emperor will be pleased!' he said to himself. 'Well, well! Look at her now, flat on her back in Vernal Delights. It's where she belongs! I was right after all, to call her the Old Whore!'

The last of the 'whores' turned out to be Fang Yi. Trinket was astonished to see how big she was looking.

'Looks to me as if she's gone and got herself pregnant! Don't tell me she's been unfaithful to her old man too!'

He felt inside her dress, and felt not flesh, but-a pillow! He laughed.

Going out into the courtyard, he found the place dark and deserted, littered with the dead bodies of his unfortunate guards. Still no sign of his new'found brothers, Galdan and Sangge. Returning to the Sweet Dew Parlour, he took stock

of the collection of beautiful young ladies lying there, either unconscious or at the very least incapable of motion' the Little Countess, Madame Hong, Fang Yi, Doublet, Zeng Rou, and Blue Girl. Each of them had her particular brand of charm and beauty, he reflected. And then there was a seventh lying on the big bed next door, a young woman of still greater beauty, a young lady bound to him

by vows of marriage (even if those vows still remained to be consummated).

‘Oh my little darling,’ he thought silently to himself, ‘tonight’s the night, or Trinket’s not worthy of the name husband. . . .’
Then he saw Zeng Rou looking up at him from where she lay. There was a flush on her cheeks, and a sweet, appealing expression on her face.
‘Oh you adorable little doll, I seem to have seen so long ago since the days on Wangwu Mountain. You seem to have been almost avoiding me. Well, I think tonight may be the night for you too. . . .’

He carried her in and lay her down beside Green, who was in deep slumber, a secret smile on her lips, as if she was in the middle of the most delicious dream’encounter with-Trinket thought bitterly to himself-the insufferable Sir Zheng!

And so one by one, he carried them all in and laid them out on the big bed-even the Fake’Empress Dowager.

‘Oh well,’ reflected Trinket, ‘in for a penny, in for a tael! I might as well have the lot of you! Old Whore, fake whores, good girls, bad girls-the whole lot! This is a whore’house after all! And it was your idea to come here, not mine. So when you wake up in the morning, you’d better not blame me!’

He’d always dreamed of opening a whore’house of his own in Yangzhou, and of returning to Vernal Delights in grand style and paying for every one of the girls to entertain him. Things had not quite turned out that way. But this was better than nothing. Then he thought twice about including Blue Girl in his harem’ she was, after all, technically speaking his sister’in’law, since Galdan had become his brother. Even he was bound by a certain code of honour. So he carried her back to the parlour, and propped her up in a chair. He thought he saw a glimmer of recognition in her eyes, a hint of approval, even of congratulation for his honourable decision. She looked so lovely. For a moment he was tempted again, and even began carrying her back. But in the end, chivalry won the day.

Trinket now went to the bedroom, and performed a mental roll’call’

Three of you came here dressed as whores in the first place’ that’s the Little Countess, Fang Yi, and Madame Hong. Two of you came with me, and even if you didn’t know what sort of place you were coming to, you’re here now, and you’ll have to spend the night with me. As for you, Miss Green, you’re my wife, you

came here and started playing around with my mother, in other words taking liberties with your own mother'in'law. So I think it's high time your old man did a little messing around with you!

So saying, he pushed the Old Whore to a far corner of the bedstead, shook out the quilt and spread it over the recumbent bodies of the six other young women,
kicked off his shoes, and with a little cry of glee, crept in under the covers.

Time passed, the candles burned themselves out, and soon it was pitch dark in the

room. Trinket lay there for a while in silence, and then began humming that favourite song of his, 'The Eighteen Touches', to pass the time, adapting the lyrics to his present somewhat unusual situation'

Seven ladies' hands, Seven ladies' feet...

His own mind and hands were meanwhile busy dealing with the opportunities presented by multiple combinations of female hands and feet needing to be touched. Suddenly he heard a sweet little voice humming'

'No . . . no, don't. . . My darling, is that you''

It was, of course, Green, beginning to come round from her (somewhat earlier) dose of the potion. Trinket was furious to observe that even in her dreams she thought of no one but the insufferable Sir Zheng.

'Yes, it's me, my sweet,' he murmured back.

'No! No! Don't! You mustn't!'

She began to struggle. And then came the Insufferable's voice from the room outside'

'Ah Kor! Darling! Where are you''

This was followed by a loud crash, and the sound of a chair being clumsily overturned and cups clattering off the table and on to the ground. He was evidently trying to stand up. In her semi'stupified state Green suddenly realized that if her darling's voice was coming from outside, the person with his arms around her must be somebody else. The shock of this realization helped

her to emerge a little from her drugged state.

'Who ... are you'' Her voice was trembling. 'What's ... what am I. . . '

Trinket laughed.

'It's just your husband, my darling! Surely you recognized my voice''

Green was utterly appalled. She struggled with all her might to free herself from his embrace, but she had still not regained her strength.

'Sir Zheng! Sir Zheng!' she wailed.

Sir Zheng came shambling towards the darkened room, and there was a great thud

as his forehead made contact with the doorframe.

‘Ah Kor! Darling!’ he cried. ‘Where are you?’ ‘Over here! Get your hands off me, you little monster! What do you think you’re doing?’ ‘What do you mean?’

The unfortunate Sir Zheng did not understand that her words were addressed to Trinket, and took them as a personal affront.

As for Trinket, he was in full swing by now, and would not give up easily. Green pleaded with him’

‘Dear brother’ in’ arms! I beg you, please leave me alone!’ ‘I said I wouldn’t, and I won’t. A gentleman’s word is his wand!’ Sir Zheng began to get hysterical.

Trinket!’ he shouted. That’s you, isn’t it! Where are you?’ ‘Over here’ crowed Trinket. ‘On the bed. With my wife. We’ve just been enjoying our wedding night!

Have you come to toast the

happy couple”

‘I’ll toast your mother’s-,’ screamed the enraged Sir Zheng.

Trinket laughed.

‘Afraid you’ll just have to wait a wee while for that, my friend. Mum’s not really in a fit state to take customers tonight. . . .’

Uttering a furious ‘To hell with you and your confounded cheek’, Sir Zheng launched himself onto the bed. He grabbed hold of the first arm he encountered.

‘Is that you, Ah Kor?’ ‘No it isn’t!’ came the angry reply.

On the assumption that if it wasn’t hers, it must be Trinket’s, Sir Zheng yanked it with all his might. Unfortunately for him, the arm belonged not to Trinket, but to Mao Dongzhu, the Fake’Empress Dowager. Still groggy from her draught of

Spring Wine (the potion’s fancy name), she was nonetheless sufficiently aroused

by this attack on her person to be capable of retaliating, with a strike of her left palm on the crown of Sir Zheng’s head. The blow carried only a fraction of her normal force, and failed to hurt Sir Zheng seriously. It did however startle him and throw him off balance, and he tumbled from the bed, hitting his head hard against the foot of the bedstead and laying himself out on the floor unconscious once more.

‘Darling!’ cried a distraught Green. ‘Are you all right?’ ‘1

No response.

‘He’s under the bed, drinking a toast to our wedded bliss,’ quipped Trinket, delighted at his rival’s discomfiture.

‘Shut up!’ cried Green. ‘And get off me!’

She dug her elbow into Trinket’s throat, and he fell back in pain. Released from his embrace, Green wriggled over and began clambering from the bed. In the process, she found herself straddling the Old Whore’s bosom. The Old Whore let

out a cry of pain, and grabbed hold of Green tightly. In the dark, Green had no idea who this new assailant could be. She was frightened, but lacked the strength to fight back. Next she felt someone grab hold of her right foot. Her whole body shuddered and she broke out in a cold sweat.

‘How many men are there in this bed?’

Trinket, for his part, was unable to locate Green in the darkness.

‘Where are you, my sweet?’ he called out.

Needless to say, she remained silent.

‘Well then, I have no choice! I’ll have to

Touch one here, Touch one there; Touching, stroking, Everywhere. . . ,

until I find you.’ He was off again.

Touch one here,

Touch one there;

Touch my lovely’s raven hair.

Touching, groping,

Fun galore!

Could this be

The fat Old Whore’

ditty.

His hands groped their way around the bed in time to the
Bedstead on the March

Trinket’s musical explorations were interrupted by a great clamour out in the alley. Voices could be heard shouting that a whole contingent of troops had surrounded several of the pleasure establishments in the street. Presently there came the sound of heavy footsteps making their way into Vernal Delights itself. Trinket was about to sneak out, confident that these were either his own men, or men sent in search of him by the Prefect of Yangzhou. But even before he had clambered down from the bedstead, lights were lit in the Sweet Dew Parlour, and he heard the unmistakable voice of his Triad colleague Father Obscurus bellowing out’

‘Lodge Master Wei, are you there’¹

‘I’m in here!’ Trinket cried out in response.

So it was the Triads! Learning that Trinket had disappeared from his Temporary Residence in the Ho Garden, they had gone in search of him; and, informed that he had been seen heading in the direction of the Alley of Chiming Jade accompanied by some of his guards, they made for the alley themselves, followed the sounds of fighting, and soon tracked him down to Vernal Delights. They were appalled to find the dead bodies of his guards strewn in the courtyard, and hugely relieved when they finally heard their Lodge Master’s voice.

Trinket stood up on the bed, and stumbled around (not caring whose lovely limbs he was trampling on in the process) in a frantic attempt to close the curtains. By the time Obscurus and crew entered the room with their torches, they were most perplexed to find the unconscious body of Sir Zheng (for them not a dastardly philanderer, or a rival in love, but a young man of impeccable anti’Manchu pedigree, and an important figure in the Resistance)

spread'eagled
on the floor, and a bedstead in the middle of the room with its curtains drawn together. Once again they feared the worst.

'Lodge Master Weil' cried one of the Triads.

'I'm in here' replied Trinket. 'Don't worry! But dorr't open the curtains just yet.'

They were once again greatly relieved to have found their Lodge Master alive and well, and evidently having a good time of it in the whore'house (not, as they had feared, engaged in some life'and'death struggle against the Manchus).

Trinket took advantage of the light coming through the bed'curtains to adjust his clothes, and find his hat. Then he clambered

Brothers, 'I have arrested several cmum^ ^ ^.''''

are under detention in there' (gesturing to the bed). 'I think my secret expedition will bring us great credit.'

The bewildered Triads were used to their Lodge Master's unorthodox manoeuvres,

and asked no questions. Trinket gave orders for Sir Zheng to be tied up, and for Blue Girl to be transported in a sedan chair to his Temporary Residence. Then he

carefully tucked the curtains of the bedstead under the bolster (to prevent them flapping open), and sent for a dozen or so of his guards. He ordered them to carry the entire bedstead, just as it was, through the streets of Yangzhou and all the way to the Ho Garden.

'Your Lordship' ventured the Captain of the Guard, 'the doorway is too small for

the bedstead-'

Then knock the walls down, you nincompoop!' was Trinket's response.

The captain gave the appropriate order at once, and the guards set to, demolishing three of the walls of Vernal Delights, in order to be able to extract the great wooden bedstead. Then they placed it on half a dozen stout carrying'poles (the sort used for carrying large palanquins), and set off with it down the streets of the city.

It was already dawn by now. What an extraordinary sight it was (and much commented on by those citizens who rose early enough to witness it), this great bed making its way solemnly down the streets of Yangzhou and through the various

market'places en route, gongs sounding fore and aft, guards clearing the way (for all the world as if it were some visiting Prince's state'palanquin), signs

held aloft reading 'Make Way!', all the paraphernalia of an official procession- and all for a bed!

When they finally reached the Ho Garden, they found that here again the main entrance was too small for the dimensions of the bedstead. This time the captain

went ahead without needing to receive Trinket's orders, and demolished a good section of the wall, in order to carry the bed inside and deposit it in the main hall of Trinket's Residence. Trinket had it publicly announced that the bed was transporting criminal elements, and he had a strong guard posted around the Garden's outer wall, with bows and swords at the ready. In addition to this, he told Apothecary Xu to mount a guard outside his quarters, to forestall any rescue attempt on the part of the Mystic Dragon mob.

Bedstead Pandemonium

So, there he was finally, Trinket all alone with the great bed, in the comfort and security of his own heavily guarded Residence. His explorations of the previous night had been tantalizingly cut short. Now was the time to take proper

stock of his Seven Beauties. With a little hum (Touch her here, Touch her there . . .), he drew open the curtains and leapt back on to the bed.

His renewed explorations were, however, even more shortlived than his earlier ones. No sooner was he on the bed, than his pigtail was jerked back and he felt an agonizing pain as a hand closed in tightly on this throat. It was the beautiful, but lethal, Madame Hong. By this time, five of the Seven Female Bedstead Criminals had recovered sufficiently from their potion to be capable of

movement' Madame Hong, the Old Whore, Fang Yi, Green, and the Little Countess.

The two others, Doublet and Zeng Rou, were gradually coming around from the

closing of their Vital Points. They had all remained silent as their curtained container lurched its way through the streets, partly overawed by the sheer size of their armed escort, partly bewildered as to what was happening to them and where they were going. But the moment it became evident that Trinket was about

to embark on another of his sessions of fun and games, things changed. Madame

Hong was the first to pounce. There was a strange expression on her face, a half'smile.

'You little horror!' she purred. 'You've a nerve, to think you can start touching me!'

Trinket was petrified.

‘Dear sweet lady ... I... it’s just. . .’ he stammered.

‘Go on, let’s hear it, that dirty little song of yours,’ said Madame Hong.

‘Oh, that! That’s just some nonsense they always sing in the whore’house.’

‘Listen to me,’ growled Madame Hong almost inaudibly. ‘Do you want to stay alive’

Trinket managed a very forced smile.

‘My lady, I’m the White Dragon Marshal, I’m your most devoted servant-you know that! Long Life to You and to the Great Leader, that’s what I say! May you live for ever, and your commands always be obeyed. . . .’

Madame Hong was not fool enough to fall for this.

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‘Spare us the smooth talk’ she half spat. ‘Tell the guards to
8’

‘Of course! No problem!’ replied Trinket hastily. ‘If you could just let go of me for one second, I could go and give the order-’

‘Give it from here!’ she hissed.

Trinket saw he had no choice.

‘Listen to me’ he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘everyone outside! The Viceroy, the Governor, the Secretary of the Board of War, the Secretary of the Board of Revenue ... All of your troops are to withdraw at once!’

Madame Hong was not fool enough to fall for this either. She gave his pigtail another tug.

‘What Viceroy’ What Governor’ Stuff and nonsense!’

Another tug on the pigtail, and howls of pain from Trinket.

The guards posted outside had inferred from Lord Wei’s bizarrely worded orders

(and from the cries of pain that followed them), that all was far from well with their Commanding Officer. They came surging promptly into the Residence, swords

drawn, crying’

‘Lord Wei, what’s the trouble’

‘Oh, nothing ... No trouble at all. Ow! Hot popping mamma!’

The guards looked at one another in total bewilderment. Madame Hong had

given
Trinket a sharp box on the ears.
'Ow! Tamardy! Momma! Don't hit your own boy!'
Madame Hong was not familiar with Trinket's personal style of abuse, and did not
understand that when he decided to call someone Momma, what he actually meant
was Whore. She looked at him cowering there, pathetically anticipating his next
moment of agony. Then before she could make her next move, she felt a numbing
sensation in the two Vital Points behind her shoulders- Heavenly Ancestor and Spirit Hall they were known as-and her right hand fell limp to her side.
She turned to look behind her and identify her assailant, and who should she see
but Fang Yi. She sneered at her.
'Not bad, Miss Fang! Not bad at all!'
She aimed her left hand (still fully serviceable) at a Vital Point beside Fang Yi's eye.
'It wasn't me!' cried Fang Yi, ducking to one side. Madame Hong took aim again,
but felt two hands grip her left arm from behind. This time she thought she could see it was the Little Countess.
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'My Lady, it wasn't either of us that did it,' protested the Little Countess.
She herself had witnessed the attack, and knew that the person who had immobilized Madame Hong's right arm was in fact Doublet.

Meanwhile the Old Whore had roused herself, and chopped at the Little Countess
with the edge of her palms. She was still too weak to inflict either damage or pain. When the Old Whore struck out again, Fang Yi blocked her.

Green watched the four women tussling, and saw her own chance to escape. As her
right leg stole from under the covers, she gave a little cry of pain. Trinket had grabbed hold of her left foot.

'Don't even think of trying to move!'

She tugged, crying'

‘Let go of me!’

‘Will I? Or won’t I let go? What do you think? Have a guess!’ taunted Trinket.

Green was so provoked by this, she managed to swing round and aim a blow at her tormentor, who ducked, causing Green’s fist to land squarely on Zeng Rou’s left cheek.

‘What are you hitting me for?’ cried Zeng Rou.

‘I’m . . . sorry ...’ stammered Green.

And then it was Fang Yi who landed her a blow. All seven of the women were now involved in a free-for-all on the bed, striking, wriggling, crying. It was total pandemonium.

Trinket found it all highly amusing. It reminded him of the chaos so often attendant on the antics of one of his favourite fictional characters, the irrepressible Monkey.

This is even better than when Monkey ran riot in Heaven! This is better than Havoc in Heaven! It’s Havoc in Harem!’

He was about to launch himself again into the fray, when there was a great cracking sound as the bedstead gave way. All eight of them, Trinket and the seven women, tumbled on top of one another, and all seven of the women began to shriek at the tops of their voices.

The guards looked on in silent bemusement. Trinket laughed out loud, and attempted to extricate himself from the writhing pile of arms and legs. Someone had him by the right leg.

‘Everyone let go!’ he yelled. ‘Guards! Arrest them-all seven of my wives, young and old! Arrest them all!’

The guards stood in a circle around the broken bedstead, still not daring to make a move. Trinket pointed first to the Old Whore.

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‘This one is a wanted criminal. She must not be allowed to escape at any cost.’
The guards could not make sense of the situation at all, and were thinking
‘First he says that they’re all his wives; then one’s a criminal; and two of
them are dressed up as guards.’ But finally one of them came forward and
snapped

a pair of handcuffs on the Old Whore.

This lady here,’ continued Trinket mysteriously, pointing to Madame Hong, ‘is
my

boss. But put her in handcuffs too.’

And the guards did so (theirs not to reason why). Madame Hong’s superb
kungfu

was of no avail’ Doublet had already closed two of her Vital Points.

At this point, Doublet and Zeng Rou clambered out of the pile. They had only
just properly regained consciousness, and flushed when they recalled all that
had happened during the night.

Trinket pointed to Fang Yi’

That’s my senior concubine.’

Then, pointing to the Little Countess’

‘And that’s my junior concubine. Only the senior one needs to be handcuffed.’

The guards obeyed. There was no end to His Excellency Lord Wei’s strange
ways.

But they were used to such things. None of it was out of character.

This only left Green Girl to be accounted for. She sat there on the ground, her
hair a tangled mess, her clothes in total disarray. She was still in male
attire, but looked none the less attractive for it. She was clutching the end of
her scholar’s gown in a vain attempt to conceal her bare legs from the gaze of
the guards. She hung her head, and a flush spread across her cheeks.

There was a silent consensus among the guards that this one (whoever she was)
was definitely the prettiest of Lord Wei’s wives and concubines.

This is my lawfully, duly betrothed, most honourable lady wife!’ pronounced
Trinket. ‘I’ll help her up.’

He walked towards her and extended a hand.

‘Up you get, my darling!’

The Imperial Envoy received a noisy slap in the face. Then Green hung her
head

and wailed’

‘You won’t stop, will you! You’re still taking advantage of me! I’d rather you
killed me! I’d rather die than ever . . . marry you’

The guards looked at each other in total consternation. His Excellency was receiving a public drubbing. They felt they should somehow be protecting him, but they could not bring themselves to do so. After all, it was his most honourable lady's wife who was administering the drubbing. They really could not see what to do.

Trinket held a hand to his stinging cheek.

'How could I ever bring myself to kill you? Don't be cross with me. I'll kill Sir Insufferable instead.'

He called out

'Where have you put that fellow who was all tied up in the whore's house?'

'We've got him under arrest, Your Lordship,' replied one of the guards. 'He's shackled hand and foot, sir.'

'Excellent. If he does try to escape, hack off his left leg. And if he tries a second time, hack off the right one.'

'Nooo!' wailed Green in terror. 'Don't hurt him! He won't try to escape.'

'If you try to escape, I'll hack off his hands.'

He looked around at Fang Yi, the Little Countess, and the others.

'And if one of my other womenfolk tries to escape, we'll hack off his ears and nose!'

Green protested indignantly

'What's it got to do with these other women?'

'That's obvious,' retorted Trinket. 'They are all very sexy, and he's a known sex maniac, so if they get away and he has a chance to so much as set eyes on them, they'll be in danger of being raped.'

Green started howling again. It was clearly a waste of time arguing with her tormentor.

'Take away the ones in handcuffs,' ordered Trinket, 'and put their feet in

shackles. And send for some food and drink from the kitchens. The ladies without handcuffs are going to join me for a snack.'

'Yes sir!' chorused the guards, and went off to do his bidding.

'Never!' wailed Green. 'I'll never join you. You might as well put handcuffs on me too.'

Zeng Rou looked sullen, and hung her head.

'What's the matter with you" asked Trinket.

She turned to look at him.

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'You're wicked! That's what you are! I never want to set eyes on you again!' Trinket stared at her for a moment in surprise. 'Why'

'How can you ask me why' The lady doesn't want to marry you, and you think you

can force her' Just because you're an important official, you think you can take advantage of a girl' I used to think you were a fine man, a good man! Now I know

better!' 'Know what better" Suddenly she burst into tears and hid her face in her hand.

'I know that you're a bad, evil, wicked person!'

And with these words she made to walk out of the room.

Two guards barred her way with their swords.

'You have insulted Lord Wei! Don't move! We await His Excellency's instructions!'

His Excellency had meanwhile been indulging in a certain amount of reflection. Perhaps Zeng Rou was right after all. Perhaps his whole life had been bad. Evil. Wicked, even. Perhaps it had been very wrong of him to betray his own people, wrong to be the Emperor's lackey. He called Zeng Rou back, but she only said proudly'

'If I've offended you, then kill me! Go ahead!'

'No, as a matter of fact I think you're right. I've done wrong, to think I could force any of these women to be my wife.' Turning to the Captain of the Guards he

said, 'Take this woman out.' He was pointing to Green. 'And release that man you

are holding in custody. Let them go off and get married and live happily ever after, if that's what they want.'

It hurt him to say this. And as an afterthought he added' 'But it's going to cost him. Tell him, if he wants to go, I'll be sending him the bill-ten thousand taels. It's an old debt he owes me. I want an answer now.'

Then he indicated Fang Yi.

'And undo her handcuffs. Let her go too. Let her go and find that young Liu she's so potty about. Look at me! I'm a poor twice'cuckolded wretch! Two of my wives have got lovers!'

The Captain could see that Lord Wei was greatly distressed, and did not dare so much as raise his head or make a sound.

'Go on, I said get them both out of here!'

So Green and Fang Yi were both escorted out. Trinket could hardly bear to watch

them go. Neither of them turned around to

IHbUhtKANU IHtCAULUKUN

look at him. Not a word of thanks escaped their lips. They simply left. A guard came in to inform him that Sir Zheng had accepted the terms for his release, and

was willing to pay the sum specified.

Zeng Rou walked up to him.

'You're a good man! I was wrong to say what I did!'

The sweet expression on her face was something by way of consolation.

'Come, I want the three of you-you, the Little Countess, and Doublet-to come in with me.'

He had some fun in mind. But before he could lead the way, a guard came in.

'Lord Wei, there is a man at the gate who says he has a message from someone called the Great Leader Hong.'

Trinket started at this.

'Who on earth could that be' Never heard of him. Tell the man to go away.'

The guard hesitated a moment.

'He says the Leader is holding two of your men, and is willing to exchange them for the two of his women that you are holding.'

Trinket glanced at Madame Hong and the Old Whore.

‘Why should I be willing to exchange women for men’ What kind of fancy men does he reckon he’s got”

‘Excellency, it all sounds rather ridiculous, but the messenger says his Master has a Lama and a Prince, and that they are both brothers of yours.’

‘Ah,’ thought Trinket, ‘so he’s got Sangge and Galdan.’

‘Well, tell him I won’t swop these two women that I’ve got here for two million men.’

Trinket looked at Zeng Rou, and continued his train of reflections’

‘She said I was bad. Now I’ve set two of my wives free, to go and live in sin with their lovers, and so she thinks I’m good. Being good really seems to bleed a man dry. And now I suppose I should do the right thing by my brothers, or the

Leader will cut their throats. What’s the use of keeping Madame Hong around anyway’ She may be good-looking as hell, but she’ll never agree to enjoy Long Life and Eternal Blessings with poor old Trink. Not in a million years. No, if I’m to be a good man, a brave man and true, I’ll have to put honour and brotherhood above sex!’

He called back the guard.

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‘Tell the man’ if his Leader will release those two men, I’ll return his lovely Mistress Hong. She’s worth any number of men. She’s one of the most beautiful

women ever to have lived in this world of ours. As for the other one, I know she’s ugly, but I’m afraid I’m hanging on to her.’

The guard went off to deliver this message.

This finally brought a smile to Madame Hong’s face. Trinket personally unlocked her handcuffs and escorted her from the room.

Once they reached the courtyard, they found the guard deep in conversation with the Leader's messenger, who turned out to be none other than Doctor Lu.

'Look after her well, Doctor' said Trinket. And to Madame Hong 'My lady, Long Life and Blessings to you and the Leader!'

Madame Hong gave a little titter.

'A fine career and many beautiful wives to you, Your Excellency!'

Trinket sighed and shook his head.

'The first, maybe. As for the second, I can see that's going to be a lot harder.' He called for a sedan chair, and an escort. Then he accompanied her personally to the main gate, and saw her on her way.

Charges of Treason

No sooner had Madame Hong's sedan chair disappeared from view, than another chair arrived at the gate of the Ho Garden, bearing the Prefect of Yangzhou, Wu Zhirong. Trinket was too down in the dumps at the departure of several of his favourite women to appreciate this visit.

'What have you come for?' he enquired, somewhat brusquely.

'I have a piece of particularly confidential military information I should like to share with Your Excellency' replied the ever-smarmy Wu.

Somewhat reluctantly Trinket led Wu into his study, where Wu insisted that they

be alone. Trinket dismissed his various guards.

'Well, what is this all about?'

After an enormous amount of humming and hawing, and endless references to the

huge honour he had of serving the Emperor (not to mention his Envoy) in his humble capacity as Prefect, Wu finally came to the point. With a highly conspiratorial expression,

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he produced from within his gown a manuscript, and presented it with both

hands
to Trinket.

‘This, Excellency, is a manuscript collection of poems I chanced upon yesterday.
Please be so good as to glance through it.’

Now if he had produced a few silver ingots, Trinket might have reacted with a broad smile. That was just the sort of thing he needed to bring him out of his current bout of depression. But poetry! He yawned, and pretended to ignore it altogether. Wu was most put out. He withdrew the manuscript.

‘You may recall, Excellency, that at last night’s banquet there was a lady who sang a song about the peasant girls of the Yangzhou region, with words by one of our younger local poetic celebrities, a certain Mr Zha Shenxing’ You were not very taken with it, if I remember correctly. Anyway, I took the liberty of leafing through some of the other works of this Mr Zha. And I am afraid to say I found certain passages of his, certain turns of phrase, which could be considered most objectionable-’

‘Really’ Did you now” Trinket commented, with a singular lack of enthusiasm.

Wu went on to point out places in Zha’s verse (a reference, for example, to the bronze cannon used by the founder of the Ming, Zhu Yuanzhang) where the poet seemed to be expressing a certain nostalgia for the defeated Ming dynasty. But Trinket resolutely refused to take the point, and led the conversation instead into a quite unconnected discussion of the technical virtues and defects of Ming cannon as compared with those currently used by the Manchus. Wu gave up on the poems of Zha Shenxing, and tried a couple of other books instead. This time, he assured Trinket, the works contained unquestionable examples of heinous treason.

The two books in question were by the renowned Ming Loyalist scholars Zha Yihuang and Gu Yanwu. Trinket knew that Gu Yanwu was indeed an important figure in the Anti’Manchu Resistance, and a close associate of his own Master, the Triad Helmsman Chen Jinnan. How had a book of his come into the hands of this oily witch’ hunting mandarin’ Might there be references in it that were dangerous for the Triads’ His curiosity had finally been aroused.

‘What sort of thing do you mean’ he asked Wu.

Delighted to have finally provoked some interest, Wu hastened to explain how the two men had fomented rebellious sentiments in their writings, illustrating his argument with copious and lengthy

quotations, laboriously explained. To the extent that he understood any of the quotations, Trinket dismissed Wu’s whole case as ‘searching for bones in a chicken’s egg’, and said that this kind of witch’hunt was just the sort of futile occupation that his friend the Emperor would be the first to denounce. Indeed, he insinuated, it might get Wu himself into serious trouble. What mattered to His Majesty (Trinket reiterated) was that loyal officials, and men of letters generally, should care about the people’s welfare, and do the right thing by them. Not this sort of textual hoo’ha.

Trinket’s aim was to strike fear into the heart of Wu Zhirong, and thereby discourage him from pursuing this matter any further and endangering the lives

of such worthy men as Gu Yanwu. What Trinket did not know at the time was that

it was precisely this sort of pernicious denunciation of others that had made Wu’s career- since he had first managed to denounce the poor Zhuang family of Huzhou, in the Ming History affair, a case which eventually led to the execution of every male in the entire Zhuang family. With this new material he had raked up, Wu had been counting on a promotion of at least three ranks. He was greatly

disheartened by Trinket’s initial reaction. What he for his part did not know was that the young official in front of him, the Emperor’s current favourite, had been largely responsible for the demise of Oboi, the very Manchu strongman

who before his downfall had been so helpful to Wu in the Zhuang affair. If Wu had known this, he would have trembled in his boots.

Trinket was glad to see Wu looking disheartened.

‘Finished then’ he enquired.

Far from it. Wu insisted on going on, and recited another long passage from the

Poetic Works of Gu Yanwu, following it up with another lengthy politico’literary exegesis. Trinket finally lost his temper.

‘This is outrageous! I was sent here by his Imperial Majesty’s personal command

to read out an Edict written in his own Imperial Hand, and instead of your listening respectfully to me, I end up having to listen to you, babbling on for ever about some trifle or other. If that isn’t treason, what is’ This is most

certainly a matter for His Majesty's ears. Probably a sentence of death, I wouldn't be surprised, for yourself, and for all your family and household, your wives, children, maids, everyone!'

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Wu threw himself distractedly on the ground and began performing an interminable series of abject kowtows. He pounded his head on the ground with such energy he looked as if he was crushing a big shiny clove of garlic.

'Excellency! Have mercy!' He was trembling like a leaf. His teeth were chattering so much he could not get another word out.

'Well,' said Trinket, taking a certain delight in Wu's obvious terror, 'and what has become of these two gentlemen'

Hard as he tried to pull himself together (at one point he actually bit through his own tongue, he was so nervous), it was several minutes before Wu could bring himself to utter the necessary words in response to this question'

'Excellency ... I ... I have the two gentlemen in custody, along with a certain Mister Lti.'

'And I suppose you have interrogated them' What did they say'

'Oh, I just asked one or two casual questions. They said nothing. They denied everything.'

They really said nothing"

'Nothing, Excellency. The only seriously incriminating thing was this document, a letter found on Mister Zha's person.'

He took the offending letter from a bag, and handed it to Trinket. Trinket refused to take it, but simply asked'

'What does it say' Another one of your poems or essays"

'No, sir! It is written by the Military Governor of Guangdong Province, General

Wu Liuqi.'

Trinket started when he heard that name. Beggar Wu was not only a secret member of the Resistance, he had definite Triad affiliations, as Red Banner Master of the Obedience Lodge of Guangdong Province.

'What' Does Wu Liuqi write poetry too"

'No, Excellency. This is a letter from Wu Liuqi, proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that he is plotting rebellion against the Manchu Throne. This was what I was referring to in the first place, when I said that I had a military secret I wanted to share with you.'

Trinket uttered a silent curse. From his silence, Wu Zhirong, who had been kneeling for some time, sensed that this new item of news had impressed Lord Wei and he rose slowly to his feet. Trinket scowled at him, and grunted, and Wu sank to his knees again at once.

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'Well, what does the letter say" asked Trinket.

'It is very cryptic, Excellency. But there is no doubt that he is inviting Zha to join him in Guangdong for the coming rebellion.'

Trinket insisted on seeing the letter. He could not decipher a single character of Wu Liuqi's bold scrawl, but that did not stop him from declaring with absolute conviction'

'I see no reference to rebellion here.'

Wu Zhirong tried to explain to Trinket the 'treasonous' innuendo in the letter, by referring to the careers of two famous generals of the Ming. This merely brought on a fit of storytelling from Trinket, a lengthy tactical distraction at the end of which Wu Zhirong (who was still kneeling) had lost all sensation in his knees. He begged leave to stand. Trinket granted him leave, and (realizing the extreme gravity of the situation) decided that now was the time to take steps to win him over. First he patted him jovially on the back, and uttered a few complimentary remarks about his diligence. Wu was ecstatic in his appreciation. Trinket then vaguely raised his hand higher, as if he were planning to give Wu's head an avuncular pat or two. Wu was a good foot taller than Trinket, and (in his usual sycophantic manner) he now lowered his head to

make it easier for Trinket to reach and stroke. Earlier, when he had been on the ground frantically kowtowing, he had removed his hat. The result was that Trinket now ended up gazing at his bald pate, and as he patted it, his hand slid towards the back where Wu's pigtail stuck out. It was rather like stroking a little dog. And as he reached the back of Wu's head, Trinket thought to himself 'One slice of a knife and I'd split your tamardy head open!'

What he actually said was'

'Does anyone know anything about this apart from you''

'No, Excellency. It seemed imprudent to run the risk of any leak reaching Wu Liuqi, who might thereby be prompted to take precipitate action.'

'Very right.'

Trinket slipped the letter into his inside pocket.

'I should like you to leave those books on my table, and have Gu and the others brought in here. I'll question them myself first, and then have them sent up to Peking under escort. You can accompany them yourself. I shall write a personal Memorial to His Majesty. You will undoubtedly receive great recognition for this.'

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Another series of excited kowtows from Wu, and he left the

room.

Doublet seeks Revenge

Trinket sent for his Triad Brothers, for an urgent council. As he was awaiting their arrival, Doublet came in to see him. She was sobbing. He hugged her, and begged her to tell him what it was that was troubling her. He would do anything for her. He owed her his very life.

Her pale face flushed when she heard these words.

'Master, don't be cross with me! It's that man who just walked out of here! I want to kill him!'

'Cross' thought Trinket to himself. 'Why, I was having exactly the same thoughts myself!'

'What harm has he done you' he enquired gently.

Doublet started sobbing again, as she explained the whole thing.

'It's not me he has harmed. It's the Zhuang Family. Old Master Zhuang, Young

Master Zhuang-he caused both their deaths. And I owed them everything.’

Trinket remembered now-that night, in the haunted Zhuang mansion. The women he had met on that occasion had all been made widows as the result of Wu’s relentless inquisition into the Ming History.

‘Are you sure it’s the same man’

‘How could I ever forget his evil face’ I was only a young girl at the time, but I still remember that day when he came to my Master’s house with the constables from the Yamen, and began arresting people and taking them away. How many times my Mistress swore she would have revenge, if she ever could!’

Trinket wanted to extract the most out of this situation for himself. He could have simply said, ‘Yes, by all means go ahead and kill the man!’ But no, he must appear to be granting her a special favour, and thereby earn a special favour back from her. And so it was. He made her idea of extracting revenge seem something highly irregular, something he could only allow because it was Doublet, his darling Doublet, who had asked him. For her, he would allow anything, if she would only give him just one little kiss . . .

She flushed, hung her head, and turned away.

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‘Master, after all this time, surely you know that I’m yours. You hardly have to ask.’

‘I tell you what,’ said Trinket. ‘It would be far too easy to kill him now. What you must do is take him with you to the Zhuang mansion, and make him kneel down in front of the Spirit Tablets of all those men whose deaths he caused, and then let old Madame Zhuang herself put him to death. Do you agree’

Doublet thought this would be perfect. Almost too perfect, in fact. She wondered if Trinket was tricking her. But he reassured her that the project was as much to his own liking as it was to hers.

She stood there by his side, still crying gently. He put his arm round her

slender little waist. It was all so touching. If only these moments could happen more often, he mused silently to himself. If only he could give away such favours, and receive such sweet favours in return, more often. Take Green for example. If only Wu Zhirong had been guilty of killing her father too. Then he would have a perfect pretext for having made love to her. . . .

There were footsteps at the door, and Trinket snapped out of his absurd reverie.

(How could Wu Zhirong possibly have killed Green's father! Whether you considered her father to be the Satrap or Bash'em Li, in either case the whole idea was utterly ridiculous!)

It was a delegation of Triad Brothers. Trinket spoke to Doublet'

'Don't you go worrying about any of this. I have to talk to these people now, so you go outside and make sure I am not disturbed. And don't go eavesdropping either!'

'I've never done that!' whispered Doublet. Suddenly she took Trinket's right hand, raised it to her mouth, and kissed it, ever so sweetly, before dashing out of the room.

Writing a Letter

At his meeting with the Triads, Trinket managed to merge two recent events into

one, to his own advantage.

'Brothers,' he announced, 'I have some extremely important news to share with you. Thanks to information gleaned during my undercover mission last night to the Alley of Chiming Jade, I have been able to save the lives of two important members of the Resistance, Banner Lodge Master Wu of Guangdong and the noted

scholar Mr Gu Yanwu.'

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The Brothers had been more than a little perplexed by their Lodge Master's undignified antics of the previous night, culminating in the absurd bedstead parade. They were comforted to know that it had all been for a deep hidden purpose. They were going to ask for a few more details about the operation, when

Trinket reached into his inner pocket and produced the letter.

Butcher Qian spread the letter out on the table, and perused it with the other

Brothers. They were unable to make head or tail of the various learned allusions with which it was littered. Trinket laughed.

The trouble with you Triads is, all you stuff yourselves with is Yangzhou dumplings, noodles, and wine-there isn't a drop of scholar's ink in your veins! Luckily for you, Mr Gu is on his way here at this very moment, and he can explain it all.'

At that moment, the arrival was announced not of Gu, but of the Mongol Prince Galdan and the Tibetan Lama Sangge. Trinket went out to speak to them in private. They were warm in their appreciation of Trinket's brotherly concern for their well'being, and Galdan was delighted to be reunited with Blue Girl, whom Trinket had sent for meanwhile. She was now minus handcuffs, and had been able to smarten herself up a bit for the occasion.

Trinket congratulated them on having outclassed the deadly Mystic Dragon kungfu of their adversaries (when in fact he and they knew that they had been taken captive, and only released as part of an exchange-but face was saved), and immediately proposed a banquet to celebrate their safe return. He also suggested to his two friends that they each write a Memorial to the Emperor. That way there would be something to support their future promotions. They agreed to the proposal, and since Sangge was the best educated among them (Galdan could hardly write Chinese, and Trinket was no better) he wrote both Memorials himself. Galdan affixed his personal seal to his. Trinket presented them each (including Blue) with a handsome gift of silver, and saw them on their way.

On his return he was informed that Prefect Wu had brought across his three prisoners. He gave instructions for Wu to wait in the eastern side'room, and led Gu Yanwu, Zha Yihuang, and Lii Liuliang into his study. He dismissed his regular guards, bolted the door, and was then alone with the three men and his Triad Brothers.

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‘Lodge Master Wei of the Green Wood Lodge is honoured to meet with you three gentlemen.’

They stared at him open-mouthed. It took a moment to sink in. The recent affair, which had led to their being arrested by Prefect Wu, had been most unfortunate.

What had happened was this: Zha had received an important letter from his old friend and fellow Loyalist Beggar Wu in Guangdong, a letter that concerned their

plans for concerted action in the event of Satrap Wu’s rebellion. Zha had immediately arranged for his two Loyalist friends to make their way to Yangzhou

to discuss its contents. Unfortunately the ever vigilant Prefect Wu, in the wake of his intensive reading of Gu’s Poetic Works, had seen fit to ‘investigate’ the two other gentlemen and, in the course of these extended investigations, had discovered the incriminating letter on Zha’s person, and arrested him too. Their

concern for their own well-being had been quite eclipsed by their apprehension for General Wu’s safety. He was a key figure in the entire Resistance enterprise. They were dumbfounded (and delighted beyond measure) to learn that

the whole affair had been nipped in the bud by none other than Lodge Master Wei,

in his undercover role as Special Imperial Envoy to the city of Yangzhou. They had already met several of the Triad Brothers present, and knew that the young Lodge Master was himself a disciple of Helmsman Chen Jinnan, who had personally

saved them from their last scrape with the authorities, on board the boat on the Grand Canal.*

As they talked the matter over, they came up with a highly ingenious plan whereby they could turn the present situation to their own advantage, and incriminate Prefect Wu. The basic idea was Trinket’s, but the scholars were quick to lend it their support. Gu Yanwu was to write another letter, a fake, this time from the Satrap himself to Prefect Wu (for the three men—the Satrap, the Beggar General, and the Prefect—all shared the same surname), implicating him in the forthcoming rebellion. Gu and Zha were much taken with the idea, and applied their considerable literary talents to the task.

‘I never thought the day would dawn when I should be acting as the Satrap’s scribe!’ joked Zha.

1 For details of this, the reader is directed to the Prologue of the First Book.
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When the finished product had been approved by all three of them, after a great deal of subtle discussion of epistolary rhetoric (all of which the Triad Brothers found highly mystifying-probably some form of secret language, they concluded), Butcher Qian was asked to sign the Satrap's actual name at the foot of the letter. The letter itself would quite plausibly have been written by one of the Satrap's secretaries, but it would look more convincing to have it signed in the hand not of a man of letters but of a plain man of action. Qian obliged, and wrote four extremely wobbly but bold characters-Gu Yanwu assured him that the wobblier and bolder they were, the better.

The letter was handed to Trinket. The three gentlemen declined Trinket's invitation to extend their drinking. Nothing must be done to arouse Prefect Wu's suspicions. Trinket did not press them, and was in fact somewhat relieved to see them go. They were the sort of people he admired, but whose company he found (to use his own expression) a 'drag'. You just couldn't have any fun with men like that. If he had suggested a game of cards, they would probably have passed out. With them it was all fancy talk, high-flown verbiage, learned quotations, the sort of thing that totally passed him by, and in fact made him feel thoroughly uncomfortable. The mere sight of one of the sexier girls from Vernal Delights would probably have given them a heart attack. And if he had so much as breathed a single 'tamardy!' in their presence, Heaven help him!

He gave them each a thousand taels of silver to help them on their way, and instructed Butcher Qian and Apothecary Xu to see them out by a side entrance.

They had no sooner left, than the arrival was announced of Governor Ma and the Provincial Treasurer, on urgent business.

'Yikes!' thought Trinket. 'Has word got out already'

Trinket works Fast

Governor Ma and Treasurer Mu sat down with Trinket and exchanged the usual civilities. Ma then informed Trinket that he had come on a matter of the greatest urgency. Trinket swallowed hard, and tried his best not to look too concerned.

Ma took an envelope marked Highly Urgent and Confidential from his inner pocket, and handed it to Trinket. Trinket in turn

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handed it to the Treasurer, and asked him to read its contents, explaining 'I'm afraid I can't read very well.'

Treasurer Mu already knew the contents by heart.

'Excellency,' he replied, 'the letter is from the Board of War in the Capital, informing you that the Satrap has already raised the standard of revolt! The war has begun!'

Trinket was hugely relieved (that it had nothing to do with Prefect Wu's witch'hunt), and quite unable to contain his delight. He jumped up, and waved his arms in the air.

'So he's finally done it! Tamardy! Excellent kungfu!'

The two mandarins exchanged perplexed glances. Trinket hastened to reassure them

that all was well, and that the Emperor was more than prepared for this eventuality. In fact, given that the Imperial forces were now in such a perfect state of preparation, the sooner the conflict broke out, and Satrap Wu was disposed of (as he surely would be), the better. Hence his own joyful excitement.

'By the way, I assume that this news has been classified as Top Secret' Trinket said casually.

'Most definitely, Excellency' was Mu's reply.

'Strange . . .'

'How so, Lord Wei'

'Oh, nothing really. It's just that Prefect Wu was here just now, and he seemed to know all about it.'

Trinket might be no scholar, but his mind worked fast.

'How is that possible' How could he have known"

Trinket proceeded to draw the noose tighter and tighter round Wu's neck. He told

the two mandarins that Wu had actually tried to implicate him in the forthcoming

rebellion, offering him substantial rewards. As for Governor Ma and Treasurer Mu

(so Wu had implied), they were in the way of his own advancement, and were to be

disposed of at the earliest opportunity.

‘Where is this man!’ cried Mu. ‘Has he left already?’

‘As a matter of fact he is waiting just outside.’

‘Would you be so kind as to call him in’ I should like to hear him answer one or two questions.’

Trinket obliged.

Wu came in, and seeing the two others there, assumed that Trinket had summoned

them, wanting to bring them in on his little coup, the denunciation of a nest of Loyalist conspirators. What a

shame, he thought to himself, that the credit for this would now have to be divided by four, instead of by two! But still, he would have to live with that. He walked forward, and bowed.

They told him to be seated, and he perched gingerly on a nearby chair.

Trinket managed things with great panache. First he got Prefect Wu to admit that

he had just been to see him about ‘a letter from a highly’ placed General planning rebellion’, and then, extracting the original letter (from Beggar Wu) from his right sleeve, he brandished it in front of him, saying ‘Is this the letter’ Look carefully now. This is very important.’ Prefect Wu glanced at the letter, and immediately recognized it. ‘Yes, that’s definitely the letter.’

Thank you,’ said Trinket, carefully slipping the letter back into his right sleeve. ‘That is all. I should like you to withdraw from the room for a moment now, Prefect Wu,’ said Trinket. ‘I need to discuss this with my colleagues here.’

Governor Ma had with the greatest of difficulty managed to contain himself during this interrogation, out of respect for the Imperial Envoy. But he was fuming with rage at his subordinate the Prefect’s treasonous conduct, and the veins were bulging on his forehead.

Trinket now extracted the other letter, the one which Zha and friends had fabricated, from his left sleeve, and handed it to Ma and Mu. It was perfect. Wu

was finished.

Ma opened the envelope, and read the letter.

The brazen, treacherous dog! I should like to slay him with my own sword this very minute!’

Even as they were digesting the contents of the faked letter (Trinket made a point of asking Treasurer Mu to explain every last nuance), the arrival was announced of a Palace Guard from the Capital, bearing a special Imperial Edict for Lord Wei. The three of them knelt at once to receive the Imperial instructions, which were that Imperial Envoy Wei was to return at once to the Capital, and leave the details of the construction of the Yangzhou Martyrs’ Memorial in the hands of the Provincial Treasurer.

Trinket promised to put in a good word for them both at Court. As for the case of Prefect Wu, he asked them to write a joint Memorial to the Throne, which he would personally present to the Emperor. They insisted that such a Memorial should also praise the role played by their superior, Viceroy Malji, in Nanking. Trinket readily agreed.

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When Ma and Mu had taken their leave, Trinket gave Butcher Qian and the other

Triads instructions to tie up Wu Zhirong, and gag him. The Prefect’s utter shock

and terror when they did this can v’ell be imagined.

The following morning, the entire Yangzhou. mandarinates lined up outside Trinket’s Temporary Residence to say farewell to the Imperial Envoy (and of course to load him with presents, in the hope that he would speak for them in Peking). Even the Viceroy came hurrying down from Nanking to be there. Treasurer

Mu had written the Memorial, in the course of which he praised Lord Wei to the

skies for his role in uncovering the treasonous intentions of Yangzhou’s Prefect (and needless to say did not forget to give a substantial portion of the credit to the Viceroy, the Governor, and himself).

Spring Fragrance the Sceptic

When all the mandarins and official callers had left, Trinket sent one of his guards to Vernal Delights, to fetch his mother and bring her to the Ho Garden, while he himself changed into less formal clothes.

Spring Fragrance still had no idea that her son really had become a big shot. She thought he'd probably made all that cash at cards. Now, when she saw with her own eyes who he really was, and when he told her he wanted to take her with

him to Peking, to enjoy the good life, she simply shook her head.

'You never know what will happen up there. Maybe you'll lose all your money again, and then you'll have to sell me into one of those northern brothels. Who knows' If I'm going to have to do that kind of work, I'd rather it was here in Yangzhou. At least here I can understand what people are saying. I've never been

able to follow that terrible Peking accent.'

'Please mum, you need never ever worry, I promise. In Peking you can have all the maids you want, and I swear, we'll never run out of money. Ever.'

She just kept on shaking her head.

'I'd only get bored, with nothing to do.'

Trinket could see she had made her mind up. It was no use bullying her. He took

out a big wad of notes—at least fifty thousand taels there must have been.

'Mum, this is for you. I want you to go back and buy Vernal Delights. You can do

that now. You can be the Madame from now on. In fact you've got enough there to

buy another three whole whore'houses as well, and then we can set up a chain.

We'll call them the Four Seasons' Vernal Delights, Summer Delights, Autumn Delights, and Winter Delights. We'll have money rolling in all year round.'

Spring Fragrance was more modest in her ambitions (and more sceptical in her approach to life).

'The first thing I'm going to do is ask someone to check these notes and see if they're genuine,' she said. 'If they are, then I might just start up a little place of my own. Nothing too grand. When you're grown up, you can come and help me run it.'

Then sotto voce'

'Trink, tell me truthfully, did you steal the money'

Just to humour her, Trinket produced a set of dice from his pocket.

'Full House Red!' he called, and threw the dice. Sure enough they were red, every one of them, four red pips staring up at the ceiling. Now that was something his mum could understand.

‘Why, you little turtle’egg! So that’s how you did it!’

CHAPTER 25

In which the. Strange GUI Trio, and Iron Hand the Lady Warrior, are introduced;
and an Assassination Attempt has Unpredicted Results

News of the War

The following day, Trinket set off for Peking, with Prefect Wu and the Old Whore

and an escort of guards. They made haste on their journey, eager to obey the Emperor’s urgent summons.

En route they had the latest news of the Satrap’s rebellion. The Military Commander of Yunnan Province, Zhang Guogui, and the Governor of Guizhou, Cao

Shenji, along with his military counterpart, General Li Benshen, had all of them

surrendered to the Satrap’s advancing forces. The Governor of Yunnan had committed suicide, as had the Viceroy of the Twin Provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, Gan Wenkun. Things looked very bleak for the Imperial cause. Trinket reached the province of Shandong, and there the local officials read out to him the Emperor’s most recent proclamation, which had been published in the Peking

Gazette. In it Kang Xi denounced the Satrap’s treason and his base ingratitude to an Imperial Throne that had done nothing but shower him with honours all his

life. He urged all his true subjects to remain loyal to the Throne. If anyone could capture the Satrap, that man himself would be granted the Satrap’s full title, Prince of the West. This idea appealed greatly to Trinket. His Triad friends, while having no desire to strike a blow for the Manchu cause by capturing Satrap Wu, reflected that if their Lodge Master were to be made Prince

of the West, they would themselves be in a stronger position to launch a rebellion of their own from the South’West.

Trinket gave orders for his party to proceed with all haste to the Capital. The sooner they reached Peking, the sooner he could take part in the growing conflict, and the less chance there was that someone else would earn this reward

and become Prince of the West.

Strange Companions

They had reached the town of Xianghe, some fifty miles southeast of Peking, when

Trinket handed over command of the expeditionary force to his deputy, Colonel

Zhang Yong, with orders to proceed straight to Peking and to await him there, taking special care to keep the Fake'Empress Dowager closely confined.

He himself led a small contingent, consisting of Doublet and the Triads, with the still heavily bound Prefect Wu, and went off in a south'westerly direction, towards the 'haunted house' in which the widows of the Zhuang Family lived.

He

intended to fulfil his promise to Doublet, and to hand over Prefect Wu to Widow

Zhuang herself.

That evening they all put up at an inn, some ten miles short of the Zhuang mansion. They had all by this time changed out of their military clothes, to avoid attracting undue attention. They had also (for the same reason) untied Prefect Wu, virtually immobilizing him instead, and rendering him incapable of

speech, by a deft manipulation of the relevant Vital Points.

They sat down to dinner at two tables. Doublet sat at a separate table with Wu (who was shunned by the others), keeping

a close watch over him. As they were eating their food, a squad or a dozen or so Imperial troops arrived, and started noisily demanding food and drink. The innkeeper hurried to clear tables, slaughter fowl, and wait on them.

No sooner had these soldiers sat down to their meal than the sound of horses and

rumbling carriage wheels was heard, and another group of travellers entered the

inn. The first two were sturdy young men. They were followed by a strange, consumptive'looking man of middle years, short and skinny, with sunken cheeks

and prominent cheek'bones, and a sallow, completely bloodless complexion. There

was something strange, almost sinister about his manner. Every few steps he took

he halted and coughed. Behind him there entered an elderly couple. They must have been well into their eighties. The old man was also of slight build, but hale and hearty, with a long flowing white beard and a ruddy face. The old woman

by his side was somewhat taller than he was, an upright figure with lively, piercing eyes. Last of all came two women in their twenties. Of the group of seven, it was the consumptive who was by far the most lavishly dressed, quite the well-to-do gentleman. The two young men and women were clearly servants of

some sort. As for the elderly couple, they were dressed in plain, nondescript black clothing, and it was hard to place them. It was the old lady who spoke first.

‘Nurse Ma, pour the Young Master a bowl of hot water, so he can take his medicine.’

One of the women’s servants produced a porcelain bowl from a basket she was carrying, and filled it with hot water from a kettle provided by the inn. She warmed the bowl, then poured out half the water and placed the half-full bowl in

front of the ‘Young Master’ (who was not really so very young). The old lady took out a little porcelain bottle from inside her gown, removed the stopper, and extracted a small red pill. She went over and placed the pill on the Young Master’s tongue, at the same time pouring the hot water gently into his mouth. When he had swallowed the pill, he took several short breaths, and was seized with a coughing fit. The old couple watched him anxiously. They heaved a sigh of

relief when his breathing steadied and he stopped coughing.

He seemed irritated, and frowned.

‘Mum, dad, stop looking at me like that! I’m not dead yet.’

The old man humphed and looked away. The old lady smiled’

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‘Of course not, dear. I’m sure you have a long and happy life ahead of you.’

Trinket was watching this little drama with considerable interest.

‘A long life my foot!’ he observed silently. ‘That little runt will be lucky to survive the next couple of days—he’s a goner, if ever I saw one! They can feed him the Jade Emperor’s Most Miraculous Elixir ten times a day, it won’t make a

bit of difference! So the two old ones are his mum and dad. ... I’d say they’d spoilt him rotten since the day he was born.’

‘Nurse Zhang! Nurse Ma!’ It was the old woman’s voice again. ‘Go and heat up the

Young Master’s ginseng broth, and bring him his food.’

The two serving-women went off to the kitchen to do her bidding, each carrying a basket.

Meanwhile, the corporal in deputy command of the squad of Imperial soldiers was busy chatting to the innkeeper, and enquiring how far it was to Peking.

‘Another ten miles march or so,’ said the innkeeper obligingly. ‘You’ll come to a small town, with a reasonable tavern. You could lodge the night there, and then you should be in Peking by the following afternoon-’

‘We won’t be lodging in a tavern!’ exclaimed the corporal. ‘We’re on urgent military business. We’ll be marching right through the night, most probably. We’ve to carry an important military dispatch to the Capital. The news is that Satrap Wu has already fought his way through to Hunan Province! I tell you, this war is going to be a long haul-four or five years most likely. You should be pleased, though-it’ll be good for your line of business!’

‘Good for my line of business my arse!’ thought the innkeeper bitterly to himself. ‘With the likes of you for customers I’ll be broke in less than a year. I know you lot! You eat and drink me out of house and home, then go marching off and toss me a few coppers to keep me happy! Good for business, hah!’

Trinket and his Triad friends were shocked to hear that the Satrap had made such swift inroads into central China, and was already as far north as Hunan. Butcher Qian went over to the corporal to try and find out more.

‘Excuse me, sir, but I thought I heard you talking just now about Satrap Wu’s army having advanced into Hunan. I’m a

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Changsha man myself, and I’ve still got family there. I was wondering if you had any more detailed news”

The corporal was flattered to be addressed as sir and proceeded to give Qian a fuller account of the state of the rebellion’

‘I don’t know much about Changsha. All I know is, one of the Satrap’s generals by the name of Ma Bao has moved his troops into Hunan from Guizhou; and

the town

of Yuanzhou, in southern Hunan, has fallen to the rebel forces. Three of the Satrap's other generals are leading a three-pronged attack from Yunnan eastwards, while another of his top commanders, Wang Pingfan, is attacking from

Sichuan. The Satrap's forces are carrying everything before them. People are fleeing left, right, and centre.'

Qian's face looked serious.

That sounds pretty bad, sir! But the Emperor's troops are sure to defeat Wu in the long run, wouldn't you say?"

That's what everyone thought. But Yuanzhou fell after a single skirmish. The Satrap is going to be a tough one to beat, that's what I'd say.'

Qian brought his hands together in a polite gesture of thanks, and went back to sit with his friends. The Triads had very mixed feelings about this news. Some of them could imagine nothing worse than a victory for the Satrap, such was their hatred for him as the arch traitor to the Ming cause. But some almost wanted him to do well, to fight his way up to Peking and have a showdown with the Manchu forces. According to these people it would help their own cause to see both sides-the Satrap's and the Emperor's- weakened by such a conflict.

The soldiers gobbled down their food and rose to leave.

Thanks for the meal, my friend!' the corporal called out to the innkeeper as they were going. 'Fair exchange for the good news we brought you, don't you think! Excellent for business this war will be!'

The innkeeper smiled bleakly.

'Indeed! Of course, gentlemen, everything's on the house'

The soldiers made their way to the door. As the corporal passed by the table where the consumptive was sitting with his elderly parents, he suddenly felt a hand at his throat.

'Hey, you! What's this dispatch' Show me.'

The corporal was a strongly built fellow, but he found himself literally crumpling up in the consumptive's grip.

'What the hell! Tamardy! Let go of me will you-'

He struggled till he was bright red in the face, but was totally overpowered by the Invalid, who had used his right hand to rip open the corporal's jacket and help himself to the document concealed within it. Then with his left hand he pushed him effortlessly away. The soldier went hurtling past two tables, sending

large amounts of crockery crashing to the ground.

The other members of his squad rushed to their officer's aid, but were themselves soon overpowered by the Invalid and his two retainers, who laid them

low with deadly use of fist and foot. The Invalid then proceeded to tear open

the document and read it. The corporal's face was white with horror at this breach of security.

'You . . . you can't do that! That's for the Emperor's eyes only! This is treason!'

The Invalid continued to read, and then said'

'Interesting. The Governor of Hunan wants reinforcements against the Prince of the West. Huh! Fat lot of use that will be! A million men won't stand a chance against him.' Here he started coughing again. The Prince will simply wipe them out!'

He crumpled the document into a ball and squeezed it in the palm of his hand. When he opened the palm, a hundred tiny scraps of paper flew swirling around the room. The Triads were amazed at this effortless display of Inner Force by a man who looked as if he was at death's door. When the corporal finally managed to drag himself to his feet and advanced on the Invalid, he was knocked to the floor again with a simple sweep of the man's hand, and found himself lying there helpless and barely able to breathe. The other soldiers were now in no mood or state to come to his aid.

The Invalid just sat there, as if nothing had happened. One of the two nurses now brought him his hot ginseng broth, and his old mother blew on it and fed him with great care, as if she was feeding a child.

'Weird!' muttered Apothecary Xu, echoing exactly the sentiments of the other Triads. 'I think we ought to be going.'

They settled their bill, and went on their way.

Spinning Tops and Playing Tag

As they went they discussed the strange Invalid.

The way he ripped open that soldier's shirt' commented Xu. The sheer force! Most unusual!'

‘And the way he pushed him away afterwards,’ went on Father Obscurus. ‘So casual, but lethal!’

They all agreed that the best way of dealing with this strange character was to keep as far as possible out of his way. They had been able to deduce (from the way he had used the title ‘Prince of the West’) that he was on the side of the Satrap, and therefore an enemy. But none of them had the stomach to pick a fight

with the strange family Trio. This was a sobering (and somewhat shaming) realization for the Triads, and they continued on their way in silence for a while.

The silence was suddenly broken by the sound of clattering hooves. There were two horses galloping up behind them. The road they were on was a small country

lane leading to the Zhuang Family manor, and it was too narrow for two horses to

pass. Feng Jizhong and Doublet pulled their horses off the road, but the others just stayed where they were.

When they turned, they saw that the riders were the Invalid’s two retainers. So much for keeping out of his way.

‘Halt there!’ one of them cried. ‘Our master would like to speak with you!’

The way he said this was not exactly rude. But it implied clearly that the only important person in the world was their master. The Brothers were none too happy

about this.

That won’t be possible,’ replied Father Obscurus gruffly. ‘We have an important

engagement, and cannot wait. Besides, we have never even met this master of yours.’

Those were my master’s orders,’ replied the retainer. ‘I think it would be extremely advisable for you to wait for him here.’

This was sounding more and more like a threat.

‘Isn’t your master one of Satrap Wu’s men?” asked Butcher Qian.

‘My master is nobody’s man!’ replied the retainer haughtily.

At that moment they heard the rumbling of wheels, and a large carriage came into

view. The retainer turned his horse around and went up to greet his master. The

Triads waited where they were, conscious that a swift departure would now be interpreted as cowardice.

One of the nurses was inside the carriage. She opened the curtain, and they could see the Invalid seated within. His aged parents were riding on the rear of the carriage. Invalid gave Trinket and his entourage a piercing look.

‘What have you done to that man” He was pointing at Prefect Wu. ‘Who are you,

anyway” he continued. ‘And where are you going’

He spoke briefly and sharply, and in the tone of a man who was not used to being trifled with.

‘And who would you be” replied Father Obscurus. ‘I don’t believe we are acquainted. I’d ask you to mind your own business. "River water never mingles with water from the well” as the saying goes.’

Invalid humphed.

‘Answer my question. It’s no business of yours who I am!’

Father Obscurus was starting to get angry.

‘And what business is it of yours who we are or what we do’ As for you, we can tell, from the way you keep referring to that vile traitor Satrap Wu as the Prince, that you are one of his men. Take my advice’ the fragile state you’re in, you’d be best off at home in bed with a nice warm drink. You might catch cold out here and cough yourself to death!’

The other Brothers burst out laughing. But not for long. The next instant there was a loud smacking sound and a flashing movement, and Obscurus had received a stinging blow to his left cheek, followed by a chop to the left of his ribcage, which threw him violently from his horse. It all happened with the speed of lightning, and it was only when Obscurus was already on the ground that his Triad brethren were able to see that the person responsible for the attack was the Invalid’s aged mother. She had struck with the palms of both her hands. She now steadied herself where she stood on the ground, then leapt back onto the carriage with the same lightning speed.

Meanwhile Invalid had changed places with one of the nurses who had been sitting on the coachman’s seat, lifting her bodily with his left hand, and placing her inside the carriage. Butcher Qian launched into the attack, aiming at him with both palms. Invalid punched out with his left fist at the edges of both of Qian’s palms. The impact made no sound, but Qian felt a devastating force surge through his entire frame, and was sent spinning away, totally out of control. Two backward somersaults later he tried to steady himself and stand upright again, only to find himself giving way at the knees. In a desperate attempt not

to fall down on his knees directly before his adversary, thereby disgracing himself and his

Brothers utterly, Qian managed to flip himself backwards again, and to land facing in the other direction.

Next it was Brother Feng Jizhong's turn to enter the fray. He was literally repulsed by a single flick of the middle finger of Invalid's right hand. One by one, the consumptive (who had by now jumped down on to the ground) took them all

on, and by dint of flicking, jabbing, and pulling he soon had five Triad brethren whirling around like so many spinning tops. There was nothing they could do. Invalid was from time to time seized with a fit of coughing, but he was invincible. The minute one of his human tops began to slow down, he would

set him spinning again, like a child spinning coins on a table. He seemed to be having great fun.

Trinket watched aghast. Doublet was standing in front of him, loyally protecting her master.

Time for a Number Thirty'Six' muttered the valiant Trinket (the famous Thirty'Sixth Strategy' when all else fails, beat a hasty retreat).

'We should head straight for the Zhuang manor' suggested Doublet. Trinket agreed, and they prepared to set off, with the incapacitated Prefect Wu still in tow.

Meanwhile Invalid was still spinning his tops and enjoying himself enormously.

His aged parents smiled as they watched their 'boy' at play, and the four servants stood to the side, applauding their master.

Prefect Wu saw that this might be his last chance to escape from his dire predicament. He struggled free of Doublet and hobbled towards the Invalid.

Trinket panicked. What if Wu were to divulge the truth to this weird but formidable adversary' Quickly grabbing Wu's jaw with his left hand, he squeezed

his mouth open, reached into his boot for his lethal dagger, and sliced off the front half of his tongue. Wu passed out in agony.

For a moment Doublet thought that Trinket had actually killed him.

'Come, Master, let's hurry!' she cried, and the two of them ran off, leaving Wu behind. They had gone less than half a mile when they heard the sound of horses

in hot pursuit behind them. Trinket spied a rocky hillock off to the left, and he and Doublet left the road and ran up the boulder's strewn slope. It was Invalid

and one of his retainers who had followed them on horseback. Their horses could

not negotiate the boulders, however, and they both halted.

‘You two children!’ called out the retainer, dismounting. ‘Don’t be afraid! Come down! My master wants to play with you!’

‘Oh no!’ muttered Trinket. ‘Not the spinning’top game. I don’t think so.’

He scrambled faster than ever up the hill. The retainer came relentlessly after him, but Trinket and Doublet were quick on their feet, and he was unable to catch up with them.

‘What fun!’ cried Invalid. ‘I love Tag!’

He too dismounted and scrambled coughing up the hillside.

Trinket meanwhile, thanks to a dodging tactic taught him by the White Nun (one of the Hundred Flights), was managing to elude the retainer. Doublet grabbed the man from behind (he had not reckoned on her having such strength), and succeeded in dislocating his elbow.

Invalid was jumping from boulder to boulder, and soon landed in front of Doublet. One sweep of his left hand and Doublet’s hat went flying into the air. Her long hair now blew loose in the wind.

‘Look! It’s a girl!’ cried Invalid, laughing gleefully. He reached out and grabbed her by the hair. She retorted with a double elbow reverse jab, the move known as Double Whirling Dragon.

‘Excellent!’ cried the Invalid.

With his left hand, he swept through the air again and, seizing both of her hands, pinned them behind her back. Next he wrapped her long hair around her wrists, and tied them in a tight knot. Then he burst out laughing.

‘What fun!’

Doublet was distraught.

‘Master!’ she cried. ‘Get away while you can!’

Invalid poked her in the small of the back, and closed one of her points.

‘He’ll never get away!’ he laughed, and dropping her to the ground, went in pursuit of Trinket, who was still scrambling around in the rocks. He continued to evade Invalid, using the same tactics taught him by the White Nun.

‘You’re excellent at Tag!’ laughed Invalid.

But by now Trinket was out of breath. He knew he could not last much longer.

‘You’ll never catch me!’ he bluffed. Til catch you first!’

And he pounced on Invalid, who laughed, and slipped out of Trinket’s grasp. He began running around haphazardly on the rocky

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hillside. Trinket had begun to figure him out a little by now. He was, without any doubt, an extraordinarily gifted fighter, but evidently had some kind of mental handicap-though he must have been forty years old at the least, he seemed

to have the mental age of a nine-year-old. He was devilishly quick on the stony ground, leaping around from rock to rock, popping up suddenly in places where

Trinket least expected him to be. Trinket was both surprised and impressed.

‘I’ll catch you soon, never you worry!’ he cried.

Invalid seemed to find this threat unbearably funny. He burst out in a fit of childish gibberish that left him coughing uncontrollably.

‘Now I’ll get you!’ cried Trinket, and made to pounce on him. Just at that moment he heard a voice calling in the distance. It was the old mother. She sounded very angry with Trinket.

‘You horrid boy! Making my son cough like that!’

And next thing a pebble came whistling through the air and struck Trinket (who

failed to duck out the way in time) right on the ankle.

‘Seize him!’ cried the old lady, and the other retainer ran forward and took hold of both Trinket and Doublet, dragging them over to where she stood. Invalid

was chuckling loudly and clapping his hands.

‘Silly baby!’ (More coughing.) ‘Baby! Big baboon! Useless baboon!’

Trinket was both taken aback and angry at this latest turn of events. His Triad Brothers were all bound by now, and roped together in a line. One of the nurses was leading them along by one end of the rope. Prefect Wu was the last in line. They all walked with their heads hung and eyes closed, almost as if they were

unconscious or in some kind of trance.

‘Tell me,’ asked the old lady, ‘where did this girl, the one dressed up as a man, learn to dislocate elbows like that’ And you, young man, where did you learn the Hundred Flights’ And who are you anyway”

Trinket reflected for a moment before answering this last question. ‘I’ll never get the better of these weirdos by ordinary means. Perhaps I’d better try something a bit different. Like pretending to be a friend of the Satrap’s. That might just work. That might save my skin. . . .’

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As these thoughts were passing through his mind, he caught sight of Prefect Wu,
and had an inspiration.

‘If you really want to know, my name is Wu’ he replied at last. ‘I’m from Yangzhou, actually. Hot popping momma! When my uncle’s armies fight their way through to Peking, you’d better watch out, because he’s Prince of the West you know! And if Uncle thinks you’ve been treating me badly-’

The three of them-Invalid and his old parents-exchanged a startled glance.

‘You’re lying!’ exclaimed Invalid. ‘How could someone like you be the Prince’s nephew”

‘I’m most certainly not lying!’ protested Trinket. ‘Go ahead- if you don’t believe me, test me. Ask me anything you like about the Prince. If I get a single answer wrong, cut my head off!’

‘Very well then’ what does the Prince treasure more than anything else in the whole world”

‘You mean people, or things” replied Trinket. ‘If you mean people, then that’s easy’ the Peerless Consort, Chen Yuanyuan, the most beautiful woman that ever-’

He was off.

‘Of course not people snapped Invalid. ‘His possessions”

‘Certainly! I can tell you that,’ replied Trinket confidently. And he proceeded to list the Satrap’s Three Treasures’ his white tiger skin, his big ruby the

size of a chicken's egg, and his marble screen with the tiger'skin markings. The Invalid was not just impressed by this evidence of inside knowledge, he was actually tickled by it and laughed out loud.

'Well done! You really do know, don't you! What fun!'

And as he said that, he flung open the lapel of his gown, to reveal a beautiful white tiger'skin lining-with black markings on a white background, to be precise.

'How . . . how did you manage to steal that" gasped Trinket.

'Steal it' The Prince gave it to me,' replied the Invalid.

Gradually Trinket continued to build up a convincing new identity as the Satrap's nephew. He dropped the names of several of Wu's generals (names he remembered only too well from his eventful stay in Kunming), and struck home with a carefully chosen anecdote about the curative properties of the tiger skin (most especially effective for coughs and colds). The Peerless Consort, when she caught a chill, had been privileged to borrow it for a

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mere three days, and had 'witnessed its miraculous effects. Needless to say, this story appealed particularly to Invalid's parents, who were delighted to learn that their son was actually wearing such a potent cough remedy. Trinket also displayed intimate knowledge of the Satrap's son, Wu Yingxiong. (He was especially careful not to use his own favourite name for the man-the Little Traitor.) And he claimed a close acquaintance with Wu's new wife, the Princess Ning (though how close that acquaintance really was, he chose not to specify). The Trio were by now almost inclined to believe Trinket, and the old man untied the Triad brethren and opened their various points. One of the nurses untied Doublet's hair. But Trinket still wanted to give the Trio a final, clinching piece of proof. Just as the old couple were beginning to look doubtful again, it came to him. Of course! He was thinking, needless to say, of the fake letter 'from Satrap Wu' that his friends and fellow Resistance fighters Gu Yanwu and Zha Yihuang had concocted to incriminate Prefect Wu. It would be perfect for his present needs!

'I know' he said, smiling inwardly. 'There is one thing I could show you, since after all you're working for my uncle. I've got a letter from him-it's highly confidential of course, but I think I can trust you.'

It worked. The old man read the letter through from beginning to end. The evening was drawing on, and the light was beginning to fail, but what he read finally convinced him that Trinket was indeed the nephew of the Prince of the West. He made a mental note, as he read, that the Prince was perhaps not as dedicated to the cause of the Ming Restoration as he would like people to believe. This seemed more like the letter of a man ambitious to take the throne for himself, and to found his own dynasty-not to put a Ming Pretender on the throne. Perhaps he deserved his nickname the Satrap after all.

He hastened to apologize to Trinket for having treated him so disrespectfully. Trinket dismissed the matter as a mere trifle. After all, at the time the gentleman had not known his true identity.

Meanwhile the Triads were one by one regaining full consciousness, and were dumbfounded to hear their Lodge Master claiming the Satrap as his uncle. But then, he'd done stranger things in the past, they remembered. No doubt he had some cunning plan.

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Night was now falling in earnest, and a cold wind had arisen. Invalid started coughing again.

'May I be so bold as to ask your names?' ventured Trinket. This time the old man answered directly.

'We are the Gui Family.' He glanced at his son.

'It is getting late. We had better find somewhere suitable for him to pass the night.'

Trinket suggested that they should all proceed together, since he knew of a place where they could stay. The old lady mounted the same horse as her son, sitting behind him and wrapping her arms around him.

Kungfu Pedigrees

It was not long before they arrived at the Zhuang manor. One of them went ahead and knocked at the door. It was quite some time before finally an aged half-deaf

crone answered. She seemed extremely vague, and muttered something about there being no gentlemen in the house.

Invalid was not in the least deterred by this.

There are now!’ he exclaimed. He laughed and strode on into the hall, pushing the old lady aside as he did so. His parents immediately sent off the two nurses to prepare his meal.

Old Gui was still not entirely convinced by Trinket’s tale. He started asking questions about the ‘real’ Prefect Wu, whose face was a sorry sight, blood dribbling from his mouth. Trinket passed Wu off as a Manchu official he had met on the way, whose tongue he had been obliged to cut out, to prevent him betraying any of the Satrap’s-er, the Prince’s-secrets. Wu, still in agony, was incapable of contradicting Trinket’s story.

When Old Gui went on to question the origins of Trinket’s kungfu, things looked tricky for a moment. Trinket did not want to risk revealing the identity of any of his Shifus. So he came up with a new one for the occasion, the Tibetan Grand Lama Sangge (he knew Sangge had links with the Satrap, and it was therefore likely that Old Gui would know about him).

The Reverend Sangge was good enough to teach me one or two moves. He also instructed my young maid. But I am ashamed to say I never really learned them properly. I was no match for your son. What strength he has! What excellent kungfu!’

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Mother Gui was always pleased to hear anyone speak in optimistic terms of her son’s health. At that very moment Invalid was slumped in a chair, looking like death warmed up. She looked at him and smiled. But she was still sceptical about

Trinket’s kungfu pedigree.

‘What you did just now was typical Iron Sword kungfu. I’d know it anywhere. How

could the Lama have possibly taught you that”

She obviously knew what she was talking about. The White Nun, who had

taught

Trinket the Hundred Flights, was indeed a leading exponent of Iron Sword kungfu.

Luckily for him, the old man seemed to have worked out another possible lineage'

There was an Iron Sword Master called Perfect Jade who once spent a lot of time

in Tibet. It was most probably he who passed on the Iron Sword secrets to the Tibetans.'

'And what about the girl's kungfu' The old lady was still far from satisfied.

'You're not going to tell me she learned hers from the Tibetan too' I hardly think so.'

She and the old man both shook their heads. There was clearly something they had

recognized in Doublet's style of fighting. Their doubts were interrupted by another fit of coughing from Invalid. Mother Gui hurried over to rub his back, and presently the nurses came in with his ginseng broth and with bowls of tea, which they offered round to Apothecary Xu and the others.

Old Gui drank his tea, and was about to question Doublet further, when he noticed that she had already slipped out of the room. Suddenly he stood up, and

spoke to the two nurses'

'Where did you get the water from, for the tea'

'From the kitchen,' they hastened to answer. 'It was quite clean. We both looked carefully.'

Even as they said this, there was a thud, and the two Gui retainers passed out and fell to the ground. Old Lady Gui was on her feet now, wobbling unsteadily, and holding her hand to her head.

The tea! It's been drugged!'

The Triads had not tasted their tea, but they too (having exchanged meaningful glances) suddenly slumped to the floor, knocking bowls all over the place.

Trinket too uttered a cry, and did likewise, closing both his eyes. Invalid gave a feeble cry. His head tilted to one side, and he lost consciousness.

Old Gui had drunk the tea, but he was able, through a series of deep breathing exercises, to control the movement of the drug, so that it did not circulate within his body.

'Quickly' he said to the two nurses, who had themselves drunk nothing. 'Fetch two bowls of cold water.'

They hurried out.

There's something very strange about this house,' muttered the old lady, as she bent down to take hold of the sword belonging to one of her retainers. She grew dizzy and collapsed on the ground. Old Gui had taken hold of a chair with his left hand, and was standing there, closing his eyes and taking deep breaths, tottering slightly from side to side.

From his prostrate position on the floor, Trinket opened his eyes a slit. He saw Doublet coming into the room, accompanied by a large number of women in white.

Old Gui spotted them at the same moment and summoned up a last spurt of energy,

propelling himself at one of the women, chopping at her with a flashing movement

of his palm, and sending her flying into a chair. This was the cue for the Triads to leap up from the ground (where they were busy pretending to be drugged) and pounce on him. But he was already unconscious. In a matter of seconds, Apothecary Xu closed a few points, and had the three Guis immobilized, to make doubly sure.

Trinket now jumped to his feet, and laughed loudly. Then he turned to one of the woman in white, and bowed respectfully.

'Greetings, Widow Zhuang!'

Evil is its own Reward

The lady in white returned Trinket's salutation.

'How can we ever express our gratitude to you for delivering our enemy into our

hands like this! For giving us this opportunity for vengeance and justice!

Please come with me. I would like you to meet our Shifu.'

She took Trinket by the hand and led him towards a lady dressed in a yellow tunic who was busy massaging the back of the unfortunate woman recently hurled

across the room by Old Gui. The woman was still moaning in pain and spitting out

mouthfuls of blood.

'Don't worry!' said the woman in the yellow tunic, smiling gently and speaking

in a soft, tender voice. She was no youngster,

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reflected Trinket as he looked at her. But she had the voice of a young girl. She wore a little band of gold on her head, and was barefoot. Her hair was grey, and her face, although her cheeks were soft and white, was heavily wrinkled around the eyes. It was almost impossible to guess her age. From the hair one would say well over sixty; from the cheeks, about thirty. In any case, thought Trinket, if she's Widow Zhuang's Shifu, I should kowtow to her. Which he did. Trinket bows to Elder Sister Madam!

She clearly found this mode of address highly amusing. Trinket hastened to explain.

'I called you that because if you are Widow Zhuang's Shifu, I should call you Madam; but on the other hand, if I'd heard your voice on its own, without seeing

you, I'd have thought you were my little sister.'

Yellow Tunic laughed out loud.

'What a funny little fellow you are! You certainly have the gift of the gab! No wonder you talked round my own Shifu's brother'in'arms, Old Gui!'

Trinket and his friends looked at her in utter amazement.

'You mean . . .' began Trinket incredulously. 'You mean that this old gentleman here is your Shifu's brother'in'arms'

That's what I said. It's forty years since I last saw him. At first I did not even recognize him. But the moment I saw him in action, I knew it was him! No one else can do that move the way he does. It's deadly-Snow on the Mountain Passes of Qin!'

Trinket reflected that whatever Old Gui's kungfu lineage was, the Gui Trio were going to be impossible to deal with once they came round. He would have to bind

them as a precaution.

These three are working for the Satrap' he declared, and gave orders for them to

be bound. The Triads were only too glad to oblige, having just recently been so tormented and humiliated. Being a Spinning'Top was not something they wanted to

experience again.

'Working for the Satrap' said Lady Yellow Tunic. The Guis' I find that hard to believe. How did you run into them anyway'

Trinket told her the story, giving a vivid description of Invalid Gui's strange (but invincible) kungfu.

'It was my own Shifu who saved the boy's life in the first place' said Yellow Tunic. 'He is his parents' pride and joy.'

She looked at the unconscious form of Old Gui.

‘The old man was always so upright, so just. If he really has joined forces with the Satrap, my Shifu would certainly be most disappointed.’

She spoke of her Shifu with a mixture of awe and fear.

Meanwhile one of the women in white came up to Widow Zhuang.

‘Ma’am, now that we have the Great Enemy in our hands, let us go into the shrine and make an offering to the souls of the departed.’

‘Very well,’ replied Widow Zhuang.

They all proceeded deeper into the manor, dragging Prefect Wu with them. When they reached the shrine, they forced him to his knees. Widow Zhuang took a book down from the altar and held it out before Wu.

‘Do you recognize this book’

If there was one book that Wu Zhirong knew by heart, it was this’ An Epitome of Ming History, by Zhuang Tinglong, the book responsible for his own meteoric rise within the ranks of the mandarin. He nodded. The Widow continued’

‘Now look at these Spirit Tablets. Tell me if you recognize the names.’

Wu looked up at the row of tablets above the altar and all around the candle’lit shrine. There were more than a hundred all told. They were all of them men who

had been put to death several years earlier, as a result of the Ming History Inquisition. It was Wu Zhirong who had instigated the witch’hunt. He had been responsible for the death of every one of them’ Zhuang Tinglong, the blind nominal author-(although he had already died by the time of the Inquisition, his

corpse had been taken out of its coffin and gibbeted); Zhuang Yuncheng (the author’s father); Li Lingxi (the Vice’President of the Board of Rites, who had written the book’s Preface’ he had been subjected to the Slow Process-death by

slicing); Cheng Weifan (the well-meaning Yamen secretary, another case of the Slow Process); Li Huan and Wang Zhaozhen (petty officials in the Prefect of Huzhou's Yamen); and so on. As Wu began reading the names, he had a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Blood was still dribbling from the stump of his amputated tongue. He was already two-thirds dead. He felt his whole body begin to tremble beneath him.

The Widow spoke again'

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'These are all men that you destroyed, for the sake of your own wealth and glory. Some died in prison, after long days and weeks of torture. Some were sliced to death, slowly and painfully, by a thousand cuts. We too would have died, or spent the rest of our days in slavery, if our Shifu had not saved us. Today your turn has come. Today you will die. We will not be as cruel as you were. But justice must be done. It would be too easy for you if one of us were to do the deed. You are to take your life with your own hand.' And so saying, she released his points, restoring the power of movement necessary for this final act, and tossed him a sword.

Wu picked up the sword. He was trembling violently. He lacked the courage to do what he had to do. Suddenly he turned, and made a desperate dash for the door of the shrine. It was a futile gesture. Before he had taken a single step, a dozen white-clad figures had converged to block his path. He uttered a hoarse cry, and stumbled to the ground. There he writhed around for a moment. And then he lay still.

Widow Zhuang went up and felt his body. He was no longer breathing. His face was covered in blood. His eyes were staring wide. He was a terrifying sight.

'Evil has had its own reward. This wicked man has finally met his death.'

She knelt before the altar.

'Spirits of the departed! You have been avenged! May your souls know peace!'

All the women threw themselves face down on the ground, and began howling. Trinket and his Triad friends all bowed before the altar. Yellow Tunic stood motionless and silent to one side, a slight frown on her fair brow.

After a lengthy spell of lamentation, the women kowtowed before Trinket and thanked him for what he had done. Not only had he killed Oboi, the Manchu who had initiated the investigation leading to their husbands' deaths. He had also brought them Wu.

The women proceeded to dismantle the altar and the shrine, and committed the tablets to the flames.

Living Legends

Lady Yellow Tunic now took Trinket and his friends back out to the hall, where the Gui Trio were still lying unconscious. Having discovered that the old man was the brother-in-law of Yellow Tunic's Shifu, Trinket felt somewhat ashamed at having used drugs to lay him low.

'If I'd known who he was, I'd never have done such a thing!' he protested.

'If you'd known who he was' Why, you obviously still have no idea. This man is a living legend. He is known far and wide as one of the greatest fighters of all time. His full name is Gui Xinsu, and he has always been known as the Matchless Knight. Those paltry drugs you tried on him would have affected him about as much as a sprinkling of pepper in his soup!' 'What do you mean'

'I mean, do you really think an old veteran like Gui, a living legend of the kungfu world, would have fallen for something like that' Common or garden whore-house opiate' That stuff you were using may be all right on young girls. But on Matchless' To put him out required something a little more serious, I can assure you.' Trinket knew at once that it was she who had added this 'something more serious', a more powerful ingredient to make his amateurish potion so effective. She denied this fiercely. But he knew it was true. He knelt before her and begged her to accept him as her disciple. She laughed, and reaching out she took hold of him by the chin. As she did so, Trinket felt something hard and cold. He looked down, and had the shock of his life. At the end of her right arm

was not a hand, but a shining black metal hook. She smiled. 'Look carefully.'

With her left hand she pulled back the sleeve, to reveal a snow'white right arm, as far as the wrist. And then there was the black hook.

'If you really want to be my disciple,' she said, 'you must do the same thing yourself.'

This 'Lady Yellow Tunic' was in fact known as Lady Iron Hand. She was the famed guru of the Five Poisons Sect, who had later herself become the disciple of Yuan Chengzhi, the legendary Master of the Mount Hua School of kungfu. With the downfall of the Ming, she had followed Yuan to his island exile. She had been on a secret mission on the mainland when she had run into the Zhuang widows, on their way into captivity and slavery in Manchuria. She had saved them, and it was also she who had taught them a certain amount of kungfu. On this present occasion she had encountered

Doublet in the kitchen, as she was putting some of Trinket's 'whorehouse opiate' in the tea. Enquiring as to the situation, without ascertaining the exact identity of the opponents they were dealing with, she had realized that their kungfu was far too advanced for such a cheap trick, and so had added something much more potent of her own (she had not been a Five Poisons guru for nothing).

Trinket was not so sure about the idea of cutting off his right hand. She laughed.

'Don't you worry. There's no need for you to be my disciple. And anyway, I don't have time to teach you; though I do have something I'd like to give you. There's absolutely no call for you to go knocking your head on the ground and calling me

Elder Sister Shifu!'

'But I like it!' protested Trinket. 'Even if you won't be my Shifu, I'd still like to call you Big Sister! You're so pretty! Big sis! Big sis!'

He was almost as bad as Invalid.

She let out a peal of laughter. She belonged to the Miao mountain people of the south'west, and had none of the typical Chinese inhibitions about such things.

She just liked being called pretty, and found Trinket's way of talking entertaining.

‘Go on, say it again!’

‘Big sis! Big sis!’

‘You’re a cheeky little boy, aren’t you!’

She grabbed his neck from behind with her left hand, lifted him off the ground, and dangled him over to her left side. Suddenly he heard a series of spluttering sounds and three of the candles on the table directly in front of him went out. Then, from the wooden partition wall opposite, he heard a series of puttering sounds, like heavy drops of rain falling rapidly one after the other.

‘Go and have a look,’ she said, releasing him. He took one of the candles that was still alight, and walked up to the wall. He could see twenty or thirty glistening steel darts embedded in it.

‘How on earth did you do that? You didn’t even move!’ he cried in amazement.

‘No

one could ever dodge something as fast as that!’

‘The only person who could was my Shifu. We fought each other once-it was before

I became his disciple. Luckily I never killed him.’

There was a strange note in her voice. Trinket looked at her.

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‘I think you were in love ‘with that Shifu of yours’ he ventured.

She flushed very slightly.

‘Nonsense! If his lady were to hear you say that, she’d cut your tongue out!’

There was so much that Trinket did not know. For example, it was not her Shifu,

the handsome Yuan Chengzhi, that Lady Iron Hand had really been in love with. It

was his lady, the woman warrior who dressed as a man. But that is part of another story.*

Lady Iron Hand seemed momentarily flushed by memories of the passion of her

youth. She took a pair of finger’sheaths from her pocket and slipped them onto the thumb and first finger of her left hand. Then she carefully removed the darts from the wall, and extracted a small metal casket attached to a metal hoop

inside her gown. It had rows of tiny little holes in its lid. She replaced the darts one by one.

Trinket took one look at the casket and clapped his hands.

‘I see how it works! There’s a spring, and all you have to do is release the spring and the darts fly straight out from inside your gown. It’s so clever!’

‘You must be very careful when you use these’ she said undoing his gown and attaching the hoop. She showed him how to release the spring. She also explained to him how to make the poison with which the darts were tipped, and how to make the antidote.

‘There are enough darts in here for five strikes’ she said. ‘Then you have to replenish the supply, and tip them with fresh poison.’

The poison was not fatal, she explained. It merely rendered the opponent powerless. But he should use them sparingly none the less.

Trinket nodded instantly, and knelt once again to express his gratitude.

Dead Man’s Head

‘You can sit the Gui family up now’ said Lady Iron Hand, and herself left the room. Trinket propped up Old Gui on a chair, and went over to Invalid. As he hauled him up from the ground, he felt

* The reader can pursue these characters in the author’s earlier novel, *The Bloodstained*

Sword.

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something large and round, like a big gourd, protruding from under his gown. Opening the gown, he saw a large leather sack. Trinket was curious as to its contents, and he loosened the leather thongs and looked inside.

‘Aiya!’ he cried in horror. ‘A dead man’s head! And . . . and he’s staring right at me! Yikes! Listen to me, Dead Man’s Head, if I take you out, will you promise not to bite me’

He felt around nervously inside the sack, took hold of the head by the pigtail, pulled it out, and placed it on the table. In the lamplight, he could make out

more clearly the angry gaze on the face, the bristling moustaches. Suddenly Trinket let out a great cry and recoiled several steps.

‘It’s Beggar Wu!’

The head had once belonged to Beggar Wu, the undercover Triad general from Guangdong. Of that there was no doubt. Trinket began howling. The Triad Brothers

heard him, and came hurrying into the room. Their first reaction was to think that Lady Iron Hand had killed him. Then Doublet arrived. Trinket took her by the hand.

‘Doublet, sweet Doublet, this is your sworn brother, General Wu! He was killed by this creature! I found the head inside his gown!’

So saying, he rushed over to the slumped, still unconscious form of Invalid Gui, and gave him a few hefty kicks. Apothecary Xu examined the severed head more

closely. The blood had clearly been dry for some time, and the head had been carefully preserved with lime. Doublet stroked it and began wailing pitifully.

‘Throw some cold water on this vile thing and wake him up!’ demanded Brother Li.

‘We must get to the bottom of this. We must kill him, and avenge our Brother’s death!’

Unanimous agreement was expressed by the other Triads. Doublet went off to fetch

some water, which they threw in Invalid Gui’s face. He sneezed a few times, and

slowly opened his eyes. He tried to move, only to discover that he had been both

bound and immobilized.

‘Who’s playing tricks!’ he exclaimed angrily.

Father Obscurus nudged his face with the point of his sword.

‘My grandfather has’ he muttered threateningly. ‘What have you got to say about

this’ He pointed at Wu’s head.

‘I did it!’ declared Invalid. ‘Where are my mum and dad’

He looked around and saw that the old couple were also bound and helpless. He

almost burst out crying. Suddenly he seemed very afraid and alone, like a spoilt child in real trouble for the first time.

Apothecary Xu gave him a good box on the ears.

‘Why did you kill this man’ Come on, speak up, and tell the truth, or I’ll poke both your eyes out!’

He held the tip of his sword a millimetre from Invalid’s right eyeball. Invalid

was terrified and started coughing uncontrollably.

‘I ... I ... Don’t poke my eyes out! Don’t! Then I won’t be able to see! It was the Prince. He said the Emperor was a bad, bad man. He took away our land. I ought to kill him!’

So far, so good, as far as the Triads were concerned.

‘But why did you have to kill this man’ asked Brother Li, pointing to Beggar Wu’s severed head.

The Prince told me he was a very bad man. He was working for the Emperor, and we had to get rid of him. The Prince gave me medicine for my cough. He gave me the tiger skin. My mum said I was to do it. She said that man was a traitor. He was a good fighter though. It took all three of us to kill him. Now let me loose. And let my mum and dad loose too. We’ve got to go to Peking now and kill the Emperor. It’s particularly important.’

‘We should kill all three of them!’ cried Trinket.

But at that very moment they heard voices crying outside.

‘Come out! We have come to avenge Brother Wu!’

The Brothers within were surprised and delighted. After exchanging a coded password, they ascertained that these men were also Triads. They identified their own Lodge, and were waiting for the new arrivals to identify themselves in like manner, when the door of the hall was thrown open and in strode the tall, dashing figure of the Helmsman, Chen Jinnan.

Of Murder and Assassination

‘Shifu!’

Trinket rushed forward and fell to his knees.

‘Greetings!’ replied Chen Jinnan. He was about to say more, when he saw the severed head on the table. He hurried over and stood there holding the edge of the table with both hands. Tears began to surge down his cheeks.

His escort included Mao Chaoxing, Lodge Master of the Clan Lodge of Guangxi

Province, and Gu Zhizhong, Lodge Master of the Red Fire Lodge of Guizhou Province, and several Brothers from the Obedience Lodge of Guangdong Province

(to which Beggar Wu had been affiliated as Red Banner Master). When they saw

Invalid Gui sitting there, their hands moved angrily to their sword hilts.

Invalid took one look at them, burst out in a coughing fit, and lost consciousness again.

They soon discovered that there were also in the newly arrived group Triad brethren from Lodges in the provinces of Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, and

Anhui. Most of them were still outside mounting guard on the manor. Trinket proposed once more that they should execute the Gui Trio on the spot, but the Helmsman insisted on bringing them round first and questioning them thoroughly.

Doublet obliged with another bucket of cold water, and brought round the old couple and their son for the second time.

No sooner was she conscious than the old lady started complaining loudly about

the 'lowdown dirty trick' that had been played on them-putting drugs in their tea. The old man said nothing for the time being. The Helmsman proceeded to grill them. At first the old lady refused to answer his questions. But Trinket held his dagger to Invalid's throat (producing a little trickle of blood).

'Mum' Trinket wailed, and then started imitating to perfection one of Invalid's coughing fits. 'Mum! I'm going to die. Any minute now!' (cough, cough) 'I'm going to die of a bad case of the head'chop, mum.' (cough, cough) 'A bad dose of

the throat'cut, mum.' (cough, cough) 'A terrible attack of minced meat, mum.' (cough, cough) 'It won't be any fun at all!'

Trinket had always been a brilliant (and merciless) mimic, and this was one of his best performances. It sent a shiver down Old Lady Gui's spine.

'Stop doing that at once!' she cried.

Trinket was relentless.

'Mum!' he continued. 'You must tell them everything, or else-' (cough, cough)-or else I'll go down with split'open'the tummy syndrome.' (cough, cough) 'Or maybe guts'spilled'all'over'the'floor'itis.'

As he did this he lifted up Invalid's shirt, and poked his dagger into his skinny chest. The old lady could hold out no longer.

'Very well! I'll tell you who we are. We belong to the Mount Hua School. Before you were even born, my lord Sir Gui-Gui Xinshu-was renowned throughout the land

as the Matchless

Knight.'

When he heard these words, the Helmsman seemed deeply impressed. For years there had been no news of the famed Martial Arts adept Gui Xinshu. If this was truly he, there must be a lot to explain. He stepped forward and bowed respectfully to the old man.

‘So you are the Matchless Knight! Chen Jinnan presents his humble respects!’

He loosed Old Gui’s bonds, and opened his points, massaging him gently but firmly in the small of the back. Then he loosed the bonds of the other two. The old man opened their points, a great deal more quickly and expertly (it must be said) than Chen had done his. He glanced at the crowd around him, and spotted the figure of Doublet. She was the one whose style of kungfu he had recognized earlier as belonging to his own lineage. Doublet’s eyes met his piercing gaze, and she shrank fearfully behind Trinket.

‘Come over here, young girl,’ said the old man. ‘Tell me, do you belong to the Mount Hua School’

‘What Mount Hua School’ cried Doublet nervously. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about! I just want to avenge the death of my sworn brother, General Wu!’

The truth about Doublet’s kungfu lineage was as follows’ when Lady Iron Hand had helped Widow Zhuang to escape, she had taught both her and her entourage (including her young maid Doublet) certain kungfu skills. She had never taken them on as true disciples, however, and had certainly never mentioned her own lineage, or her connection with the legendary Mount Hua Master, Yuan Chengzhi.

So of course, the old man’s words meant nothing to Doublet.

‘If there are any of Old Master Shen’s disciples present,’ the old man called out, ‘let them come forward now!’

There was total silence. But the name Shen elicited an immediate response from the Helmsman.

‘Sir,’ he commented, respectfully, but pointedly. ‘Old Master Shen is indeed known to me. He is a great fighter, and a leading teacher of the Mount Hua School. What is more, he was chosen at the Hejianfu Congress as the President of our League for the Eradication of Traitors. And the principal goal of that League was

to put to death all those who

Yet you, sir, a fighter of the same lineage as Old Master Shen, you and your brother-in-arms, apparently claim to be working for the Satrap, and take pride in the fact that you have killed one of our best and bravest warriors, General Wu Liuqi, known among his Triad Brothers as Beggar Wu. There is much here that I do not understand.’

Gradually, as the two men talked, it all became clear. The old Gui couple had been well and truly deceived by the Satrap, who had not only convinced them of

the patriotic nature of his own uprising against the Manchus, but had also cast Beggar Wu in the light of a Manchu stooge, thereby justifying his assassination. When they learned of the terrible mistake they had made, that they had in fact put to death a hero, one of the key figures of the Resistance that they themselves held so dear, the old couple were so genuinely devastated that their first reaction was to attempt to take their own lives. It was only an extremely fast move on the part of the Helmsman that saved them. He himself sustained a

serious injury in the process (a deadly chop from Old Lady Gui), and began coughing up blood.

The old lady fell to the ground before the severed head of Beggar Wu.

‘Since we seem fated still to live, let this be our vow!’ she declared fiercely. ‘First we will assassinate the Manchu Emperor in his Palace in Peking, and then we will take the life of that vile monster, that lying traitor, Wu Sangui!’

The Helmsman himself, deeply moved at the tragic outcome of their misunderstanding, shed bitter tears for his departed friend. When his tears were

dry, he reapplied himself to the important business of the day. He informed the Guis that he and his confederates were planning a large-scale gathering of all the various factions of the Resistance. The outbreak of Satrap Wu’s rebellion

offered them a golden opportunity to advance their cause, and there was a need to discuss and concert strategy. He begged the two veteran warriors to attend the meeting. At first they declined, feeling too shamefaced at their recent terrible blunder. But Trinket managed to talk them round, arguing that now might not be the best moment to dispose of the Emperor anyway. In the present situation, if an older, and smarter, Manchu were to take his place, it would only make matters worse for them. Better to keep this young and inexperienced Emperor on the throne for the time being. (In reality, he was concerned that his friend Misty might not survive an attack by this deadly duo and their weird son.)

The Helmsman announced that they would all be setting off for Peking the next morning, and would meet together that same evening in the safety of Trinket's Residence, to discuss their tactics. He turned to Trinket.

'Have you moved house again?' 'No,' replied Trinket. 'I'm still in Bronze Hat Lane.' 'Good. Very well then, sirs.' The Helmsman addressed the Guis. 'We shall meet tomorrow evening at Viscount Wei's palace.' 'Excuse me, Shifu, but it's Earl Wei now!' 'Indeed!' replied Chen Jinnan. 'My congratulations!' The three Guis and their retainers made ready to go. As they were leaving, Invalid called out to Trinket 'Hey, kid! Want to play with me'

The poor man had never really had a playmate in his life, and despite everything, he thought Trinket was rather fun (to use his favourite expression).

Trinket simply replied'

'You killed my friend. I'm not playing with you.'

Invalid was not having this. In a flash he leapt on to Trinket,

grabbed him, and whisked him off as far as the doorway. No one

had quick enough reflexes to stop him, not even the Helmsman,

who was still weakened from his recent encounter with Old Lady

Gui.

'Come on!' cackled Invalid. 'Let's play another game of Tag!' Tut him down, boy!' said Old Gui sternly. Invalid obeyed his father's order. But he looked as if he would burst into tears at any moment. His mother tried to comfort him'

‘Don’t you worry, my boy. We’ll get you a couple of pageboys to play with when we get to Peking.’

‘I don’t want page’boys!’ he wailed. They’re no fun! I like this kid! He’s fun! Get him for me instead!’ Old Gui dragged him off.

When the Guis had gone, Trinket wanted to invite Lady Iron Hand to come in and meet everyone. But to his great disappointment, she had already left.

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And so the following day, Trinket took his leave of the Helmsman and set off for the Capital with the Helmsman and the rest of his entourage. They presently met up with his deputy commander, Zhang Yong, who had the Fake’Empress Dowager in custody.

As soon as they arrived at Bronze Hat Lane, Trinket’s first thought was for Kang

Xi’s safety. He could not bear the thought of his old friend Misty being assassinated by these weird fanatics, the Gui Trio, however much he owed it to his Shifu the Helmsman to be loyal to the Triad cause. He could not very well openly warn the Manchu Emperor of this new threat to his person. But perhaps he

could have a word with one or two of his own friends among the Palace Guards, and persuade them to tighten security.

He was just about to set off for the Palace, when the Helmsman appeared, with the other Lodge Masters, and he was obliged to stay at home and entertain them.

Soon they were joined by other Triad brethren, and by the Young Count, Mu Jiansheng, and the principal retainers of the Mu Family’ Liu Dahong, the Iron Dragon, and his brother’ in’ arms, Wu Lishen, the Shaker Lion; and Su Gang, the

Magic Hand. They had already been in Peking for some time. It was a while after

dinner before the Gui Trio arrived. Trinket offered to feed them, but was informed that they had already eaten. Invalid looked around him with an appreciative gaze.

‘Hey kid, this place is almost as grand as one of the Prince’s palaces! You must be his nephew after all!’

They adjourned to the eastern wing of Trinket’s palace, to drink tea and begin the more serious part of their discussion. The servants were dismissed, and the Helmsman posted Trinket’s guards outside and up on the rooftop. Then they bolted

the door fast, and got down to business. The Helmsman made the necessary

formal

introductions, and the old veterans Shaker Wu and Iron Dragon Liu expressed their deep respect for the old Gui parents, of whom they were lifetime admirers.

No mention was made of the unfortunate killing of Beggar Wu.

As soon as the discussion got under way, a basic difference of opinion became apparent. The Guis considered the assassination of the Manchu Emperor to be the

number one priority. Satrap Wu could be dealt with afterwards. The Mu Family, on

the other hand, insisted that the Satrap should be dealt with first. Killing the Emperor

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would in fact (according to their view) be tantamount to giving the Satrap a helping hand.

Old Gui produced one of the Satrap's proclamations, in which he made claims to

be restoring the Chinese Throne to the Han (that is, Chinese) people. Wu Sangui

had also produced as his figurehead a three-year-old boy purporting to be the new Ming Pretender. This received short shrift from the Mu Family.

'In the first place' protested Iron Dragon Liu indignantly, 'if he wants us to believe he is restoring the Ming, why does he plan to call the new dynasty Zhou? It's obviously all a lie. He wants the Throne for himself. We all know that! This three-year-old princeling, if he really exists, is just a puppet! The whole thing is outrageous!'

They looked to the Helmsman to provide some wisdom and resolve their differences. Chen Jinnan advocated a course of action not very different from that proposed by the Guis' to kill the Emperor first, and to deal with the Satrap later. He also pointed out that they could count on the support of the Zheng Family and their forces in Taiwan. (These were the descendants of Coxinga,

to whom the Helmsman had vowed undying loyalty, and whom the Triads still considered to be the core of the Resistance.) In the aftermath of the Emperor's assassination, the Zhengs could invade the central coastal provinces of Fujian and Zhejiang, and together with the Triads and the Mu Family, they could get the

upper hand over the Satrap.

Magic Hand Su Gang was not that impressed.

‘You speak highly of the Zheng Family, Helmsman; and none of us questions your own loyalty to the cause, or that of Prince Zheng himself. But among the lesser ranks of the Zheng Family, there are some highly unreliable individuals!’

‘Yes!’ piped up Trinket. That Young Sir Zheng, for example, and his teacher Feng Xifan, the Bloodless Sword, are a couple of rogues for a start!’

The Helmsman noted with some surprise that his young disciple had some somewhat heretical views on the Taiwan situation.

Suddenly Invalid Gui saw fit to say something.

‘Wu Sangui’s all right. He gave me his tiger skin. Look!’

And he proceeded to open his gown and exhibit his pride and joy. His mother called out’

‘Not here, child! What will you think of next!’

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But it was too late. Su Gang was not going to allow this little exhibition of Satrap’worship to go without comment.

‘So, I suppose your pretty little fur’lining is more important than our country^ ‘Take it off!’ cried the mother, sensing serious trouble. ‘Why’ wailed her son. What happened next left everyone gasping. Old Gui, without any warning, reached

out and took hold of his son’s sword. Then in a breathtakingly swift series of moves he began slicing at his son-front, back, shoulders, and arms. Everyone thought the boy was as good as dead. But such was the precision of the old man’s

swordsmanship that his son was untouched, while the priceless tiger’skin’lined gown now lay on the floor in seventeen or eighteen neatly sliced pieces. Invalid Gui stood there in nothing but his silkfloss’padded under’jacket and trousers. When all assembled were able to see what had happened, they burst out in a spontaneous round of applause-all except for Invalid Gui himself, who was so terrified he started coughing violently and nearly burst into tears.

His father removed his own padded gown and threw it round his son’s

shoulders.

The old lady picked up the pieces of tiger skin and tossed them into the brazier.

‘What a shame!’ muttered Trinket.

Old Gui took his son by the hand and led him out of the room, calling to the old lady

‘Come! Let us be about our own business!’ Trinket’s heart sank. They were on their way to murder Kang Xi. He still had not had a chance to forewarn his friend. He racked his brains for some form of delaying tactic.

‘Wait a minute!’ he called out. ‘How will you know where to find the Emperor’ There are thousands of rooms in the Palace. Do you know which one to look in” Old Gui paused for a moment. ‘Do you”

Trinket shook his head.

‘Nobody does. The Emperor changes rooms every night, for that very reason, so any would’be assassin won’t know where to find him. Sometimes he sleeps in the

Palace of Eternal Spring, sometimes he’s in the Palace of the Southern View, or the Palace of Complete Happiness, or the Palace of Prolonged Happiness, or the

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Porch of Beautiful View, or the Rain Flower Pavilion, or the Palace for Congratulations.’

As Trinket rattled them off, Old Gui frowned. Trinket continued

‘Even his personal eunuchs and guards wouldn’t know where to find him.’

Of course Trinket had made this all up (though the names of the Palaces were all authentic). But the Guis were not to know.

‘Another thing,’ added Trinket. ‘Have you any idea how many wives and concubines the Emperor’s got”

Old Gui humphed and glowered at him. Trinket was not discouraged.

‘Well, let’s not exaggerate like the storytellers do. Let’s tell the plain truth. He’s probably got eight or nine hundred. Every night’s a wedding night for him. He just keeps on doing the rounds. Tonight he may be with Number 351,

tomorrow it's 634. None of the lucky ladies knows where he's going to sleep on any given evening. Sometimes they have to wait three or four years before they get to see him in bed!

'You must know the Palace well by now' put in the Helmsman. 'You must know how to find him, surely'

'Not at night'time,' replied Trinket. 'In the daytime, yes.'

'Well then, we'll do it tomorrow, in broad daylight! We'll go in disguise. You'll help us get in. I know Butcher Qian and Shaker Wu have been in before.'

'Brother Qian has been as far as the kitchen,' Trinket corrected him. 'And as for Shaker Wu, when he got into the Palace, he was discovered by the guards and didn't get anywhere near the Emperor. Isn't that right'

Qian and Wu nodded. They knew only too well how hard it was to find the Emperor in the labyrinthine maze of the Forbidden City.

'I know what,' said Trinket. 'I've thought of a plan. Tomorrow I'll go and see the Emperor myself. I know he'll want to talk about the Satrap's rebellion. What I'll do is, I'll persuade him to go out for one of his cannon inspections. You can get him then! Once he's out of the Palace, he's a much less difficult target. And it will be much easier for us to get away if anything happens to go wrong.'

'I see,' retorted Old Gui sarcastically. 'So we're supposed to believe that the Emperor will do whatever you tell him to do! That's

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no plan! You're just inventing excuses because you're too scared to come in with us! You're a coward!'

The Young Count stood up for Trinket and told Old Gui the story of how Trinket had once saved the lives of several Mu Family men on their own failed attempt

to
assassinate the Emperor.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Shaker Wu, ‘I owe my life to Lodge Master Wei.’

‘I see!’ returned Old Gui. ‘And just because you lot failed, that means that we will too!’

‘Oh, I don’t think our Gui friends have anything to fear,’ said Trinket, ‘even from the eight thousand Palace Guards they will face. They have a Secret Weapon,
after all. They have their Master of Coughing Kungfu! One or two coughs from him
and the guards will simply die of fright, every one of them!’

Invalid Gui laughed out loud.

‘Really! What fun! You mean if I just do this-’

He started coughing. His mother was furious. She and the old man each took one
of their son’s arms, and began to walk out.

‘Sir Gui!’ called the Helmsman. ‘Just one moment! I have a plan!’

Shaker Wu and Iron Dragon Liu leapt forward to block the way, still considering
the Guis to be following an inadvisable course of action that would merely favour the Satrap. But despite their considerable prowess in the Martial Arts, they were no match for Old Gui and his son, who soon had them at their mercy. It
was the Helmsman who intervened.

‘Come-we are all friends here, and united in one cause! Let us not resort to physical force!’

Trinket the Calligrapher

In the end it was Trinket, not the Helmsman, who hit upon a way of resolving their dilemma. It was a characteristically Trinket’s style resolution of the problem’ he challenged the Guis to roll the dice with him. If the Guis won, they could proceed with their assassination plan; if they lost, they would have to go along with the will of those who were in favour of uniting against the Satrap first. Somehow everyone agreed that this method would reveal the Will of Heaven,

and that come what may they should all abide by the outcome. Invalid Gui simply thought that throwing the dice sounded like great fun.

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The immediate problem was that nobody present had any dice (or was prepared to say so, at least). Trinket was obliged to make a great show of going outside to 'borrow some dice from one of the guards'. In point of fact, he had his 'old buddies' in his pocket all along, but did not wish to increase the Guis' suspicions by saying so.

It was Trinket to throw versus Invalid Gui. Invalid began by flicking the dice, all six of them, so hard (he couldn't help it) that they literally embedded themselves in the surface of the table, creating six little holes. His mother gently explained to him that 'throwing' dice actually meant 'rolling' them softly across the table. They agreed to decide the outcome according to the best of three throws. The first two went one each way, Trinket's initial defeat having been caused by his dice hitting one of the Invalid's potholes. The third roll looked sure to go Trinket's way, and the Mu Family (who were still dead against the Gui assassination plan, but did not dare confront them again after their recent debacle) were already breathing a sigh of relief. But then at the last minute, when Trinket had already thrown five dice, and the sixth was about to settle on the desired (and, needless to say, predetermined) number, suddenly it stopped dead in its tracks, wobbled, and turned in a different direction, to land on a single 'one', thereby giving the victory to Invalid Gui.

Trinket glanced around him, just in time to detect a suspicious movement from Old Gui. The old man had undoubtedly been blowing, in such a way as to influence the direction of the dice. Trinket was about to leap up and denounce him for cheating, when the old man took hold of the six dice in one hand and effortlessly crushed them. The mercury with which they were 'loaded' came oozing out and little beads of it ran onto the table, like so many little silver pearls.

'Oh look!' cried Invalid Gui. 'How pretty! Drops of silver water!'

Trinket had been outwitted. He had no choice but to concede defeat. He was

now

obliged (according to the terms agreed upon) to provide the Guis with a detailed

map, and with an explanation of how to find their way around the Palace. He went

ahead to his study, to prepare the paper, ink, and brush for the purpose.

It was an extraordinary sight, Trinket the Calligrapher seated in his study. His page'boy carefully ground the priceless ink'stick on the equally priceless ink'stone, laid out the exquisite sheet of

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calligraphic rice paper, loaded the brush with the thick, sooty mixture, and handed it to his Master.

Trinket's hand was poised above the paper. Poised for the masterstroke. Slowly a

drop of ink gathered at the tip of his brush. Then it fell-plop!-onto the page.

Next to this blob, a little to its left, he drew a straight (well, almost

straight) line with a little hook at the bottom. And, still further to the left,

he 'plopped' another little blob. The three 'strokes' constituted one of the very few words in his repertoire, which is to say, one of the very few words he could

actually write at all. It meant 'little', xiao, and it formed the first of the

three Chinese characters that made up the nickname of his Imperial friend' Misty

(Xiao'xuan'zi' Little Mysterious One). Then he drew an approximation of the

rest. For the middle character (which was much too complicated) he simply

substituted a circle. The third character he could just about manage. Then he

added a roughly drawn sword, aimed at the very heart of the 'name'. It was a message in Trinket'code for his friend in the Palace. Someone is coming, Misty, someone with a sword, someone who wants to kill you!

He quickly folded the sheet of paper, and placed it inside an envelope. Then he sent for his trusted deputy, Colonel Zhang Yong.

'I want you to take this at once to His Majesty! Tell him that it is from me personally, and that it is very, very urgent.'

He was in the act of handing this secret message to Zhang, when in came the Gui

Trio. Old Gui's suspicions were immediately aroused. He snatched the envelope

from Zhang and examined its contents.

'What's going on here' Looks very fishy to me. Trying to warn the Palace, were you''

Trinket laughed nervously.

'Fishy' Oh no, not at all actually-but it is for the kitchen. We've been having

such trouble with the cooks lately. I ordered some special dumplings for this evening, and I wanted to remind them how to make them properly, you know, with the "little" slit on the top-like so!' And with his right hand he made a convincing gesture, pointing with the other hand to the coded 'picture' on the page. Trinket's calligraphy was so unorthodox and clumsy that the message could indeed have lent itself to this new explanation. Old Gui gave one of his characteristic humphs.
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'Anyway' said his lady, 'it's time you kept your side of the bargain and told us all about the Palace.'

This Trinket proceeded to do, blinding them with another (but much longer) series of names of buildings and compounds as he took them on a 'guided tour' of the Forbidden City. After all, he couldn't see how it could really do any harm. He started with the Meridian Gate, directly behind the Gate of Heavenly Peace, then led them over the five-fold Bridge of Golden Water, and on through the three Great Halls-of Supreme Harmony, Middle Harmony, and Harmony Protected-then through the Gate of the Imperial Ancestors, and on to the Imperial Kitchens (in his former identity as Laurel Goong'goong he had been attached to these kitchens); then through the Palace of Heavenly Purity, and into the women's apartments, the Palace of Female Repose and the Palace of Maternal Tranquillity; thence into the Imperial Gardens, and northwards to , the Hall of Nurturing the Mind; and on, and on.

Lady Gui did her utmost to commit all of this to memory.

'Come on!' called Old Gui. 'Let us be on our way!'

Trinket saw them out of his study, and noticed Colonel Zhang setting off from the main gate.

Old Gui's parting gesture was to give one of the stone lions standing beside the terrace steps a little tap on the head. Splinters of shattered marble fell to the ground.

Serious Consequences of a Light Poke

Trinket returned to his friends in the eastern hall of the palace. They were still drinking and in a thoughtful mood. He informed the Helmsman that he had briefed the Gui Trio on the layout of the Palace, and that they had already left on their mission. The Helmsman nodded and heaved a sigh.

‘If they do manage to reach the Manchu Emperor and kill him, I fear that will be the last we will ever see of them.’

They sat around a while longer, drinking in sombre silence.

An hour or so later, there was an urgent message for Trinket. Colonel Zhang wanted to see him. Trinket went out, to find not Zhang, but his three other colonels, Zhao Liangdong, Wang Jinbao, and Sun Sike. They looked grim. Zhang himself was laid out in a side room, deathly pale, his eyes closed. When Trinket spoke to him, he opened his eyes a slit and promptly lost consciousness again.

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Trinket felt in Zhang’s breast pocket. His ‘coded’ message was still there, undelivered.

Zhang had been found not a hundred paces from the gate of Trinket’s palace. It seemed that he had been set upon by some thug. He was most probably lured by the

Guis, Trinket speculated silently. They already had their suspicions, and wanted

to ensure that Kang Xi was not forewarned.

Zhang came round.

‘I have . . . failed you . . .’ he gasped hoarsely.

‘Just take it easy,’ replied Trinket. He entrusted the message to the other three officers, with instructions to deliver it without fail to the Emperor in person.

When Zhang himself had recovered sufficiently to tell the tale, the full truth emerged. As he was leaving the building, Old Gui had caught up with him and dealt him a light poke in the back (even as he recalled it, Zhang groaned with pain). At the time it seemed nothing. But he had hardly walked out into the street, when the excruciating pain began. It was one of those deadly internal blows, not unlike the Old Whore’s Soft Crush karate.

Trinket comforted Zhang and told a guard to bring him some hot ginseng broth.

At

the same time, he sent for a doctor to come and see to his wounds.

Trinket returned to his friends, and reported that Colonel Zhang had run into the Guis (he said nothing of the message he was carrying), and had been seriously hurt by Old Gui. Secretly he brooded over the failure of this important mission.

‘Now I wish I’d never told them so much about the Palace! I should have deliberately mixed everything up, to confuse them!’

The night passed in anxious anticipation. Finally, when first light dawned, Trinket announced that he himself was leaving for the Palace. The Helmsman gave

him a short parting lecture, urging him to do everything in his power for the Guis, if by any chance they should fail and fall into Manchu hands. The killing of Beggar Wu, he emphasized, was the result of a misunderstanding.

‘The Gui Trio’s rude ways must not blind us to the fact that they are our allies. Despite everything they are fighting for the same cause as we are.’

‘Yes, Shifu,’ answered Trinket. ‘But what if they have succeeded’ What if the Emperor is already dead’ There won’t be anything I can do to save them then.’

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He was not particularly concerned for the Guis. He was thinking about the mortal

danger his friend Kang Xi was in, and that in all probability he had already been assassinated. Tears came to his eyes.

‘Poor Brother Wu!’ he sobbed, quickly providing a Triad cover for his emotions.

The Young Count pointed out that whatever the outcome of the Gui assassination

attempt, things were going to be very dangerous in Peking for a while. He must warn his own friends to lie low, or else to escape from the Capital altogether.

The Helmsman agreed.

‘We must do likewise. All Triad Brothers disperse to safe locations. And pass the word around. Be cautious, and don’t provoke the enemy into retaliating. Any

sort of showdown could be disastrous. This evening, meet again here to discuss further plans.’

As Trinket walked out of his main gate, he ran straight into Colonel Sun, who reported the successful delivery of the message to one of the Emperor’s personal

guards. The other two colonels were still in the Palace, awaiting a reply.

‘Very good,’ said Trinket. ‘You go in, and stay with Colonel Zhang.’

With a heavy heart, Trinket gave the order for his guards to bring the Fake’Empress Dowager, and set off in a sedan chair for the Palace.

Kang Xi confronts the Old Whore

On his arrival at the main gate of the Forbidden City, Trinket observed that all seemed quiet. He was cordially greeted by the Palace Guards, who wanted to know

if he had had a pleasant stay in Yangzhou. Trinket nodded. So far so good. This was a good sign, at least. One of the guards then went on to say that the Emperor had been up most of the night, locked in consultation with his chief ministers, discussing the Imperial response to Satrap Wu’s advances.

Trinket told the guards that the sedan chair following his own contained an important prisoner, the disgraced former Empress Dowager. They searched the sedan for any concealed weapons.

On reaching the Gate of Heavenly Purity, Trinket was informed that the Emperor was still holding an audience in the Hall of Nurturing the Mind. The audience had lasted all night.

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Trinket was hugely relieved. It was undoubtedly the safest place for him to have spent the night.

‘Phew! Thank goodness the Satrap is doing so well! Thanks to that, Misty had to

hold this emergency audience-and it has certainly saved his life, with those Gui turtles lurking around the place.’

For some time now Trinket had been referring to the Guis in his own mind as ‘those Gui turtles’-the play on the word gui, which also meant ‘turtle’, pleased him. For all the Helmsman’s Resistance pep talk, he didn’t like the deadly Trio one bit.

He waited discreetly outside the Hall where the audience was still progressing. An hour or so later, he saw the ministers trooping solemnly out. They included his old Manchu friends Prince Kang (Giyesu) and Songgotu, who pumped hands

happily when they caught sight of Trinket, but refrained from entering into conversation. A senior eunuch summoned him urgently into the Emperor’s presence.

Entering the Great Hall, Trinket fell to his knees and performed an elaborate kowtow. Then he rose to his feet again, and saw Kang Xi seated on his Dragon Throne, looking in fine fettle.

‘Majesty!’ exclaimed Trinket, a feeling of genuine happiness momentarily overwhelming him. He had been truly concerned for his friend’s safety. ‘I am so glad to see you!’

His eyes were glistening.

‘Come, come! Why the tears?’

‘I’m just so happy!’

‘I’m touched!’ replied the Emperor. ‘Well, that old Satrap turtle has gone and done it! He’s rebelled against me! And so far, he’s doing a little too well for my liking. A little too well for comfort. He thinks he can scare me. Well, I’ve got a few surprises up my sleeve. Tamardy! Yesterday, I had that no’good son of

his put to death!’

Trinket let out a gasp of amazement. So the Little Traitor was dead!

‘You’ve killed him’

‘That’s right! They all told me not to. All the old men. They said I should keep him alive. If the war went badly for us, I could always use him as a bargaining piece. They said killing him would only make things worse for us, it would make

the Satrap mad. Lily’livered bunch they are!’

‘I’m sure you were right, Majesty,’ declared Trinket. ‘You had

to be decisive and brave.’

‘There you are! I knew you’d see it my way! If only you’d been here yesterday to talk to those old fogeys! All they care about is hanging on to their jobs.

They’d just as soon work for the Satrap, if he was prepared to keep them on!’

Kang Xi descended from the throne, took Trinket by the hand, and led him over to

the table, on which was spread a large map.

‘Come and look at this. I’ve sent one lot of troops down to Changde in Hunan, via Jingzhou; another lot down to Yuezhou, via Wuchang. I’ve put Prince Lergiyen

in overall command. I’ve appointed Chief Secretary Molo, from the Board of Justice, Commander’in’Chief on the western front, in the two provinces of Shaanxi and Sichuan. So, you can tell the Satrap, I’m ready for him!’

‘Majesty, I beg you, put me in command of something! Let me have a go at the turtle!’ Kang Xi shook his head.

‘War is no game. Besides I want you here with me. And anyway, you’re not a Manchu. My men might not obey your orders.’ Kang Xi sighed.

‘What I need now are one or two great generals. Leaders of real stature. This is going to be a hard war, especially the first few years. We may have to weather a few setbacks. And we need to be able to keep up our morale. It takes a great general to do that!’

‘But Majesty, you yourself are the very man you are looking for! You are the Great General of the moment!’

Trinket followed this up with a detailed comparison between the Art of War (in which he was a novice), and the Art of Gambling (in which he was a master). The main point was that one or two losses (whether in battle or at cards) didn’t matter. You had to look on a loss as a loan’ you were simply lending money to your enemy, money which would eventually make its way back a hundredfold into your coffers.

Kang Xi laughed. He picked up Trinket’s ‘coded’ message, which was lying on his desk.

‘So, you tried to warn me! You thought there might be someone wanting to kill me!’

‘I knew you’d understand it, Majesty! I couldn’t send an ordinary message-there were people watching my every move. So I made up a little drawing.’

‘Who were the dbba^mo. -”““
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were after me”

‘They were people sent by the Satrap.’ Trinket’s reply had an element of truth in it. The Guis had originally been sent by the Satrap, even though now they were part of the Triad’led alliance.

‘Since the beginning of this rebellion, I’ve taken the precaution of tripling the guard in the Palace. And when I got your message, I doubled the night watch.’

‘This time you’re dealing with very unusual people’ said Trinket. You must be extremely careful.’
An idea suddenly occurred to him.

‘Majesty, I have a waistcoat that will protect you from anything. Nothing can get through it.’

He began to take it off. Kang Xi smiled.

‘I know all about that thing. You got it from Oboi’s house, didn’t you’

Trinket had no idea the Emperor knew. He was normally capable of preserving a

perfect poker’face. But this took him totally unawares. He flushed deeply, and fell to his knees.

‘Majesty, it was wrong of me to take it. I deserve to die! You know everything!’ Kang Xi smiled.

That waistcoat was an Imperial heirloom that used to belong to the Ming Emperors. We found it in the Palace. The late Regent, Prince Dorgon, gave it to Oboi, who had been wounded many times. When I sent you to supervise the confiscation of Oboi’s estate, I noticed afterwards that it was missing from the inventory.’ Trinket smiled sheepishly.

‘Anyway,’ Kang Xi continued, ‘I want you to keep it. I’m so heavily guarded here

in the Palace, I don’t need to worry for my own safety. You are always encountering danger out there. Consider it a gift from me.’

Trinket fell to his knees. As he did so he broke out in a cold sweat’ supposing the Emperor knew about him taking the Sutras too!

You must tell me about your trip to Yangzhou another time.’

Kang Xi yawned. He was clearly exhausted by his all’night audience.

There is one thing I wish to report, Majesty. I was able to arrest the Old Whore and bring her to Peking.’

This piece of news seemed to wake Kang Xi up.

‘Indeed! Bring her in here at once!’

Trinket gave the order, and four guards dragged the Fake’Empress Dowager into

Kang Xi’s presence. She knelt before him. Kang Xi rose to his feet.

‘Look up at me!’ he ordered her.

After a moment’s hesitation, Mao Dongzhu raised her head and looked him straight

in the eyes. She was so haggard and deathly pale that, despite everything, Kang Xi found himself feeling sorry for her.

This woman has done so much evil in her life’ he reflected. ‘She killed my

mother, she drove my father to become a monk by killing his beloved consort. That made me virtually an orphan. She kept the true Empress Dowager cooped up in a wardrobe all those years. She's done the most terrible things. And yet-after she killed my mother, it was she who brought me up as a child. She was actually kind to me, she was almost like a real mother. If I stop and think about it, there have only ever been two people in this place who have shown any feeling for me' her, and this mischievous little prankster, Laurel!

His reflections continued'

'Besides, if I look at it one way, I owe her my throne and my life. Supposing she hadn't killed the Donggo Empress and her son Prince Rong, I would probably never have become Emperor. Prince Rong would have been put on the throne, and most probably I would have been got rid of altogether!'

As a boy, Kang Xi had always considered the loss of his parents to have been the greatest sorrow in his life. With the years, his view of life had evolved, and now, after ruling China for several years, he had begun to value his throne and his power more highly than anything-even more than the love of a mother and a father. It was something he could never bring himself to admit to anyone. Even to think it to himself filled him with a sense of guilt. But it was true!

The Old Whore observed his thoughtful expression and sighed.

'You mustn't let yourself worry too much about this rebellion of the Satrap's,' she said, speaking slowly and with great deliberation. 'You must take good care of yourself. I hope you're still taking your Bird's Nest Soup everyday'

Kang Xi was awoken from his wandering train of thought.

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'Yes, I do. Every day.'

'I have done so much evil in my life,' said the Old Whore. 'I hope you will have the kindness to put me to death yourself.'

Kang Xi shook his head. It wounded him to hear her speak like this. He turned to Trinket.

‘I want you to take her to the Empress Dowager’s apartment in the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity. I want her to decide what to do.’

‘Yes, Majesty!’ replied Trinket, dropping to one knee.

Take her away then!’

Before he left, Trinket produced the two Memorials from Galdan and Sangge, and

handed them to Kang Xi.

‘Majesty, I have another piece of excellent news. The Mongols and the Tibetans have decided to break with the Satrap and come over to your side!’

This was indeed wonderful, and unexpected, news. The Mongolian and Tibetan soldiers had a fearsome reputation as fighters, and would prove extremely useful

against the Satrap. Kang Xi could hardly believe it. He sent the Fake’Empress Dowager out of the room for a moment, and when he was alone again with Trinket,

exclaimed’

Tamardy, Laurie! How on earth did you manage to do that”

Trinket knew that whenever the Emperor used the expression ‘tamardy!’ he was

really pleased. He chuckled happily, and told Kang Xi how he had become the ‘sworn brother’ of Galdan and Sangge.

‘And I’ll bet you promised them something in return”

Trinket confessed that he had indeed, on the Emperor’s behalf, offered them a reward’ in Sangge’s case, elevation to a Living Buddhahood comparable with that

of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama; in Galdan’s case, promotion to something

comparable with the title Gengimoto Khan (he still couldn’t get the name right).

Kang Xi understood only too well.

‘You mean he wants to be Khan of all the Dzungars. Of course they will both be rewarded. When the time comes, I will issue the Edict, and will send you to deliver it in person. But first, they have to fight and show their true loyalty. You must tell them that.’

‘Yes, Majesty. You shouldn’t trust them too much. They’re not exactly what I’d call very trustworthy people.’

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Trinket wanted to make sure that if they did turn out to be unreliable, he wasn’t going to be held responsible.*

What Fun!

Trinket now proceeded with the Old Whore to the Hall of Maternal Tranquillity.

The eunuch in attendance announced that Her Majesty would receive them both.

Trinket was a little surprised at being allowed directly into the Empress' apartment (no one still believed him to be a eunuch), but he went in as instructed.

It was dark inside the Empress' room, as dark as it had ever been during the days of her sinister impostor, the Old Whore. She was sitting on the edge of her bed. Behind her the bed's curtains were closed. Trinket fell to his knees and kowtowed.

She glanced at Mao Dongzhu and nodded.

'So, you've arrested this criminal. Very well, you may go now.'

That was obviously all she intended to say. Trinket kowtowed again and retired from the room, leaving the Old Whore inside.

'Well, that's gratitude and a half!' he thought to himself. 'After all I've done! Just "You may go now"! Well, sod the lot of them! Old Whore, New Whore, they're all the same as far as I'm concerned!'

He set off, accompanied by the same guards who had escorted him, and feeling thoroughly unappreciated. He was wandering through the garden next to the Empress' apartment, alongside an extended rockery, when he caught sight of a human shape flitting past in the shadows. Then three figures emerged from behind

one of the larger artificial mountains. One of them reached out and seized him by the left hand.

'Good day!'

It was one of the eunuchs, thought Trinket. And then again, it wasn't. He looked

closer, and recognized the features of Old Lady Gui. The two other figures, dressed as Palace Guards, were Old Gui and the Invalid.

Trinket was not inclined to antagonize Old Gui. He remembered only too clearly

the splinters of crushed marble to which a light tap of the old man's extended

palm had reduced the

Our author notes that in fact both Galdan and Sangge subsequently rebelled against the Manchu throne, and were defeated by Kang Xi, in the 1690s.

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head of one of the stone lions outside his study. He did not relish the idea of a similar tap on his own head, which was made of considerably softer stuff.

‘Good day to you all!’ he replied, racking his brains for an escape plan.

Tell your guards to wait here!’ whispered Old Lady Gui. ‘We need to talk to you in private.’

Trinket did as he was told. She dragged him along a few yards, then hissed in his ear’

Take us to the Emperor-now’

‘I thought you came here last night” said Trinket. ‘Haven’t you managed to find him yet”

The eunuchs and guards all said he was going to be up all night in a special audience. We haven’t been able to do anything yet.’

‘I had planned to go and see him myself” said Trinket. ‘But they told me he’d already gone to bed.’

‘Well take us there! Surely you know where he’s sleeping”

‘No, I don’t know! I’d need to ask a eunuch or something. It’s all very dangerous. Take my advice, and get out while you still can. Come back another time if you really want to go ahead with it.’

‘We’re not leaving till we’ve done what we came here to do!’ hissed the old lady. ‘And don’t think you can fool around with me!’

She tightened her grip, and Trinket let out a little yelp of pain. He thought his fingers were going to snap.

‘Or would you like me to-’

It was Old Gui, tapping the top of Trinket’s head very lightly. Trinket was thinking fast’

‘Why don’t I take them to the Empress Dowager’s apartment, and raise the alarm’ At least that will warn the Emperor. So what if they do end up killing the New Whore! Why should I care anyway”

‘I was in there at the Empress Dowager’s just a moment ago’ he said. The Emperor is very likely to be there now, paying his respects.’

Old Lady Gui looked at him.

‘Any nonsense from you, and we’ll kill you. We’re not expecting to get out of here alive anyway. When you’re dead, you’re welcome to join us on the road to the Underworld. We can go and see King Yama together. For some reason my boy

seems to think you're fun to have around.'
I'll tell him I hate CAULDRON

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Thanks for the invitation, but no thank you!' said Trinket, forcing a smile to his face. 'I'd rather play with him right here in the garden, if it's all the same with you.'

'Stop wasting time!' snapped the old lady. 'Which is it to be? Who are we going to see? The King of the Underworld? Or the Manchu Emperor on his Chinese throne?'

The Manchu Emperor most definitely!' said Trinket. 'But let's get one thing clear. Once we're there, I'm out of it; I'll have no further part in whatever it is you're planning to do.'

'You!' sneered the old lady. 'We don't need you. Once we're there, you can go. We'll finish this off on our own.'

They proceeded through the garden, the four of them, back towards the Empress Dowager's compound. Invalid was greatly excited by the sight of all the peacocks and doves. Trinket kept chattering away to him, anything to delay the moment. Old Lady Gui was impatient to get there, but at the same time could not bring herself to deny her darling son a few moments of pleasure, knowing that he was so close to certain death.

As they approached the main entrance to the Empress Dowager's compound, they saw a string of people emerge, followed by two palanquins, each carried by eight bearers. Seizing Trinket in one hand and her son in the other, Lady Gui darted behind a bed of large peony bushes. Old Gui followed.

The people and chairs drew nearer and nearer. The person at the very front Trinket recognized as one of the eunuchs from the genuine Empress Dowager's entourage. The first of the two palanquins belonged to the young Emperor's First

Consort. The second belonged to the Empress Dowager herself. The eunuch bringing up the rear was carrying a large silken umbrella, and was accompanied by

twenty
or so junior eunuchs and Palace maids, and a dozen members of the Imperial Bodyguard. Normally the Empress Dowager would not have had such a large escort
when she moved around within the confines of the Forbidden City. Doubtless this
was a new precaution, reflected Trinket, arising out of the present unusual situation, and his own warning to the Emperor.

It was then that he had one of his inspirations.

‘Look out!’ he whispered to the Guis. That’s the one! The one in front has got the Emperor inside it. The one behind it belongs to the Empress Dowager.’

This seemed more than plausible to the old couple. They felt a sudden sense of impending climax. Things were drawing to a head. They both glanced at their son
with a certain tenderness.

‘Listen to me, boy,’ whispered the old lady. The person in that first chair is the Emperor. We’ll wait for them to pass close by, then I’ll give the word and we’ll all three of us jump on the chair and hack him to pieces!’

‘Good!’ Invalid grinned. ‘What fun!’

The chair came closer and closer. Trinket felt his own hands go cold and clammy.
He could hear the eunuch in front calling out the usual command for everyone to
stand aside. The old lady gave the word, and Trinket watched the Turtle Trio leap into action.

They moved like a collective whirlwind. There was a great crashing sound as the
three of them struck out with extended palms at the first chair. Next the old couple, anxious to ensure that the Emperor was well and truly killed, drew their
swords and thrust four, five times through the curtains and deep within the chair. Each time their blades came out dripping with blood. If there had been ten people inside that chair, they would all have been dead for certain.

The guards had by now had time to react, and surged forward swords in hand.
But

the Guis were too quick for them. With a cry of 'The deed is done!', the old lady seized her son by the hand and zoomed off into the bushes. The old man brandished his sword and hacked his way past the guard, who were powerless to hold any of them back. Seconds later they were all three to be seen whirling down a path beside the Palace of Ripe Old Age. The maids and eunuchs in the retinue were screaming hysterically.

Alarm gongs went off, and everywhere in the Palace there was the sound of doors being closed and bolted as the guards doubled security on every passage and gateway. Every unit was put on the highest possible alert: the Palace Guard, the Valiants, and the regiments of Banner troops stationed just outside the Palace.

'So, the First Consort is dead! Too bad! Couldn't be helped!' thought Trinket to himself. And, in his ever resourceful manner, he chose this moment to leap out from behind the flower-bed (where he had been abandoned by the Guis), crying

'Protect Her Majesty's chair! They may try to take Her Majesty's life!'

Somewhat late in the day, the guards were galvanized into action. Trinket seized a sword from one of them, and led them

L heroically into the fray. They formed a circle around the second chair, the one belonging to the Empress Dowager.

Trinket was not content with this. He rallied the eunuchs and maids to a display of valour as well.

'Come on, you useless bunch of babies! Stop screaming, and form a second circle! If the assassins strike again, then they can hack you utterly worthless lot to pieces first!'

The eunuchs and maids certainly did not agree that they were utterly worthless.

But Trinket was cutting such a heroic figure, they could hardly refuse to obey him, and reluctantly formed an outer circle around the Empress Dowager's chair.

Some of them were so

scared they wet their pants.

Trinket now put down his sword, and went up to the Empress

Dowager's chair.

'Your Majesty, your servant Trinket presents his apologies for arriving on the scene so late! I am pleased to report, however, that Your Majesty's person is safe, and that the assassins have been driven

away!'

'Well done.'

He heard the voice of the Empress Dowager from within. He drew aside the curtain and looked inside the chair. The Empress Dowager sat there, her face deathly pale, but smiling broadly.

'Well done, Trinket! Very well done! You have saved my life

yet again!'

'All health to Your Majesty!' replied Trinket, and closed the curtain again.

He next sent word to the Emperor, that the Empress Dowager was alive and well, and that the assassins had been driven away, and that he was to set his Imperial mind at rest.

Trinket!'

It was the Empress Dowager's voice again, this time

whispering through the curtains. 'Yes, Majesty.' 'Are the two in the front palanquin both dead?'

Two"

'Yes. Go and have a look. But be extremely careful.' Trinket was very curious as

to why there should be two people in the First Consort's palanquin. And why should he need to be

'extremely' careful'

He went up to the palanquin, and extremely carefully pulled

the curtain immediately, auu a^^r'''

the knees, and all but collapsed on the ground.

The interior of the chair was a bloody mess. Yes, there were two bodies. Each had been stabbed several times. There was blood everywhere.

One

of the bodies was immediately recognizable as the Fake'Empress Dowager. The other was that of a short, fat man. He had been battered to a pulp by the first palm attack. But it did not take Trinket more than a second to recognize him as Thin Dhuta. There they were'. Meatball and the Old Whore, dead, and locked in

a lovers' embrace.

Trinket was not overly surprised to discover the Old Whore in the chair. After all, he had only just taken her into the Empress Dowager's room. But where had

Meatball sprung from' And where were the two of them going, in the First Consort's palanquin, and accompanied by the Empress Dowager in person'

Trinket took a deep breath and approached the Empress Dowager's chair.

'Majesty, the two people you referred to are dead. Very dead indeed. It's a horrible mess in there.' He spoke very softly. There was a laugh from inside the chair.

'Well done! Shall we go back to my apartment now' I want the other chair to be carried back as well. Just as it is. No one is to look inside. Understand'' 'Yes Majesty!'

This was sounding stranger and stranger. But Trinket gave the order at once, and

personally assisted the bearers with the Empress Dowager's chair. Once they reached her compound, he helped her down. She smiled at him again.

'Very well done!'

It seemed to be her expression of the moment. Trinket returned the smile. But he was thinking to himself

'What's so very well done about it' And how come the New Whore's looking so seductive all of a sudden''

The Empress Dowager summoned him into her inner room, waving away all the maids

and eunuchs. She told Trinket to close the door. Trinket's heart was pounding.

He was bright red in the

face.

‘Yikes!’ he was thinking to himself. This is looking very nasty for old Trink! All those "well dones"-I don’t know, what if she

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fancies me or something’ The Old Whore got up to some pretty rum stuff, with that bald man she kept dressed up as one of her maids, and then with old Meatball in bed with her. Supposing the New Whore decides she wants me in bed

with her” And what if she wants me to dress up as a maid too’ Trink in drag’ Hello- I don’t think so!’

The Empress Dowager sat for some time on the edge of her bed. Then she spoke.

The whole thing has been most dangerous. I have been absolutely counting on you!’

‘Majesty, you can always count on me to do anything to save your life!’

It was by no means clear what the ‘whole thing’ was. Or what it was she was counting on him to do. Trinket was trying to narrow down the options. Dressing up in drag could hardly be considered a life’saver.

She nodded.

‘I know. You’re a very loyal young man. It’s very lucky for us all that His Majesty has taken such a fancy to you.’

‘I’m the lucky one, Majesty!’

Trinket was silently uttering a prayer’

‘Jade Emperor in Heaven Above! And Our Beloved Lady of Mercy! Look down on me and protect me! Please, oh please don’t let her ask me to dress up as a maid!’

She smiled at him again. The smile made Trinket shiver. Then she spoke’

‘I want this whole thing kept quiet. I want you to take the two dead bodies, and the chair, and I want you to burn everything. And I don’t want anyone to

breathe
a word about this. As for the guards and eunuchs and maids who were there at
the
time . . .’

She was silent for a moment.

‘Majesty, don’t worry, I know a way to seal their lips! They won’t breathe a word, I promise. In fact I’ll seal their bums too, so that they won’t be able to fart a word!’

She frowned at Trinket’s vulgarity.

‘Just see to it! I’ll make sure you are rewarded.’

‘I shall, Majesty! If anyone says a thing, you can have my head off!’

‘Off you go then!’

Trinket kowtowed and left the room.

As he was leaving, he saw Kang Xi’s Imperial palanquin on its way into the compound, preceded and followed by several hundred guards. Trinket stood to one side to let it pass.

From within his great chair Kang Xi caught sight of him.

‘Laurie! Wait for me here!’

‘Yes Majesty!’

He knew that Kang Xi would want to hurry in and see the Empress Dowager first.

He stood there waiting in a daze. There were still so many questions to be answered. What was going on? What was Meatball doing hiding in the First Consort’s chair? What did the Emperor want to see Trinket for?

The Truth will Out

Trinket accompanied Kang Xi back to the Hall of Nurturing the Mind. He waited at

the entrance for some time. Then he saw Colonel Ajige, the commandant of the Vanguard Regiment, come out-an obvious sign that Kang Xi was redeploying units

of the Vanguard, to catch the assassins.

A eunuch summoned Trinket into the Emperor's presence. Kang Xi dismissed his

guards and eunuchs, and told Trinket to close the doors behind him.

Kang Xi paced up and down the room, frowning to himself. There was obviously

something weighty on his mind. He seemed to be struggling with himself, trying

to come to a decision. Trinket watched him anxiously. With every day the Emperor

was growing more and more a figure of authority, someone to be feared. Each time

he saw him, he felt their old friendship slipping away. Gone were the days when

they used to spar and tumble together without a care in the world.

Finally Kang Xi spoke.

'Laurie, there's something on my mind, and I really don't know how to deal with

it for the best.'

'But Majesty, you yourself have the wisdom of Zhuge Liang!'

Trinket assumed that this was some important affair of state, or a military decision. As usual, he could think of no one more flattering for the occasion than the great strategist of the Three Kingdoms.

'Even he would be stuck with this one. It concerns you. I can't decide what to do. You've done three things for me, you've

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performed three highly meritorious services to the Throne. First, you've captured Mao Dongzhu, the woman you always liked to call the Old Whore; second,

you have brought Prince Galdan and Lama Sangge round to my side in this conflict; and third, you have saved the life of the Empress Dowager, and helped to fight off the would-be assassins. You've done all of this! And how am I to reward you? You are already an Earl-I can hardly make you a Prince!

Kang Xi burst out laughing. He then went on to engage Trinket in a roundabout

conversation about the dearth of honest ministers at Court, and the abundance of

sycophants. Finally he brought up the subject of the Fake Empress Dowager.

'Who was that lover of hers?'

‘He was always called Thin Dhuta’ replied Trinket. ‘I’ve never known his real name.’

‘But he was so fat! He was as round as a meatball! Why Thin Dhuta’

Trinket told him the story.

‘In the first place, how did you know he was in the First Consort’s palanquin, with the Fake’Empress Dowager” asked Kang Xi. ‘And then, why did you tell the guards to attack the chair and kill them both’

It was now clear to Trinket that Kang Xi knew nothing about the Gui Trio and their part in this killing. He decided it was time to tell him-but without going into names or details (which might prove very awkward to explain away). He described how he had met the three would’be assassins in the garden, just after he had left the Old Whore with the Empress Dowager.

Two of them were dressed as eunuchs, one of them as a guard. One of them grabbed me and squeezed my fingers so hard I thought they’d snap off!’

He held up the fingers of his left hand. They were still bruised and swollen.

‘They ‘wanted me to lead them to you, Majesty.’

‘What did they want with me’

‘They wanted to kill you! They were sent by Satrap Wu. In the end, I was able to trick them into killing the Old Whore and her fat lover. Afterwards they got away. For all I know, the three of them are still at large in the Palace.’

‘Wait a minute!’ exclaimed Kang Xi. ‘One thing at a time! If I understand you correctly, what happened was this. You decided

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that rather than lead them to me, you would let them murder whoever was in my Consort’s chair’ Is that right’

‘Yes, Majesty.’

‘For that decision alone, I should have your head off.’

Trinket was already on the ground, performing one kowtow after another. Kang Xi smiled.

‘Tamardy, man! Get up!’

Trinket was in a muck sweat, out of sheer terror. He kowtowed once more, and stood up.

‘As a matter of fact,’ said the still smiling Kang Xi, ‘you’ve helped me solve my dilemma. Your reward for your three meritorious acts is this’ I will forgive you for this one heinous crime!’

Kang Xi now reconstructed for Trinket’s benefit the course of events as he understood it’

‘That fat man must have succeeded in smuggling himself into the Empress Dowager’s apartment - I suppose he must have known his way around well enough, after all those earlier assignations of his with the Old Whore! Then he forced the Empress Dowager to help him escape with the Old Whore. It was just his bad luck that he ran into you and those three assassins.’

Trinket was thinking to himself’

‘So that’s what was going on! He was already hiding in there when I took the Old Whore over. No wonder the New Whore gave me such a black look, as if I owed her a million taels or something! Old Meatball was probably in her bed, he was probably right there inside the curtains behind her! I wonder how long he’d been there’ Days, probably. I wonder if he got up to any hanky’panky with the New Whore’ Or perhaps he was just looking for one of the Sutras. Who knows!’

In the midst of these musings, Trinket suddenly became aware of Kang Xi speaking again.

Tell me, that Old Gui, the Matchless Knight, is he really as great a fighter as they make him out to be”

Trinket felt as if a thunderbolt had struck him right in the midriff. His legs melted under him, and he started wobbling dizzily from side to side.

What didn’t the Emperor know’

Kang Xi was not through.

‘By Heaven my father and Earth my mother, I will overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming! Lodge Master Wei I think you owe me an explanation!’

Trinket’s first reaction was to reach for his dagger. But what was the point’ He would never succeed in killing Kang Xi. And besides, he didn’t want to. Instead, he fell to his knees and said abjectly’

‘Misty! Laurel surrenders! He begs you to forgive him! You are the Great Sage Onion’

‘I want a full confession from you,’ replied Kang Xi. The very mention of the old names Misty and Laurel had brought memories of their happy sparring days

flooding back. And the old Sage Onion joke-Kang Xi could not help smiling. But

at the same time he could not possibly allow Trinket to get away with it as easily as that. ‘Confess everything. One lie, and I’ll have you chopped up and fed to the dogs!’

‘Yes, Majesty! Yes, Majesty!’

From where he was on the floor, Trinket could only hear Kang Xi’s severe tone of voice. He could not see the hint of a smile on his face.

‘Majesty, yes, I was with the Triads; but I never did anything against you. I swear! You seem to know everything anyway, so I had better tell you the whole story.’

And he did, starting with the day he had been kidnapped by the Triads from Prince Kang’s, after killing Oboi; how he’d become the Helmsman’s disciple, and then a Triad Lodge Master; and all the rest, ending with his recent encounter with the Gui Trio. He told Kang Xi how he’d rolled the dice, how Invalid Gui had

won, how he'd drawn the 'coded' picture message, how he'd been dragged aside in the Empress Dowager's garden by the old lady, and how he'd set them on the Consort's palanquin in the hope of alerting the Emperor to the danger threatening him. The only thing he left out was the business of the eight copies of the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections. With that one important exception, he made a clean breast of it. It was probably the most truthful moment in Trinket's long and confused career as the young Manchu Emperor's friend.

Kang Xi kept asking questions about the Triads. Trinket answered them all truthfully. Then the Emperor, to Trinket's amazement, began reciting by heart lines that formed part of the Triad catechism'

I

The Five Fathers divided a verse of poetry;
No one knew that the heroes had it on their person.
Trinket knew the response'
It was handed down among the Brothers,
And when they meet, they know each other by this sign.
Rang Xi'
On entering the Triad Gate of Brotherhood, From that day forth, we swear to
speak the Truth.
Trinket'
Pine and Fir stand to left and right of the Door;
In the Centre, the Red Flower Pavilion of Brotherhood.
Kang Xi'
The Brothers stand before the Lodge of Loyalty; The Generals and Troops wait
within the City.
Trinket'
Let us swear an oath by our Founding Fathers, To overthrow the Qing and
restore
the Ming.
According to Triad ritual, this exchange established mutual trust and security,
and led to a further exchange of identification' personal name, Lodge
affiliation, and position in the Triad hierarchy. Kang Xi merely smiled.
'Why, Majesty!' said a dazed Trinket. 'I would never have guessed that you were
a Triad Brother yourself! Which Lodge do you belong to'
He suddenly realized what an idiot he was being. Of course the Emperor could
not
possibly belong to an organization whose principal goal was to overthrow the
Emperor!
'Stupid Trinket!' he cried, giving himself a good slap in the face.

Kang Xi rose from this throne, and began pacing up and down the room again. 'I should have you chopped into little pieces. All this time you've been wanting to overthrow me and all the Manchus, and restore the Ming!'

'Majesty! I owe everything to you! I owe you my life! It's all thanks to you that I've not been chopped into little pieces! I'll quit the Triads. From now on I'll overthrow the Ming and restore the Manchus instead!'

'Silly fool! We rule the country! We don't need to be restored! And as for the Ming, they don't need to be overthrown-they already have been!'

'Well, I'll do whatever you tell me to do, I'll overthrow anyone'

Kang Xi nodded. This time, when he went on to speak, he spoke very quietly, pronouncing each syllable with great care.

'Good. Then I'll tell you who I want you to overthrow. The Triads.'

'Yes! Yes!' cried Trinket.

But one look at his tortured face was enough for Kang Xi to see how much he recoiled from the idea.

'You'd say anything!' muttered Kang Xi. 'It's all lies-'

'No, it's the truth!' cried Trinket. 'The whole truth, nothing but the truth!'

There's only one way to find out. Actions speak louder than words. I want those Triads destroyed, root and branch. I want them dead, every one of them. And I want you to do it. That's how you can earn my forgiveness. That's how you can make up for having lied to me all these years. And if I find you are still lying and playing tricks on me, I shall have no hesitation in killing you, Lodge Master Weil'

Trinket was in a cold sweat.

'Surely you'd never kill me, Majesty' I may have kept one or two things from you, but I've always been your devoted friend and loyal subject!'

'Devoted friend' Loyal subject'' Kang Xi smiled. 'Wicked villain, more like!'

'Never wicked. Never, Majesty. Nor villain. I never meant you any harm.'

'Well, then, let's settle for clown or fool, if you prefer. But don't think you

can talk me out of this. I have set my mind on it. The Triads must be broken. You can have as many soldiers as you like. I want you to bring them all in-the Triads, the Mu Family, the Guis-

the lot of them! For every one of them that's missing, I'll cut off one of your hands. If four are missing, I'll cut off both your hands and both your feet. Five missing and I'll-what can I cut off then"

'You'll have to cut off my dingdong. I'll just have to be a hot popping eunuch!' Kang Xi could not help laughing out loud.

'Tamardy! You think you're so smart don't you!'

Trinket was secretly thinking to himself

'He knows everything^. He even knows about the Mu Family! He's got spies everywhere!'

Kang Xi produced a sheet of paper from inside his Dragon Robe.

'I have here a list of forty'three names.'

He proceeded to read them all out' Chen Jinnan, Helmsman of the Triad Secret Society; Trinket Wei, Lodge Master of the Green Wood Lodge; Brothers Li Lishi

and Xu Tianchuan, Father Obscurus, Butcher Qian, Gao Yanchao, Feng Jizhong; and

many more Triad names to follow. Then he came to the Mu Family' Mu Jiansheng,

known as the Young Count; Liu Dahong, known as the Iron Dragon; Wu Lishen, known

as the Shaker Lion. The list ended with the names of the three Guis.

'If we remove your name from the list, that makes it forty'two. I want them all.'

Trinket fell to his knees. Several kowtows later, he spoke'

'Majesty, I know those men have sworn to overthrow you and your Manchus. But

they haven't succeeded. Just let me talk to them. I'll tell them what a good Emperor you are, how wise and everything. I'll persuade them to give up the struggle. Only don't kill them.'

Kang Xi brought his hand down heavily on the desk in front of him.

'Are you refusing to do what I have asked you to do"

Trinket's mind was in absolute turmoil. 'How can I possibly betray my friends" he was thinking to himself. The Emperor will kill them for sure. Somehow I've got to get word to the Helmsman, and give them a chance to escape.'

(The previous evening he had been worrying how to save his Manchu friend from

the Triads and their allies; now he was desperately thinking of a way to save his Triad friends from the Manchus. Was there no end to it')

Kang Xi was beginning to get angry.

‘What are you waiting for’ Don’t you see that this is your only chance to redeem yourself”

‘Yes, but don’t you see, Majesty, that I’m only trying to be loyal to all of my friends’ You’re my friend. I tried to be loyal to you, I tried to stop them from killing you. But they’re my friends too. Can’t you see, you are putting me in a very difficult position.’

(Actually, as they both knew only too well, it was Trinket, and Trinket alone, who had put himself in his present untenable position, by going along with a series of mutually contradictory fictions, out of little more than a well’developed sense of self’preservation.)

‘How can you talk about being loyal’ said Kang Xi, ‘when you spend your life thinking of ways to act against your Emperor”

Trinket had never seen Kang Xi as angry as this.

‘Oh dear!’ he mused to himself. ‘Looks like the loyalty argument won’t work. Better try a different tack.’

‘Majesty, remember’ you are my Shifu! How can a Shifu kill his own disciple”

Kang Xi was just wondering how to reply to this preposterous plea (as a matter of fact, he reflected, he had only ever joked about being Trinket’s Shifu-the whole idea was ridiculous!), when he heard a confused hubbub of voices outside, and the sound of weapons clashing.

Trinket leapt to his feet.

‘That may be the assassins now! Shifu, don’t move! Stay where you are! I will protect you!’

‘You are never to call me Shifu again!’ muttered KangXi. ‘From this moment I disown you!’

But secretly he was thinking to himself that Trinket was probably as loyal to him as any disciple to his Shifu, and most likely would lay down his life for him.

They heard footsteps. It sounded as if a large number of people had come running as far as the entrance of the hall, and were now waiting outside. Trinket ran to

the door and quickly bolted it from the inside.

‘Who’s there’ he called out.

‘Inform His Majesty that three intruders have been sighted in the Palace grounds!’ It was the loud voice of a soldier. ‘The Guard have them surrounded, and we expect to capture them any minute!’

to himself.

‘His Majesty has been informed!’ he called back, ‘I another hundred guards, and

post them in front of the Hall of Nurturing the Mind, and behind it. And post twenty or thirty men up on the roof.’

The guard went at once to execute these commands. So far as he was concerned,

Lord Wei was still a senior officer in the Palace Guard, and his orders were to be obeyed. Minutes later they heard the sound of men taking up their positions on the roof directly above them, and large numbers of additional guards arriving

outside. Kang Xi looked on, reflecting on how carefully Trinket was taking everything in hand, how devotedly and effectively he was seeing to his Emperor’s

personal safety—just as he had on Mount Wutai, when the White Nun had leapt down

through the roof. For the time being he was safe from the assassins. He took another sheet of paper from inside his gown and handed it to Trinket

‘Look at this. What do you think it is?’

Trinket looked. It was a picture of a large building, with two stone lions in front of it, and a flagpole. It looked rather like his house. There were also a dozen cannon in the picture at various sites all around the building, all clearly aimed directly at it. As he studied it a little more carefully, there was no doubt left in his mind. It was definitely his house.

‘Well’

‘It looks a bit like my place.’

‘You’re absolutely right.’

Trinket shivered. Cannon all round his house could only mean one thing. He’d watched the two foreigners firing their cannon. He’d heard the terrible noise they made, he’d seen the smoke and the flames, the bits of stone and mortar sent

flying everywhere into the air. Even with a hundred magic waistcoats he wouldn’t

stand a chance. He’d be blown into pieces, made into minced meat, and so would

all his friends. He started trembling violently at the very thought of it.

‘I know all about tonight’s meeting,’ said Kang Xi. ‘The Triads, the Mu Family, the Guis of the Mount Hua School, even Situ He from the Wang Wu Clan-they’ll all be there, won’t they, in your house’ These twelve cannon of mine are all carefully positioned in various buildings around yours. They’re all primed and ready to
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fire. All my men need to do is open a few windows, poke the muzzles out, and light the fuses. And bang! None of your friends will come out alive. And if one of them did, I’ve got men stationed all round the place. I think you ran into Colonel Ajige just now. He’s in charge of the whole operation. It’s the Vanguard men-and they don’t get on too well with your Valiants, so don’t imagine you can talk them into doing you any favours!’

Trinket was frantically trying to think of a way of getting word to the Helmsman and his friends, to warn them not to go there this evening, when a voice called from outside’

‘Majesty, we’ve caught them!’

Kang Xi looked delighted and told Trinket to let them in.

‘Certainly, Majesty,’ Trinket answered, and went to unbolt the door.

The Gui Trio were brought in under armed escort. There must have been twenty or thirty guards surrounding them.

‘Kowtow to His Majesty! On your knees!’ shouted one of the guards. All the guards immediately fell to their knees.

The Guis were badly wounded, and spattered with blood from head to foot. But they stood defiantly upright. They were all three tightly bound, and each was being led on a tether by two armed guards.

‘On your knees! You too!’ bawled the captain of the guard. The Guis took not the slightest notice. Blood was dripping from them, as it was from the guards wounded in the struggle. Old Lady Gui was glaring at Trinket.

‘Little traitor!’ she hissed.

Trinket felt sorry for them, the terrible state they were in. He said nothing.

Kang Xi nodded.

‘So this wretched old creature is Gui the Matchless Knight! How many of our men did he kill’

‘Majesty!’ answered the captain. ‘They fought fiercely! Thirty of our men met their deaths, and forty more were wounded!’

Kang Xi was astounded. He reflected silently to himself that they must be extraordinary fighters, these three. He waved them away, and the captain began to escort them outside.

At that very instant, Old Gui summoned up a desperate surge of Inner Force, and swung his right shoulder sharply into the side of one of the guards beside him. The guard gave a cry of pain, and

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went shooting through the air. His head smacked into the wall and he fell dead to the ground. Old Gui then grabbed hold of the rope binding his son, worked it loose, and gave it a forceful tug. It broke in two. He held his son in his arms for a second, and cried’

‘Go boy! Escape now! Your mother and I will follow later!’

He literally threw his son out through the door. And in that same instant, he and Old Lady Gui staggered forwards, bound as they were, in an attempt to pounce

on Kang Xi. It all happened in a matter of seconds.

Trinket was absolutely flabbergasted by this sudden turn of events. He dashed forward, threw his arms around Kang Xi, and bundled him under the desk, at the

same time protecting him with his own body. From beneath the desk they heard a

series of heavy thuds. Seconds later, Trinket poked his head out, and saw the Old Guis lying in a pool of blood, seven or eight swords driven deep into their backs. They looked extremely dead.

It had been a desperate attempt, partly to create a diversion during which their

son would have some chance of escape, partly to use their last remaining drop of

energy in an assault on the Emperor's life. But the day's fighting had already taken its toll on their strength, and besides, they were bound hand and foot. All they could do was stagger forward and then collapse on the ground spitting blood. They were easy work for the guards.

Kang Xi stood up and took a deep breath.

'Carry them out!' he said.

The guards were about to lift the bodies from the ground, when a figure flashed in through the door, darting forward with lightning speed and throwing itself on

the old couple.

'Mum! Dad!'

It was Invalid Gui. The guards hacked at him where he lay, and he seemed quite

incapable of evading their blows. Each sword found its way deep into his flesh.

'Mum!' he gasped. 'I can't manage on my own! I don't know where to go!'

All his life Invalid Gui had depended on his parents for everything. He had managed to escape from the Hall for Nurturing the Mind, only to realize that he

simply could not manage without them. He had come back to find them and be with

them.

He coughed twice, then his head slumped forward. He was dead.

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Dolong, Commander of the Guard, came hurrying through the doorway of the hall

and fell to his knees before Kang Xi.

'Majesty, the intruders have all been-'

He suddenly stopped, as he looked up and caught sight of the carnage all around

him. Kang Xi, who had himself only just emerged from under the desk, reflected

that once again he owed his life to Trinket-however unorthodox and lacking in dignity his methods of protection may have been.

'Colonel Dolong, I want you personally to look after Lord Wei. He may be in great danger. Tomorrow morning, I will issue fresh instructions.'

'Yes, Majesty.'

Trinket realized that this measure was not so much for his own protection, as to prevent him from interfering with Kang Xi's plans to bombard Trinket's palace that very evening.

Kang Xi walked over to Dolong.

'Lord Wei is to be kept under close guard. He is in need of protection. He is to be allowed to speak to no one, he must not be allowed to send anything out of the Palace. You must understand, the situation is extremely dangerous at present. In short, Lord Wei should be treated as if he were a prisoner.'

Kang Xi had no illusions about Dolong's abilities. He was a good soldier, but no match for Trinket's cunning.

'Yes, Majesty,' replied the trusty Dolong. 'You can count on me in this matter.'

Trinket went through the motions of thanking Kang Xi for his deep concern, though in his own mind he knew that this was all for show. Kang Xi knew that he might have some use for Trinket again one day, and was therefore saving him some 'face'. In reality there was no question about it. He was under arrest.

Escape Plans A, B, & C

One thing Trinket knew for sure. He could not simply sit back and let his friends be blown to smithereens. That would be to abandon any claim whatsoever to the River and Lake code of honour. That would be to sink to the very depths of turtle behaviour.

One thing was puzzling. How had Kang Xi suddenly become so well informed? He seemed to know everything all of a sudden. And yet earlier in the day, when they had been talking about the

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war, he had seemed to know nothing about Trinket's various secrets. Who could it

have been that had betrayed him'

Dolong could see that his young charge was deep in thought and (being the thick

soldier that he was) jumped immediately to the wrong conclusion. He slapped Trinket on the back.

'Set your mind at rest, my friend! No one could be better protected than you are! See how His Majesty cares for you! We'll make sure no one can get anywhere

near you, don't you worry!'

'Exactly my problem!' thought Trinket bitterly to himself, managing to force a smile and make a few polite remarks about the Emperor's infinite consideration.

'I'll never get a message through to my friends now, with all these great hulking brutes standing around me all the time! (There must have been between

thirty and forty guards visibly monitoring his every move.) I don't want to be protected! It's the last thing I want to be! I'd rather Kang Xi booted me up the bum, and screamed at me, and said "Get out! Scram! Get the tamardy out of here,

you smelly piece of pickled shit-I never ever want to see you again!"

'My friend!' said the ever jovial and well'intentioned Dolong. 'My instructions are that you are not to wander around the Palace. You'll have to stay put somewhere. Where's it going to be' Your old quarters' Or in one of the guardrooms' We could have a round of cards or something"

He was trying to please.

Meanwhile the embryo of a plan was forming itself in Trinket's wily little mind.

'Friend Dolong,' he said (after all, they had known each other now for a year or two, even if his main gambling and carousing friends in the guards were Dolong's

juniors, Captains Zhang and Zhao), 'I've just remembered that I promised to do something for Her Majesty the Empress Dowager.'

Dolong looked dubious. 'His Majesty's instructions were very clear. You're not to leave the Palace on any account.'

'Don't worry. This doesn't involve my leaving the Palace.'

Trinket went on to instruct a number of the guards to carry the First Consort's palanquin to the Palace burning'ground west of the Gate of the Divine Warrior.

'Her Majesty's orders are very precise. No one is to look inside the palanquin. Anyone looking inside will be immediately executed.'

Dolong and the guards all knew about the assassins' attack on the Consort's palanquin earlier in the day. They also knew that the Empress Dowager had (for

whatever reason) cast a thick veil of secrecy over the whole affair. They were only too glad to hear that the palanquin and its contents were to be incinerated. It would be one less murky mystery.

As they carried the palanquin through the Palace grounds, blood continued to ooze from between the wooden panels of the floor. No one even dared to ask whose blood it was. Dolong supervised the cortege, and when they reached the burning'ground, various Palace menials (such as they were known as in Manchu) were deputed to build a pyre, and the palanquin and its unknown contents were committed to the flames.

As Trinket watched the mortal remains of Thin Dhuta and the Old Whore turn to ash, he picked a piece of wood from the ground and began casually drawing the shape of a bird on it, using a charred stick. Then he held it in both hands and, gazing at the blazing palanquin, mumbled to himself

Thin Dhuta, Old Whore, in this life you never had the good fortune to be man and wife. Now, in the Dark World to which you are travelling, you can be together for ever and a day. That Turtle Trio who actually killed you-they're on their way there too. They'll only be a few steps behind you. You'll probably meet up somewhere on the way, on the Bridge of Woe, or in the Temple of Memory.'

Colonel Dolong assumed that his young charge was paying his last respects to the spirit (or spirits) of the departed (whoever he, she, or they might be). He watched Trinket make a little heap of stones, and place the piece of wood with the drawing of the bird in the middle of the heap. A touching act of homage.

What Dolong did not know was that this was the old signal agreed between Trinket and his 'Auntie', Tao Hongying, the former maid of the Ming Princess Royal (alias the one'armed White Nun). Auntie Tao had been hiding in the Palace all these years, waiting for a chance to avenge the death of the last Ming Emperor. She had saved Trinket on a previous occasion. Perhaps she could help him again now.

When there was nothing remaining of the palanquin but ash, Trinket left the burning'ground and made his way to his old quarters. The eunuchs had given the place a thorough cleaning, and an assortment of wine and snacks had been set out for him.

By now evening was beginning to draw in. Trinket began to fret that Auntie Tao might arrive too late, or might not see his 'signal' at all. It was imperative that he got a message to his friends, or they would share the palanquin's fate' there would be nothing left of them in the morning but ashes. And the trusty Dolong just wouldn't go away. Trinket needed badly to come up with a cunning (and foolproof) plan.

A short nap, and he was up again and talking to Dolong. The cunning plan was emerging in his mind.

'Dolong, old friend, I'm sure I'm safe enough in here, with all you lot looking after me so well. But there's one thing I can't help worrying about, with all these nasty Triads and Mu Family people wandering around after me everywhere.'

'What would that be?' enquired the colonel politely.

'Well, it's a bit delicate. It's to do with women, actually. I'm just worried that once they realize they can't get their hands on me, these people might try something on my womenfolk. There are some very pretty ones down at my place, I can tell you!'

Trinket was relying on the man'to'man factor. And Dolong had no reason to doubt

the truth of what he was saying. The young philanderer Lord Wei had long left his earlier identity as the eunuch Laurel behind him, and now had quite a reputation in Palace circles for his amorous conquests.

'I wonder,' Trinket continued, 'if you could possibly send some men over to my place, to keep an eye on them for me'

'Of course, my dear chap! Nothing could be simpler!'

Dolong knew only too well that his men would compete eagerly to go on this particular mission, knowing as they did Lord Wei's other reputation-for generosity when it came to handing out tips.

'There are two young ladies I am particularly concerned about,' Trinket went on.

'One of them is called Doublet, and the other one is called Zeng Rou. I'd like your men to make a point of telling them that the Triads and the Mu Family people might raid the house tonight.'

The idea was that if such an odd message did get through to them, Doublet and Zeng Rou would be smart enough to put two and two together, and warn the Helmsman and the others that there was something strange going on. But what about the girls themselves, and anyone else unable to get away in time' Trinket kept seeing this picture of cannon'balls falling and bits of bodies

belonging to his friends being thrown into the air. He tried to console himself 'with the thought that if there were some of Dolong's Palace Guards in the place, the bombardment might never take place.

But then again (Trinket began to fret, after Dolong's guards had already left the Palace), suppose the Emperor's orders were to fire on the house come what may, that would be the end of the girls! Doublet was especially present in his thoughts. He knew he would miss her the most. She had always been so sweet and

devoted. He could not bear to lose her. But if he tried to change the plan, and gave orders for the guards to bring the girls out, then there would be no one to pass the message on to the Helmsman. He would then be guilty of an extremely un'River'and'Lake decision, and a very turtle'headed, love'and'sex before honour'and'friendship attitude. It was all very difficult. Why was life presenting him with these insoluble dilemmas' He paced up and down his room.

In the event, the dilemma was resolved for him an hour or so later, when the guards reported back. They had been unable to get anywhere near Lord Wei's Residence in Bronze Hat Lane. The Vanguard regiment, under Colonel Ajige, was in

charge of the whole operation, and had absolutely refused to let them through. Ajige had said that he had the situation completely under control. It was as the Emperor had predicted. There was little love lost between the Vanguards and the Palace Guards.

So much for Plan A. Trinket had to think up yet another cunning plan, and quickly. He probably had enough poisoned darts to put paid to Dolong (dear friend!) and a few of the guards. But not enough for all of them. He'd used up all the opiate at Widow Zhuang's manor. It would soon be dark. Time was running

out. He felt as desperate as an ant trapped in a hot wok. He was pissing in his pants every thirty seconds. And still he could not think of a plan.

Slowly but surely darkness was falling. Trinket opened his window and looked outside. Seven or eight Palace Guards were patrolling right beneath his window.

Of Auntie Tao there was not the least sign. He heaved a sigh and lay down dejectedly on his bed. Any minute now it would be too late, and his friends would be on their way to the next world. And a noisy departure it would be too!

And then he saw it. The big vat of water which stood by the window, the vat that

had once belonged to the late (and not much

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lamented) Eunuch Hai Dafu (he'd used it to cool off during his frequent bouts of

fever). It had come in extremely handy on a later occasion, when Colonel Rui Dong (the Invincible Iron Palm) had come to his room under orders from the Old

Whore to eliminate Trinket. Colonel Rui (it will be remembered) had toppled Trinket from this very same window ledge and into the vat, only to find himself seconds later with the deadly dagger in his own innards. It was definitely a vat with a history, thought Trinket to himself. And history was knocking on its capacious rim once more. The vat was giving him ideas. He felt for his dagger. The plan that was forming itself in his mind was as follows. First he would lure Dolong into the room. Then he would kill him' in the vat, with darts, somehow—that part of the plan could be filled in later. Then he would start a fire, and in the ensuing chaos, he would escape. The thought of killing Dolong was not one

he particularly relished (dilemmas again!). They had been friends for some time.

But honour decreed it. And besides, Dolong's death would enable dozens of others

to live, including his own Shifu, the Helmsman.

His mind was made up. He lit a candle. The curtains would catch fire the quickest, he thought to himself. First he would kill Dolong, then he would set the curtains on fire.

At that very moment he heard Dolong's voice outside in the passageway.

'They've brought your dinner, Lord Wei! Would you like to come out and eat it!'

'Why don't we eat together in here'

'Very well!'

Dolong sent in the junior eunuch from the Catering Department with the food and

wine. He was a young lad of sixteen or seventeen. As he set out the meal,

Trinket, on a sudden impulse (or more accurately, a sudden new development of

Plan B), invited him to stay and keep them company.

Dolong came in shortly afterwards, and they sat down to their meal. Dolong started talking.

'Just look at how well the Emperor treats you! Why, it's ages since you were in service in the Palace, and yet he's kept your old room for you, just the way it always was!'

'Eat up, my friend,' Trinket urged him. 'See, they brought some of my old favourites! Clever of them to have remembered in the

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Catering Department. Try some of this Lion's Head Meatball with Crab.'

Trinket had strolled behind Dolong even as he was saying this. Dolong did not even have time to raise his chopsticks. He felt something cold enter his heart from behind, and slumped forward onto the table.

In the end, Trinket had chosen to use his infallible dagger. It had been carried out with precision and in total silence. The eunuch noticed nothing. Next it was his turn. And once that was done, Trinket quickly bolted the door from the inside and changed clothes with the dead eunuch. He propped Dolong's body on his chair, and for good measure carved his face up until it looked a real mess.

Even as he was doing this, he was thinking to himself'

'I'm really sorry, Dolong, old friend. But I'm sure you'll understand that I had to do it. I just had to. Try and look on the bright side. Supposing I got away, and you were still alive, and the Emperor decided to punish you. You'd have been executed anyway tomorrow (and most of your family with you). This way, you'll have died in the performance of your duty (so to speak), and your family will probably get a fat pension. So really, one way of looking at it is that you're better off as you are now.'

But even he was not greatly convinced by himself. He could not help shedding a few tears for his friend.

'As for you, my poor young fellow,' he continued, looking at the eunuch, propped up opposite Dolong, and now wearing his (Trinket's) clothes. 'In a way, you're lucky too, to be wearing my Yellow Jacket, and my hat with the Ruby Button. In real life, you could never have dreamed of such rapid promotion!'

He straightened out his eunuch uniform. Then, loudly'

'That'll be all! You can go now, little fellow! Here's a few taels for your pains!'

'Thank you, sir!' (muffled, eunuch-like reply)

Loudly again'

'Tell them that Colonel Dolong and I would like to be left on our own for a while. We are not to be disturbed!'

So when the door opened and a junior eunuch emerged into the passageway carrying a food basket the guards, who were having their own dinner, paid him not the slightest attention.

'Excellent kungfu!' thought Trinket as he headed for the main door. 'It'll be a couple of hours at least before they notice anything.'

And when they do see the two dead bodies, they'll think that Lord Wei and Colonel Dolong have both been assassinated! There's a lot of that going on in the Palace at the moment. They'll piss themselves!'

Just as Trinket was going out the main door, what should he see but an extremely grand palanquin heading towards him, all decked out with pheasant tail'feathers.

The eunuchs clearing the way in front of it cried'

'Make way! Make way for Her Highness the Princess Ning!'

'What bad timing!' muttered Trinket. 'Now I'll never get away. She'll insist on going in, and she'll find me dead! All hell will be let loose!'

He watched the Princess step down from her palanquin.

'Is Laurel here?' she asked.

Trinket took a deep breath and walked forward.

'Your Highness,' he said to the Princess, sotto voce, 'I'm afraid Lord Wei is rather drunk. Allow me to accompany you.'

By the dim light of the lanterns, the Princess had not recognized him. She saw all the guards emerging from Trinket's quarters to greet her, and wondered what

on earth was going on. She frowned and waved them away.

'All of you wait for me here outside!'

And so saying she strode on into the passageway leading to Trinket's room.

Trinket (in his role as the junior eunuch) followed her in. As they entered the passage, he closed the main outer door behind them. The Princess told him to leave and walked on into the inner room. Then she saw the slumped bodies, and

gave a strangled cry. She saw the 'little eunuch' still standing there by the inner door, and frowned.

'What are you doing in here?'

Trinket drew closer to her.

Take a look.'

The Princess was somewhat taken aback by this cheeky response. But then she looked, and recognized Trinket.

'Just what do you think you're up to now'

'Be quiet!' whispered Trinket. 'Very quiet!'

'What the hell is going on'

The Princess looked from the real Trinket to the one slumped 'drunk' on the table. Trinket pulled her well inside the room, and closed the inner door.

'Things are very bad indeed!' he whispered. 'In fact they couldn't be 'worse. For a start, the Emperor wants me dead-'

'He's already had my husband killed!' Princess Ning put in. 'What does he want to go killing you for' If he tries that-I'll fight him myself!'

She was nothing if not plucky! Trinket put both arms around the Princess and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Plan B had sort of fallen through; but Plan C was already forming in his mind. So he said'

'Let's both get out of the Palace as quickly as we possibly can! The Emperor knows all about us! He wants to chop my head off!'

He was hugging the Princess so tight, and kissing her so passionately, she was aching all over and almost incapable of replying.

'But...' When she finally did manage to speak, her voice sounded husky and strangely sexy. 'But, now that he's killed that horrible husband of mine, I was thinking I could go ahead and marry you! And he wants to kill you! How did he find out about us! How'

'I don't think it was very hard,' replied Trinket. 'You gave the game away all the time.'

She blushed.

'I didn't! I just asked him once or twice when you were coming back, that's all.'

'That's what I mean! Anyway, it doesn't make any difference. It looks as if we're going to end up married after all. But we've got to get out of here fast!'

She seemed hesitant.

'I'll talk to my brother tomorrow. I'm sure he'll understand. I'm sure he won't really kill you. He said he wanted to find me another husband. He's always

been
so good to you.'

It was at this moment that she noticed the nasty, sickly smell that permeated the room. And in the next moment, realizing that it was the smell of blood, she let out a cry, grabbed hold of the table, and began vomiting all over the floor.

Trinket tried patting her on the back and comforting her. She merely turned on him and started boxing him ferociously on the ears.

'You're bad! You're a wicked wicked boy!'

Now she was pummelling his chest.

'Yes, I know, I'm wicked and bad. I know I am.'

The one thing Trinket knew for certain at that moment was that unless he left the Palace at once, his friends were as good as dead. The time set for the bombardment was minutes away. And here was the Princess having one of her tantrums.

She twisted his ears.

'You don't know how wicked and bad you are! Look at what you've done to me for a

start! Poor little baby Laurel!'

She stood up, stuck out her tummy, and started sobbing.

Trinket looked at her stunned.

'You don't mean-'

'Yes, I do! And if we don't get married very soon, my life won't be worth living. I could never pretend this was little Wu's doing. Everyone knows what I did to him'

All the colour drained from Trinket's face. What a moment to have to confront paternity! And with the hysterical Princess of all people. If he was hard with her, she was liable, no, she was certain to make a huge scene, here and now, and

spoil his entire escape plan (whether it was the aborted Plan B he went ahead with, or the new Plan C). On the other hand, if he was too nice to her, she would want to go to bed with him there and then. What was he to do' His night of

dilemmas was by no means over yet.

At that very moment there came a series of three knocks at the window. Then a pause. Then two more knocks.

'That must be Auntie Tao!' whispered Trinket excitedly.

And sure enough, the next second, a figure vaulted up onto the window'ledge and

into the room-Auntie Tao. There was hope after all! She and the Princess eyed one another.

‘Good evening, Your Highness!’ said Auntie Tao.

‘And who might you be?’ replied the Princess somewhat haughtily. Whatever was

this middle-aged, unattractive woman doing in Trinket’s room at this hour of the

night? The very fact that she was neither young nor pretty made the Princess’ pangs of jealousy all the stronger. Her lover was clearly indiscriminating in his desires. Insatiable in fact.

She was just about to call for one of the guards, when Trinket clapped a hand over her mouth. She fought back and began boxing him on the ears again.

Trinket

put his right hand round her neck and began squeezing it tightly.

‘I’ll strangle you, you little whore!’

For a moment, she could not breathe and she flailed her hands in the air and kicked her feet around wildly. Trinket brought his left hand round and thumped her hard twice on the crown of the head.

Auntie Tao could tell from the way Trinket was carrying on with the Princess that this must be an emergency. She quickly pressed three places on the Princess’ back and chest, and closed the Vital Points controlling her upper body. Trinket let go of her.

‘Auntie!’ he whispered. Things are very bad! The Emperor wants to kill me! I’ve got to get out of the Palace!’

‘It’s crawling with guards out there,’ replied Tao. That’s why it took me so long to get through. Look!’

She pushed the window slightly open. Trinket looked through the crack and could

see seven or eight guards patrolling with lanterns. It looked bad. But maybe Plan C could work after all. Maybe he could get out the same way Thin Dhuta and

the Old Whore had tried’ in a palanquin-the Princess’ palanquin. Hopefully he would not run into a Gui’s style ambush.

The first thing was to talk the Princess round.

‘Listen, my sweet, darling Princess,’ he said, ‘you really mustn’t be jealous, or think there’s anything going on between this woman and myself. She’s my Auntie, for goodness’ sake! And since you and me are about to get married, I think you should call her Auntie too.’

Princess Ning smiled. She was only too pleased to believe that the woman was not

Trinket's lover, and only too happy to call her Auntie. Auntie Tao herself could not make out this couple at all. One minute they were fighting like cat and dog, the next they were all lovey'dovey.

'Now then,' said Trinket, 'what we're going to do is this. We're both going to leave here in your palanquin, and get out of the Palace. As soon as possible after that we'll get married. We'll need somebody a bit older to act as a witness, so I suggest we take Auntie Tao along with us.'

The Princess had her points duly reactivated, and called for her chair to be brought into the room. Her eunuch chair'bearers thought this a strange order, but no stranger than many other orders they'd had from her in the past, so they did their best to oblige. The trouble was, the chair was rather a grand one, and it was much too wide for the door. The most they could get through the doorway

was the two front carrying'poles. The chair itself could go no further.

The two front eunuchs had to backwards and vacate the passageway connecting the

inner room to the antechamber, as the Princess had given specific orders that she wanted to be left alone when she climbed into her palanquin. Then she and Trinket sneaked into the passageway, climbed inside, and closed the curtains. They persuaded Auntie Tao to accompany them on foot. Since she was posing as a

maid (and had been for some considerable time), her presence would arouse no suspicion.

'We're ready!'

The two eunuchs wriggled their way back into their chair'carrying positions, and

all the bearers lifted their load and set off.

'Funny!' they thought to themselves. 'It seems a lot heavier than when we came!'

Plan C in Action

Following Trinket's instructions, the Princess ordered her bearers to carry them

out of the Palace through the Gate of the Divine Warrior. It was late at night,

and the guards on duty at the gate asked the bearers to halt. The Princess poked her head out through the curtains.

‘I want to go home!’ she cried. ‘Out of my way!’

The captain in command of this particular watch was Trinket’s old friend Zhao Qixian. He hastily bowed to the Princess, and laughed nervously.

‘Your Highness, there’s been a serious disturbance in the Palace this evening, and all sorts of undesirable people managed to break in. It’s really not very safe. I strongly urge you to wait to go home until morning.’

‘I’m in a hurry!’ cried the Princess angrily. ‘What do I care about any of that’

Zhao was still not prepared to give the order to open the gate. After all, the Princess’ late husband had been the son of the Satrap, and in the present situation, it was possible to be suspicious of anything and anyone. He insisted on seeking the authorization of his superior, Colonel Dolong.

Trinket was following all of this from inside the palanquin, and when he learned

that Zhao was about to go in search of Dolong, he reckoned the time had come to

intervene.

‘Zhao,’ he said from inside, ‘do you know who I am’

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irmxet poked his head out and gestured to Zhao to come closer. He spoke in a barely audible whisper.

‘Zhao, I’m on a top secret mission for the Emperor. If I let anyone see me, the whole thing will be spoiled. That’s why the Emperor told me to ride in the Princess’ palanquin.’

Zhao knew how close Trinket was to the Emperor. And he’d certainly seen him in even stranger circumstances in the past.

‘Very well, sir. I’ll open the gate straight away.’

‘Just a moment.’

Trinket had had another of his brainwaves. It seemed that so far as his ever fertile mind was concerned, the more desperate the situation, the more inventive he became.

‘You may be wondering what the mission is. Since we’re old friends, I think I

can let you in on the secret. His Majesty has come up with a very clever plan. He's fixed things so that a whole group of the Satrap's men are all gathering together tonight, in my house in Bronze Hat Lane. He's put me in charge of a Vanguard regiment, and I'm supposed to go and arrest the lot of them. Now, you know as well as I do that the Vanguards don't get on with the Valiants, and I'm a Colonel in the Valiants. So you're probably wondering why I'm commanding Vanguard troops for this particular mission.'

'Well, yes sir, it does seem rather odd.'

'I'll tell you.' At this point Trinket's whisper became positively ghost'like.

'It's all because we've found out that the Vanguard commander, Colonel Ajige, is himself in league with the Satrap. The man's a traitor. His Majesty wants to make a clean sweep of them all. And the brilliant part of it is that because Her Highness the Princess used to be married to the Satrap's son, they'll never suspect anything when they see her palanquin arrive. Absolutely brilliant, isn't it''

Zhao was out of his depth.

'Wow! I'd certainly never have suspected Colonel Ajige of being a traitor! I'll bet it was you that found out, sir''

'Be that as it may, what I want you to do now is follow us with forty of your men.'

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orders at once. He was delighted to have been invited to take part in this secret mission, which would no doubt greatly further his own career in the Palace Guards.

It was not far from the Forbidden City to Bronze Hat Lane. Soon their little procession had reached the entrance to the lane. Trinket's heart was pounding all the way. He kept expecting the bombardment to begin.

Colonel Ajige came forward to greet the Princess' palanquin. All the way there the Princess had been briefed by Trinket on exactly what to say and do (the latest version of Plan C). She had also found time to give him a massage, to help him unwind a bit.

'Colonel Ajige,' she said, in her most princessly voice, looking out through the curtain. 'My brother the Emperor has asked me to remind you of how important

your mission is tonight. Is everything ready”

Ajige bowed.

‘Everything is ready, Highness.’

‘What about the big cannon”

‘Yes, Your Highness. Eather Nan,’ (the Belgian Jesuit Verbiest), ‘is in charge of them personally.’

Trinket heard this all too clearly. He knew the Belgian foreign devil was an excellent shot.

‘His Majesty wants me to go into Lord Wei’s Residence personally. There’s something he wants me to do. You may accompany me if you wish.’

‘Excuse me, Your Highness, but we are very close to the appointed time. I really cannot allow you to go in now.’

‘What do you mean” The Princess sounded angry. She was good at sounding angry.

‘Are you disobeying His Majesty’s orders”

‘Of course not, Your Highness. But ... it is much too dangerous.’

Trinket gave a little cough. It was the prearranged signal for Auntie Tao to spring into action. She darted forward and poked her fingers into three of Ajige’s Vital Points, two in the small of his back, one beneath his ribs. Ajige let out a barely audible groan, and froze. He felt a cold sensation and a sharp little jab as a blade was pressed into his back. He was frightened out of his wits.

‘Either you obey His Majesty’s orders, or I shall be obliged to kill you,’ said the Princess calmly. ‘And all of your fa^;’”

‘Yes, Your Highness.’ Ajige’s voice trembled. ‘ t,

At this point Trinket had yet another of his last’minute brainwaves. Why should

he sacrifice perfectly good Palace Guards (men with whom he had mostly excellent

relations), when he could use Vanguard troops instead. He whispered to the Princess’

‘Tell him to select fifty of his own men to escort you inside.’

The Princess did exactly this, and the trembling Ajige gave the necessary orders. Trinket told Zhao to wait outside with his Valiants.

The palanquin was carried as far as the entrance hall of the second courtyard of Trinket’s compound. There the Princess and Trinket climbed out and told the fifty Vanguard troops to form up in the courtyard. Auntie Tao led Ajige, and the four of them (the Princess, Trinket, Ajige, and Auntie Tao) walked on into the main hall of the palace.

They opened the doors, and saw' the Helmsman, the Little Countess, Apothecary Xu, and all the others, gathered there in the hall. They were taken aback to see Trinket with his present companions, all of whom were total strangers.

Trinket greeted them all.

'The Emperor knows all about this meeting. The streets outside are crawling with soldiers. And a dozen cannon have been set up, ready to fire straight into my house! Any minute now this place will be flattened! We have no time to lose!'

General panic ensued.

Iron Dragon Liu was one of the first to speak'

'Let's make a dash for it! The worst that can happen is that we get killed!'

Trinket shook his head.

'No. I have a much better plan. I want you to change clothes with the soldiers waiting outside in the courtyard. Then we can all get out safely.'

They all praised Trinket's plan as a brilliant one. Ajige gave the orders for his men to troop in. He had no alternative. There was a knife at his throat.

The Triads and the Mu Family waited until the first twenty'odd soldiers filed into the hall, and then set on them. After much punching and kicking, they were soon laid low. There were two more batches, fifteen at a time, who suffered a similar fate.

Then the Triads and Mu Family stripped the soldiers and dressed themselves up, all of them, even the Princess, as Vanguard troops.

The one person Trinket could not see was Doublet. It was Zeng Rou who told him'

'She was so worried. In the end she set off with Brodier Feng to find out what had happened to you.'

They left at noon,' confirmed the Little Countess. 'It's strange that they're not back yet.'

Trinket was very concerned. Neither of them knew what was happening, and they

might arrive back just in time to be blown to pieces. It was very important to leave them a message of some sort. It was Butcher Qian who volunteered to do this. There was no time for anything fancy. He took his sword and slashed the legs of a couple of the Vanguard soldiers. Then he ripped off some lengths of their undergarments, and soaked them in their own blood. With these makeshift writing brushes he went around the house smearing the words ESCAPE QUICKLY! on every door.

They now untied all the horses in the stables, and led them out. Four Triad Brothers pretended to be eunuchs, and carried out the Princess' palanquin, with the Princess and Trinket still inside it. Everyone else just walked out in Vanguard uniform, with the unfortunate Colonel Ajige in their midst. The real Vanguards were left inside, immobilized, or bound, or both-to await their fate.

Trinket's one regret was for his own household staff-the stable boys, cooks, guards, maids, and so on-but there was nothing he could do. If he had alerted them all to the impending danger, and tried to get away with his entire household in tow, he would undoubtedly have given the whole game away. As they emerged from the lane, they saw huge numbers of Imperial troops everywhere. But where the cannon were hidden, they still had no idea. Trinket was hugely relieved to have extricated himself and his friends from the immediate danger. He gave orders for Zhao (who was still waiting outside) to take Ajige away and lock him up. His treason was so serious, Trinket explained, he was not on any account to be released except on the Emperor's personal orders.

They all waited down a quiet side alley, about half a mile from Trinket's house. Suddenly it began. One explosion after another, and clouds of black smoke rising up into the night sky, together with fragments of brick and tile and timber. The ground trembled beneath their feet. The bombardment was quite protracted. Soon flames rose

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from the building. Most of them had never seen or heard a cannon before, and were deeply impressed. They had escaped with only minutes to spare.

Trinket, who had by now climbed down from the Princess' palanquin and was riding
a horse, hurried to the Helmsman's side.

'Shifu, we must leave the city as soon as we possibly can. When v'ord gets around of what's happened, the city gates will be closed and we'll never be able to get away.'

'You are right.'

Trinket then turned to the Princess, who had just climbed out of her palanquin.

'You'd better hurry back to the Palace. I'll come back for you when everything has quietened down.'

'You'll what' The Princess was fuming. 'I help you escape from the Palace; I talk Ajige into saving your friends-and you think you can just dump me' And that marriage you talked to me about' What about that' And what about this''

She held her hand to her stomach, and was clearly about to give the assembled (and already somewhat shocked) Triads a detailed report on her pregnancy. Trinket thought better of his previous idea.

'All right! All right! Come with me then! Climb up behind.'

A big smile lit up the Princess' face, and she vaulted into the saddle.

They all made their way to the Zhao Yang Gate in the east of the city, where it was easy enough to persuade the guards on duty to let them through. The guards
had seen the smoke and heard the explosions. Something big was obviously happening. What could be more normal than for a squad of the Emperor's
Vanguards
to go in pursuit of some wanted criminal'

Their first priority when they had travelled a dozen miles or so was to change into civilian clothes. This they achieved by raiding a retired mandarin's home, and stripping every single member of his household. Their horses soon collapsed
under them (Trinket suspected foul play), and they were obliged to continue on foot. Presently, they heard the sound of hooves in the distance behind them. As the horses approached they could tell that there must be getting on for two

thousand mounted troops after them. Seeing that they were hopelessly outnumbered, the Helmsman gave the order to split up and lie low for the time being, rather than put up a

futile fight and all die in the process. They should each go their separate ways, and hide in the countryside, in the relative safety of some small village or other.

‘I’m off!’

It was Trinket.

‘Where do you think you’re going’ cried the Princess, hurrying after him.

‘Somewhere. And you’re going somewhere else. Back to the Palace. It’s not safe for you with me.’

‘Little rat! Think you can get away from me’ Well, I can tell you, it’s going to be a lot harder than you think!’

CHAPTER 26

In which Trinket escapes from Peking, and visits Snake Island for the last time; the Leader makes a Last Stand; a Great Hero dies; and Life on Potluck Island is Described

Out of the Wok, and into the Fire

‘Oh dear!’ thought Trinket. ‘I can see it’s going to be harder to escape from her than from any number of troopers!’

He spotted a field of tall millet, and made a dash towards it. The stalks were more than a man’s height. It seemed his only hope of getting away from both the

Princess and the troopers at the same time. He was just doing his best to hide himself between two of the serried rows of millet, when he felt a yank on the back of his jacket.

‘And where do you think you’re off to’

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It was her again. He laughed nervously.

'Quick! You hide over there'

'No thank you! I'm staying here, right next to you!'

And so they made their way together deeper into the millet field. As they did so, they could hear Zeng Rou's voice behind them and before long both she and the Little Countess had joined them in their hiding place. They heard the sound of horsemen coming closer, shouting orders as they continued their search.

They must have seen us!' whispered the startled Princess.

'No they haven't! Not yet! Be quiet!'

As they crouched there in the field, Trinket was remembering another occasion,

when he and his Shifu the White Nun, with Green Girl and Sir Zheng, had been obliged to hide in a field of sorghum. He was daydreaming about Green, and comparing her (very favourably) with the strident and panicking Princess currently beside him!

But it turned out that the Princess was right. The soldiers were closing in on them. The millet field was not particularly large (three or four acres at most). And whereas in the fertile soil of the northeast millet quickly grows into a huge impenetrable forest stretching for miles, here in the countryside not far from Peking it did not do nearly so well. They would surely be found before long.

Trinket had meanwhile spotted a couple of peasants' huts over on the far edge of

the field, and thither he now dragged his three women companions. They had to

crash through a fence and push open a rough plank door to get inside one of the

huts. But once there, it seemed they were in luck. The place looked empty, apart

from a few farm implements piled in one corner. Trinket found some capes made of

woven straw lying on the ground, and handed them out to the girls. He threw one

on himself, stuffed a conical straw hat on his head, and squatted in a corner.

The Princess giggled.

'Look at us! A family of peasants in their hovel! What an adventure this is!'

'Sh!' hissed the Little Countess. They're coming!'

The next minute the door was pushed open and in came seven or eight soldiers.

Trinket turned his face away. After a second's silence, he heard one of the men say'

'None of them are in here! The local peasants must have all gone out to work in the fields.' There was something very familiar about that voice! Trinket had a little peep from under his 'coolie' hat, and was delighted beyond measure to

recognize his deputy in the Valiants, Colonel Zhao Liangdong.

‘But Colonel’ one of the soldiers was in the process of saying, ‘what about those four peasants over there’

That’s all!’ ordered Zhao brusquely. ‘Out of here now, all of you! An officer can hardly breathe in this little hut, with all you soldiers cramming the place full! Out you go. Leave this to me. I want to question these men on my own.’

The soldiers hurried out, and from the field they could hear their commander loudly cross’questioning the peasants.

‘Have you seen any strangers come this way recently’

As he said these words, Zhao went over to Trinket and silently deposited a couple of gold ingots and several lumps of silver in front of him.

‘Oh, I see, so they headed off in a northerly direction, did they’ They must have learned how very angry His Majesty is!’ (silent gesticulation) ‘He’s absolutely furious! He wants heads to roll! They’d better get a move on if they don’t want to be caught!’

Zhao gave Trinket the briefest of manly hugs and went back out to the field, shouting’

The fugitives have obviously headed north! After them!’

Trinket could not believe his luck. Zhao had risked his own life, for the sake of their friendship. He was deeply touched. He and the girls hurried through the door in the other side of the hut, and emerged into a ramshackle yard.

Trinket saw at once that they were not alone. There were eight or nine others sitting in the roughly built shelter that ran down one side of the yard. It did not take Trinket long to recognize them. And once he had, it took him even less time to try to take to his heels and flee.

But to no avail. He had not gone more than two steps, when a strong hand caught him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him up into the air’

‘And where do you think you’re off to’

The last time he’d heard those words, it had been Princess Ning’s voice. This

time, it was a different voice, but a familiar one all the same-a voice he'd have known anywhere. It was Great Leader Hong. And with the Leader were' his utterly gorgeous wife,

Madame Hong; the cadaverous Fat Dhuta; the lean'faced Doctor Lu; and the Blue, Red, Black, and Yellow Dragon Marshals- Xu Xueting, Rootless the Taoist, Zhang

Danyue, and Duan Jin. In other words, the entire inner cabal of the Mystic Dragon Sect- including (now) the (very) roaming (and extremely renegade) ex'White Dragon Marshal'at'large, Trinket himself! And with them was the adorably beautiful girl Fang Yi, long the object of Trinket's romantic affections.

The Princess didn't take kindly to the rough way this man was handling Trinket.

'Get your hands off him!' she cried, aiming a feisty kick in the direction of the Leader, who replied by sending her spinning off into the corner of the yard with the tiniest flick of the middle finger of his left hand.

Trinket was still dangling in mid'air. He cried out feebly.

'Long Life to Our Leader and His Wife! Blessings be on Them! Your humble disciple Trinket Wei at your service!'

'Spare us the rigmarole!' sneered the Leader coldly. 'I'm surprised you even remember the words!'

'On the contrary!' protested the still dangling and breathless Trinket. 'I say them morning and evening, day and night, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, when I

go to bed, when I sit on the-'

Ever since the destruction by Admiral Shi Lang and his heavily armed flotilla of the Mystic Dragon base on Snake Island, and the consequent death or dispersal of

most of the Sect's members, the Great Leader had been reduced to the life of a hunted exile, tramping around in a desolate fashion with his last few trusty Comrades. They had been on the run for a couple of years. His brief excursion to

Fort Albazin after the debacle on Snake Island had been a desperate (and unsuccessful, thanks yet again to Trinket) attempt to use the Russians to shore up his crumbling power. It had been a long while now since this dishevelled band

had been able to chant any of the old mantras with any conviction. Hearing a couple of them on Trinket's lips almost kindled a glow of nostalgic pleasure. The Leader put Trinket down on the ground. There was the faintest trace of a smile on his icy face.

'It's been so long since we last saw each other,' said the irrepressibly hopeful

Trinket. 'I am amazed to see you both looking so well, and so much younger! Especially Madame Hong! Why she looks like a girl of seventeen. She could be my little sister!'

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It always worked. Madame Hong gave a coy laugh, and pinched him on the cheek.

'Shameless little monkey! You're the world's greatest Master of the Sucking Up School of kungfu!'

The Princess, needless to say, was infuriated by this piece of obvious flirtation.

'You watch your step!'

Madame Hong smiled.

'Step' I wasn't aware of having taken one. But I think I will.'

Whereupon she walked up to Princess Ning and kicked her hard up the backside.

The Princess yelped with pain.

At that moment there was the sound of more cavalry surrounding the yard. Presently a dozen or so soldiers came in, among whom Trinket recognized to his delight his old friends Colonels Wang Jinbao and Sun Sike.

'No one in here but a bunch of old peasants!' cried Wang promptly (and very loudly).

That's right!' called back Sun, immediately getting the idea. He and Wang exchanged glances, and waved their soldiers back out of the yard.

'Seen any men on the run' Sun continued to shout out, as his men left the building. 'No' Well, we'd better be on our way then.'

Minutes later, Wang and Sun were indeed on their way, having replenished Trinket's supplies of money and left him with enough horses for everyone (they assumed that he was with friends). Trinket had tried to persuade them to take

him with them. Anything, he thought to himself, even facing a furious Emperor, would be better than dying at the hands of the demented Leader and his rabid crew. But Wang and Sun were too aware of the hunt under way for Trinket, and believed sincerely that they were doing him a favour. They ordered their soldiers to set fire to the little compound, and they all galloped away.

Presently the Leader's party, with Trinket and his three women companions, mounted the fresh horses so kindly provided for them by His Majesty's troopers, and set off in an easterly direction towards the sea. Trinket and the women were made to ride in the middle, for fear that they would try to break loose and escape. Trinket was still hoping against hope that the troopers would somehow catch up with them and save him from the Leader's clutches. But it did not happen.

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At first the Princess kept up a constant stream of princess'like complaints. But after a while Duan Jin, the Yellow Dragon Marshal, decided he had heard enough and closed certain of her points, rendering her conveniently mute for the rest of that day's voyage. The Leader charted a south'easterly direction, and that night they camped out in the open.

A few days later they finally reached the coast. Doctor Lu helped himself to one of Trinket's pieces of silver, and went off to hire a boat and the services of a boatman. Soon they were setting out to sea.

'Here we go again!' thought Trinket bitterly to himself. 'Back to jolly old Snake Island! Now watch them feed old Trink to the snakes.'

He imagined himself in a deep pit on the island, surrounded by nasty, writhing (and highly venomous) serpents. He began to tremble with uncontrollable fear. This was his third trip by sea to Snake Island, he reflected miserably to himself. The first had been in the first flush of his infatuation with Fang Yi, and he still had one or two romantic memories of evenings together on deck (even

if she had only done it to lure him into a trap). The second trip had been when he was Supreme Commander of the great fleet sent by the Emperor to destroy the

Mystic Dragons-that too had had its redeeming moments of glory. The present occasion was truly wretched by comparison. His captors refused to leave him alone for one moment, and were constantly kicking him and hitting him. And the

lovely Fang Yi had not so much as looked at him once since they'd run into

each

other in the peasants' compound. She probably had no choice, and was obliged to

obey the dark whims of her Leader. But Trinket could not help feeling bitter towards her. She always did this to him, she always threw him into utter confusion. She was so pretty, damn it, so seductive, so clever at leading him on. And he fell for it every time! Curse her! She was the cleverest little whore on the face of the earth!

After several days at sea, they finally reached Snake Island. Doctor Lu and Fat Dhuta led the captives ashore.

It was a desolate sight that greeted their eyes. Scorched trees, and piles of rubble, the result of the protracted and devastating bombardment to which the island had been subjected by Admiral Shi Lang's fleet a couple of years earlier. The stench of decomposing

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snake'flesh assailed their nostrils as they wended their way along one of the island trails. When they finally came to the great bamboo assembly hall, they found it in ruins, while the smaller bamboo structures around it had been entirely razed to the ground.

The Great Leader stood there in shocked silence, gazing morosely at the scene. His four Dragon Marshals reacted with sheer horror, and several angry glances were cast in Trinket's direction.

The Black Dragon Marshal, Zhang Danyue, drew himself up to his full height and bellowed'

'Your Great Leader has returned to the island! Let all Comrades show themselves and do homage!'

His powerful voice carried right across the island. But the only response was the occasional echo reverberating from one of the distant hills.

'... Leader ... Comrades ... homage ...'

Then total silence. Neither sight nor sound of a single member of the Sect. The island seemed utterly deserted.

The Great Leader turned towards Trinket.

'Well' You and your cannon have done a thorough job of it.' His voice was icy.

There's nothing left. I hope you are suitably pleased with your work.'

Trinket made a feeble attempt to reply, but the Leader merely walked towards him and kicked him with ferocious force high into the air. Trinket landed with such a mighty thump, he felt as if he had broken every bone in his body and would never be able to walk again. Zeng Rou, though she was greatly intimidated by the Leader's violent behaviour, walked over and put her arms gently round Trinket, helping him into a sitting position on the ground.

Duan Jin, the ever smarmy Yellow Dragon Marshal, promptly offered to slice Trinket up into little pieces, but the Leader had other ideas.

'Not yet. Not yet. We need to keep him alive for a bit. He may have useful information!'

The Leader sat down on a large boulder, and was lost in thought for a moment. Then'

There is much work to be done here. The Manchu cannon have destroyed much of the island, and many of our Comrades have died. But we must begin the work of reconstruction without delay. First of all, I appoint you, Doctor Lu, to be the new White Dragon Marshal, in place of this degenerate viper in our midst!'

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Doctor Lu fell to his knees and expressed his profound gratitude to the Leader for this honour.

'Each of you Five Dragon Marshals must now proceed on a tour of the island. You must reassemble your old Branches, wherever possible recruiting new members of appropriate calibre.'

So far as the Leader was concerned, the message was clear' it was to be business

as usual. Three of the Dragon Marshals expressed their assent' Duan Jin, Zhang,

and the newly appointed White Dragon Marshal, Doctor Lu. But the

recalcitrant

Red Dragon Marshal, Rootless the Taoist, and Xu Xueting (Blue Dragon) remained

ominously silent.

The Leader glanced at them.

‘Is there something you wish to say’

It was old Blue who spoke first’

‘Great Leader, I have always been a loyal and devoted follower. But I feel that over the years you have not trusted us as much as we deserve to be trusted.

Things have got to change if we are to regain our morale. And the very first thing we need is the Antidote for the Leopard Embryo Pill. Things can’t go on like this. Give us the Antidote, and you will find that we will serve you with renewed and increased zeal.’

‘And if I don’t’ sneered the Leader. Then I suppose you will serve me with ‘ess zeal, or without any zeal at all’ Is that it’

‘Leader!’ protested old Xu. ‘Surely you know me better than that! After all these years! Which brings me to my second point. We need older, more reliable people in our Sect. Those youngsters are all talk and hot air. The minute there’s any real trouble or danger, they run for cover. Who stood by you and Madame Hong, through thick and thin’ It was us elders. We need fewer of those

young hoodlums. When all’s said and done, they’re no better than this little urchin here!’

He pointed at Trinket, the disgraced ex’White Dragon Marshal. As Xu spoke, the

Leader’s expression had grown darker and darker, and Xu had grown more and more

nervous. But having embarked on his speech, he was determined to say it out to

the end. ‘And you’ The Leader stared at Rootless. Rootless took a couple of steps away from him. ‘I agree with Blue Dragon Marshal. We must learn new ways.

These young people are not what our Sect needs. They do it harm. Take this young

creature here!’ (He pointed, not to Trinket, but to

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the Little Countess.) ‘She’s simply not trustworthy. She betrayed us to the enemy. We must rid ourselves of such elements.’

The Leader looked around him.

‘And you others’ Is this what you all think”

There was a long silence. At last Fat Dhuta spoke’

‘Leader, we have not discussed this matter amongst ourselves. But I feel that Red Dragon Marshal and Blue Dragon Marshal are basically right.’

The Black Dragon Marshal and Doctor Lu also indicated their agreement with Xu

Xueting. The only one to stand apart from his revolting Comrades was the ever shifting Yellow Dragon Marshal, Duan Jin, who in unctuous tones expressed his

belief that the Great Leader’s infallible wisdom was to be placed higher than all other considerations.

‘This destruction of our island can serve to purge our Sect of any refractory elements, Leader’ he ventured. ‘We are counting on you to lead us ever forwards, as you always have done in the past!’

Xu Xueting finally lost his temper.

‘It’s arse’lickers like you that got us into this mess in the first place!’ he cried angrily. ‘Your sycophantic, snivelling nonsense is of no use to anyone!’

‘Me, a sycophant” protested Duan Jin. ‘Why, you’re the one who tried to start a mutiny and failed. Remember’ You’re the one who almost succeeded in dividing us among ourselves. Remember’ And here you go again!’

He and Xu Xueting had their hands on their sword’hilts. All the others who had lined up with Xu stared silently at the Leader.

The Leader turned slowly towards Duan Jin and fixed him with an icy, cruel gaze.

It sent a chill to the very core of Duan Jin’s being. He retreated a step.

‘Leader, these men must be disciplined. They must be put to death.’

‘What were you saying just now”

The Leader’s voice was muffled and sinister. Duan Jin trembled.

‘I was only doing my best to-’

‘You were talking about things that happened in the past. Bad things. Things I thought we had all agreed to forget. Let me remind you, we took an oath!’ The Leader’s voice was intense, threatening. ‘We agreed to let bygones be bygones. Remember’ To forgive and

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forget. Remember’ And what was to be the punishment for anyone who didn’t forgive and forget’ For anyone who tried dredging up old disagreements, old grudges, old mutinies’ Remember’ We agreed that any such person was be thrown into the Dragon Pool, to be consumed by ten thousand snakes! Remember”

Duan Jin’s face was by now utterly bloodless with terror. He collapsed to his knees.

‘Leader! I’ll never do it again!’

But even as he said the words Duan Jin himself knew it was hopeless. He turned and fled. The Leader let him run for a couple of seconds. Then he stooped to pick a stone from the ground and threw it. The stone whistled through the air, and struck Duan Jin on the back of his head. He uttered a ghastly cry, lurched forward, and fell heavily to the ground. His limbs twitched once or twice, and he was dead.

The Leader had made a very quick calculation. He could probably have taken on all five rebels, and won. His kungfu skills were second to none. But then what’ Who would he have left’ He knew Duan Jin for a fawning, shifty knave. He always had been. This was a time of deep crisis for the Sect. Its very backbone had been seriously damaged. If there was to be any hope of repairing that damage, he would need every man he could get. The decision had taken him only a couple of seconds. And now Duan Jin was dead.

The five survivors expressed their gratitude, and praised their Leader for his wisdom and judgement.

Mystic Dragon Dissension

The Leader now proceeded to deal with the causes of their dissatisfaction. But first he pointed to Trinket.

‘I want you all to know’ he said, ‘that I spared this little viper’s life not out of any sentimental sense of mercy, but because he knows the secret whereabouts of a great treasure, buried somewhere in the north’east. He can lead

us to this treasure, and with it we will rebuild our great movement.’

He continued’

‘As for your suggestion that we place less confidence in younger members, I have

thought about it and have come to the conclusion that you are right after all.

From now on we must be

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more discerning when recruiting new members.’

They all looked pleased to hear this, and bowed to express their appreciation of their Leader’s change of heart.

Next the Leader produced two porcelain bottles from one of his inside pockets, and from each bottle he took five pills’ five yellow and five white. Then he put the bottles back in his pocket.

These,’ he said, pointing to the pills, all of which were now in his left hand, ‘are the Antidote for the Leopard Embryo Pill. You must each take two, one of each colour.’

Xu Xueting was the first to express his thanks and take his two pills. The others followed suit.

‘Swallow them straight away,’ said the Leader.

The five men duly swallowed their pills.

‘Good.’ There was the faintest trace of a smile on the Leader’s face. Then suddenly he shouted’

‘And what about you, Doctor Lu’ What’s that in your left hand”

Doctor Lu stepped forward.

‘Me’ Nothing!’

But his left hand was still tightly clenched.

‘Open it!’ cried the Leader.

His thundering voice set their ears ringing.

Doctor Lu swayed unsteadily. He opened his fist slowly, and a white pill fell to the ground.

The others were appalled. Doctor Lu was the Sect’s expert in all matters pharmacological. If he had not wanted to swallow the white pill, it was certainly for a good reason. And the four of them had already swallowed theirs.

‘That white pill is a highly efficacious tonic’ said the Leader, speaking forcefully. ‘It is known as Snow Ginseng. Why do you not trust me’

‘Of course I trust you, Leader!’ protested Doctor Lu. ‘It’s just that I’ve been feeling a little out of sorts lately. Weak. Out of joint. I thought I’d take my pill this evening after I’ve done my yoga-’

‘What’s the problem’ Come over here and I’ll see what I can do for you.’

Doctor Lu understandably did not seem to relish the idea of receiving healing from the Leader-not at that precise moment. He recoiled still further.

‘Still not trust me’

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‘Oh no, Leader! It’s not that!’

‘Then take your pill! Novel’

Doctor Lu stooped to retrieve the pill. And then suddenly he gave a flick of his finger and the little white pill went whizzing through the air, far, far away to some distant valley.

There, Leader! I’ve taken it!’

‘You’ve got a nerve!’ The Leader gave one of his sinister approximations to a laugh.

‘Leader, it was kind of you to give us the Leopard Embryo Antidote. The yellow one. But I really don’t think I deserved the second pill, the white one, the Serpent Bane.’

The others hurried over to Doctor Lu’s side, more terrified than ever. They stared at the Leader.

‘And what makes you so sure the white pill contains Serpent Bane? You are just trying to make trouble.’

Doctor Lu pointed to Fang Yi.

‘One day I found her out in the long grass collecting snails. She said you needed them for some drug you were making. And then by chance I came across the formula for this Serpent Bane. I know it’s supposed to be three years before it takes effect. But in the first place, you’ve never tried to make it before, and so you might have made it up wrong. And in the second place, I’m not sure I want

to die, even in three years’ time.’

The Leader’s face was darker than ever.

‘And tell me pray, how was it you, as you put it, "came across the formula" I was using?’

Doctor Lu glanced at Madame Hong.

‘It was your Lady. She wanted me to fetch her some drugs from the medicine chest. I found it there.’

‘Rubbish! Why would my wife need to go to you for drugs? She would have come to

me. And besides, I keep that chest locked at all times. How did you manage to break into it without my knowing?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You’re not going to tell me that I opened it for you!’

The Leader was getting louder and louder, more and more hysterical. He turned to

Madame Hong.

‘Or did you open it for him?’

Her beautiful face was deathly pale. She nodded her head slowly.

‘. . . ““““^>‘uiwv,<j jLcicnuessry. ‘Wny didn’t

you come to me for it?’

She flushed deeply, and then the next minute all the colour drained out of her face again. She staggered a little, and clutched at her stomach. She made a retching sound, and began vomiting. The Leader frowned. He spoke softly to her’

‘What’s the matter, my dear? Sit down and rest a little.’

“ ‘know what the matter is!’ It was the Princess who blurted this out. Somehow she always managed to put her foot in it ‘She’s pregnant! She’s having a baby! Why, you silly old man, your own wife’s having a baby and you didn’t even know!’

The Leader looked totally stunned. He lurched forward and took hold of Madame Hong's wrist.

'Is what she says true'

Madame Hong was still bent double, vomiting, shaking violently.

Suddenly the Leader's tone changed. Now he was his icy self again.

'You were trying to have an abortion, weren't you' That's it! You were trying to get rid of the child!'

Apart from Doctor Lu, the others were following this with utter disbelief. If Madame Hong really was pregnant, surely this should be a source of joy. It would be the Leader's first child. Why should she want to be rid of it' Surely he must be wrong in this assumption. But then she nodded, very slowly and deliberately.

'Yes. You're right. I wanted to get rid of the baby. Go on, kill me!'

The Leader raised his right hand. The edge of his all-crushing palm was poised above her head.

'Whose is the child'

They all knew that if that palm ever came down, she would be a dead woman. To their ever increasing astonishment, she merely raised her head and said proudly'

'I said kill me! Go on! Do it!'

The Leader's eyes blazed.

'I'm not going to kill you,' he muttered thickly. 'Just tell me who the father is!'

She held her lips fiercely closed. He looked at the men around him one after another. They all trembled at his gaze.

'It's none of them!' said Madame Hong. 'Go on, kill me. You're wasting your time.'

‘She’s your wife,’ said the Princess. ‘It’s your baby, you silly old

man!

‘Will you shut up’ roared the Leader. ‘Another word from you and I’ll wring your neck!’

The Princess decided to try keeping her mouth closed for a bit.

What she did not know was that for several years now the Leader had been practising an advanced form of yoga, and as part of this practice he had been abstaining from sexual intercourse of any kind. He and Madame Hong were a devoted couple, in their own strange way, but their love had for some time found

no physical expression. Ironically, that was one reason why the Leader treated her with such unusual tenderness and consideration.

The knowledge that she was now pregnant (and had tried to procure an abortion)

had completely overwhelmed him. He was filled with a thousand and one conflicting emotions’ anger, shame, regret, remorse, wounded pride, hatred, love, fear. All at the same time. And then there was the terrible loss of face that he would suffer if all of this became public knowledge. How could he ever hope to carry on as Leader’ How could he ever command respect’ He looked around

him. No, these men must all die. Every one of them. That was the only way out of

this! And then the secret would die with them.

He let go of Madame Hong, and marched on Doctor Lu.

This is all your fault, you meddling, treacherous fool!’

‘If you’re going to-’

Even as Doctor Lu cried out, before he could get out the words ‘kill us all’, the Leader’s palm came down on the crown of his head with devastating force. The

Doctor’s eyes started out of their sockets, and he fell dead to the ground.

The others saw the wild desperation in the Leader’s eyes, and prepared themselves for a fight to the death.

Fat Dhuta unsheathed his heavy ringed sword, the one known as Whirlwind. It weighed over thirty pounds. He lunged into the attack, and the Leader dodged to

one side, at the same time bringing his right palm chopping down on to the Black

Dragon Marshal’s head. The Blue Dragon Marshal launched a double attack on the

Leader’s back with his twin clubs, and the Red Dragon Marshal

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swung his Goose Feather sword at the Leader's midriff. The Leader gave a mighty cry and leapt into the air. As he came back down again, he directed himself at Black Dragon.

Black Dragon was wielding his twin double short'swords. He employed a fast move (for which he was well known) called Seven Stars Clustered Around the Moon, aiming several short sharp jabs at the Leader, who replied with a light palm'chop with his right hand, bringing it down on Black Dragon's left shoulder and leaping out of his way. Black Dragon cried out with pain, and did a somersault, but when he stood up again he could feel a numbing pain running down the entire left'hand side of his body.

And so the battle raged. The fiercest of the Leader's adversaries was without doubt the indomitable Fat Dhuta. Whirlwind's nine rings clanged loudly as he swung it through the air. Black Dragon's clubs were by comparison delicate weapons, dancing nimbly through the air as they sought out the Leader's Vital Points. And the movement of Red Dragon's Goose Feather sword created a whirling pattern of light. All of them had swallowed the poison, and none of them felt that they had anything to lose.

To the Death!

Seeing the five men locked in mortal combat, Trinket tugged Zeng Rou and the Little Countess by the sleeve, and gestured to the Princess to be silent. The four of them tiptoed down the hill.

They had started to put some ground between themselves and the ongoing fight, and Trinket was urging them to get a move on, when they heard footsteps behind them. Madame Hong and Fang Yi were running after them. They too feared the worst, and having no weapons left (all their weapons had been taken, even Trinket's poisoned darts), had decided that their only course was to run away.

Then the Princess tripped on a stone, and Trinket, knowing that she was pregnant, stopped to help her. The next minute, there was Madame Hong, standing in front of him.

‘Running away, are you’

Trinket laughed.

‘No no! We just thought we’d pop over here to admire the view!’

‘You might have asked me if I wanted to enjoy it with you!’ replied Madame Hong
sarcastically.

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As they were talking, Fang Yi came level with them. Zeng Rou and the Little Countess, seeing that Trinket had been waylaid by Madame Hong, came back to be

by his side.

The Little Countess spoke to Fang Yi.

‘Why don’t you come along with us’ He’s always been so good to you, and you did

once promise to be his-’

‘I take my orders from Madame Hong!’

‘You mean, you get your drugs from Madame Hong!’ cried the Little Countess.

‘I

know all about that. I did too once!’

Trinket was listening to this little exchange and it suddenly dawned on him that

both the girls (Fang Yi and the Little Countess) had been at different times under the control of Madame Hong. That was why they had treated him so badly,

tricking him and leading him into one trap after another. It all became clear.

Now that he understood that they had been acting under coercion, he felt much better inclined towards Fang Yi.

‘Dear sister Fang,’ he said, ‘why don’t you come with us’ Fang Yi flushed. His words immediately made her think of the happy days they had spent together on

their cruise to Snake Island. True, she had been acting under orders even then.

But there was more to it than that.

Suddenly the voice of the Great Leader could be heard up above them on the hillside, shouting’

‘Su Quan! Su Quan! Where are you’

His voice was full of fear. Fear that Madame Hong had left him. But she seemed

not to have heard. He cried out again. Still she did not respond.

The others were puzzled by her behaviour. All she did was shake her head. Again

and again. Her face was flushed.

‘Let’s go!’ she whispered. ‘Let’s find the boat and get away from here while we still can!’

Trinket stared at her in delighted disbelief.

‘You mean you want to come with us!’

‘There’s only one boat on the island. We all have to leave together. He’s going to kill me! Didn’t you see!’

She flushed, and hurried on ahead. The Leader could be heard shouting again

‘Su Quan! Come back!’

And then they heard a chilling scream from higher up on the hill. It was the last cry of a dying man. But whose cry it was, they could not tell.

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‘So much for you, Black Dragon!’ cried the Leader. That serves you right for turning against me! Su Quan! Su Quan! Come back! I’ll forgive you! I’ll forgive you everything!’

Then another death cry.

‘Well fought, Dhuta! But I won’t be hearing from you again in a hurry!’

Madame Hong stopped in her tracks for a moment.

‘You hear that’ He’s gone completely berserk! He’s already killed two of them!’

‘Hurry up!’ cried Trinket. ‘We’ve no time to lose!’

‘I’ll come back for you two later!’

As the Leader shouted out these words, they saw him hurtling down the hill towards them, still crying ‘Su Quan! Su Quan! Come back!’

He was getting closer and closer. Trinket looked back, and saw him coming, his long hair streaming in the wind, racing down the hill. He was a terrifying sight.

‘Stop him!’ cried the Blue Dragon Marshal, Xu Xueting, trailing him in hot pursuit. ‘He’s already wounded! We must finish him off today!’

To which the Red Dragon (Rootless) added

‘He’ll never get away now!’

By now Trinket and his women companions were almost at the water's edge. But the three men were not far behind them, running like madmen, their faces spattered with blood.

'Your lady's found a younger man,' Xu Xueting taunted him. 'She doesn't want you any more!'

The Leader lurched angrily towards Xu Xueting, and brought his right palm down sharply on his head. Xu replied with a left-hand swing of his clubs, and Rootless joined in the fray, swinging his mighty Goose Feather sword at the Leader's exposed midriff.

'Su Quan!' he called out desperately. 'Til fix these two. You kill the four girls-but spare the boy! He'll lead us to the treasure.'

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struck in the midriff by the Leader's palm. The Leader gave a savage laugh, and followed up with a flying kick that caught Xu in the chest, smashing a number of

his ribs. But the Leader was unable to withdraw his foot. It was stuck fast in Xu's ribcage. Struggle as he might, he could not get it free. He was caught. Rootless hurled himself with renewed vigour into the attack, swinging his great blade. The Leader dodged to one side, and countered with a reverse punch. In one

and the same moment, his fist drove itself into Rootless' belly, and Rootless' sword hacked its way deep into the Leader's shoulder'blade. Rootless, blood spurting from his mouth onto the back of the Leader's neck, tried to raise his sword for another hack, but found it so deeply embedded in the shoulder'blade that he was unable to pull it out.

'Help me!' cried the Leader. 'Won't anybody help me?'

Madame Hong just stood there. Whether she was too frightened to move, or simply

unwilling to help, it was impossible to tell. Motionless, she watched the three men enmeshed in their death struggle, literally jointed into one another. Xu Xueting grabbed hold of one of his clubs from the floor, and managed to ram it into the Leader's side. The Leader, screaming with pain and thrashing his legs around wildly, succeeded in kicking Xu free of him, and then landed a powerful reverse elbow jab in Rootless' groin, sending him crumpling to the ground.

'See! They're ... no match for me!' The Leader half laughed, half gasped. 'They thought they could mutiny against me-and they're all dead!'

He turned to Madame Hong.

'Why didn't you help me?'

She shook her head.

'You're the best fighter in the world. You don't need to be helped. And anyway,' (here she allowed herself a sarcastic smile), 'what would have been the point of helping you? You'd only have killed me in the end!'

'So you're against me as well! Then I will kill you, I'll throttle you, you treacherous bitch!' cried the Leader, throwing himself at her.

She darted to one side with a short cry. Despite his wounds and his recent exertions, the Leader was still capable of extraordinary speed and agility. With one hand he seized her arm, with the other he gripped her by the throat.

'Go on, say it!' he screamed. 'Are you for me or against me? Just say you're for me, and I'll forgive you everything!'

She spoke slowly

'For a very long time now I've been against you. Ever since the day you forced me to marry you. Ever since that day, I've hated you to the very marrow of my bones! Go on, kill me!'

The Leader's blood was running all over her. Her head and her face were dripping with his blood. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

'You're all against me!' he cried. 'Every one of you! But I'm not done yet! I shall find new people, I shall build a new Mystic Dragon Sect!'

He squeezed his hand tighter and tighter round her throat. She found it harder and harder to breathe. Her tongue protruded from her mouth.

Trinket was standing there on the beach watching all of this in terror. He could see that any minute now she was going to die. He picked up a stone and threw it at the Leader, striking him in the small of the back. For a moment the Leader almost lost consciousness. He loosened his grip on Madame Hong's throat, and turned towards Trinket.

'As for you . . . bane of my life! To hell with the treasure! I'll kill you anyway!'

And he swung a palm wildly at Trinket. Trinket stepped nimbly aside. The Leader stumbled after him, leaving a trail of blood on the beach. Trinket ran for all he was worth. He knew that once the Leader had him in his grasp, he was as good as dead. The next minute he felt the Leader's hand catch hold of a corner of his shirt. The fabric tore away, and Trinket ran faster still. He tried the Hundred Flights taught him by the White Nun, dashing here and there on the beach, and every time he just succeeded in eluding the Leader. He had never in his life mastered any of the serious forms of kungfu, but when it came to the Art of Escape, Trinket was a Grand Master.

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The Leader roared like a lion, and struck out again and again with his palms. Finally he struck home, and sent Trinket tumbling head over heels across the sand. But the Leader's strength was waning, and the blow had not seriously wounded Trinket. He scrambled to his feet, but no sooner had he done so than he felt the Leader's hands close in on his shoulders. That was when he had the inspiration' he would use one of the special moves that the Leader himself had taught him on his very first visit to the island-one of the Three Heroes. Normally he would not have stood a chance against such a

man.

But by now the Leader was both physically and emotionally drained. Trinket was

able to remember enough of the move to twirl himself around, and swing himself

between the Leader's legs. Then he executed a smart somersault and sprang up onto the Leader's head and shoulders, pressing his index fingers on the Leader's

brow, and his middle fingers on his eyeballs. The Leader sank helpless to the ground.

'Su Quan . . .' he groaned. 'Come here!'

Madame Hong started moving towards him, but stopped when she was about a yard

from where he was lying.

'Whose ... whose child is it that you are carrying' he gasped.

She shook her head.

'Why do you want to know so badly'

Even as she said this, she could not prevent herself from glancing coyly at Trinket, and blushing.

'No!' cried the Leader. 'Not him! It can't be true!'

Not only had Trinket used on him the very kungfu tricks he had taught him, he had had the effrontery to make his lady, the beautiful Madame Hong, pregnant.

Madame Hong bit her lip and was silent. Her silence was eloquent.

'I'll kill the little fiend!'

The Leader threw himself at Trinket. It was a terrifying sight. His face smeared with clotted gore, his broken yellow teeth staring from his gaping mouth, his hands dripping with fresh blood. In sheer terror Trinket darted for cover between Madame Hong's legs. She held out both her arms, and looked straight into

the Leader's face.

'It is over!' she said calmly. 'You've ruled the roost for long enough!'

'I'm the Leader!' he snarled. 'My orders must be obeyed! Why are you all against

me' You're wrong! I'm right! I'll kill you all!

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Then I'll be the only one to survive and enjoy a Long Life and-'

But before he could get the word 'Blessings' out, he was dead. His mouth hung open. His eyes stared lifelessly in front of him.

Return to Potluck Island

Trinket scrambled to his feet and did a backwards somersault. Then he ran another few yards before finally plucking up the courage to turn around and look. The Leader was still lying motionless on the sand. He stole forwards a step or two, and then adopted his 'I'm ready to escape at any moment!' position.

'Is he dead'

Madame Hong sighed.

'He's dead.' She spoke very quietly. Trinket took another couple of steps forward.

'How come his eyes aren't closed'

Before this question could be answered, Trinket found himself being subjected to a violent assault-his ears boxed, his bottom kicked-from the Princess.

'You filthy turtle! You know perfectly well why he can't close his eyes in peace, the poor bastard! Because you messed around with his wife! You just couldn't keep your dirty little hands off her, could you!'

Madame Hong uttered an irritable 'humph!' and seized the Princess by the scruff of the neck. Then she boxed her ears, and sent her flying with a sweep of her hand. The Princess tumbled backwards, but never for a second let go of Trinket.

'Any more of your insolence' cried Madame Hong, 'and I'll kill you!'

The Princess was not one to be intimidated. She leapt up, and threw herself at Madame Hong, who tripped her with her left foot. Three times the Princess came back for more, and three times she was sent sprawling. She eventually got the message and sat down and started bawling.

'Filthy turtle! Foul eunuch! Smelly Laurel!'

She noticeably refrained from abusing Madame Hong.

Trinket was still tending a pair of sore ears. He saw blood on his hands, and realized that the Princess had actually ripped a piece out of one of his ears.

He heard Madame Hong speaking.

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‘He and I were husband and wife. I should like to bury him properly, if you will allow it.’

Her voice was strangely quiet and full of tenderness. For Trinket the strangest thing of all was that she was asking him for his permission. It gave him a thrill of delight.

‘Of course you must,’ he replied.

Together they used the various discarded weapons lying on the beach to dig a hole in the sand. The Little Countess and Fang Yi helped them lower the Leader’s

body into the hole.

Madame Hong now knelt by the side of the grave, and kowtowed several times.

‘It’s true you forced me to marry you against my will,’ she began, in that soft voice of hers, thrilling even in grief. ‘But over the years, you showed your devotion. In your way. You never did me any harm. And what did I ever give you

in return’ Not my love. I never loved you! There-now I have told you the truth! And it’s too late!’

When she got to her feet, there were tears on her cheeks. She stood there a while, lost in thought. Then she wiped away her tears, and turned to Trinket’

‘Well, are we going to stay here’ Or return to the mainland”

Trinket shook his head.

‘We can’t possibly stay here. Just think of all the ghosts that’ll be after us.

But if we go back, the Emperor will want my head. We need to find somewhere safe

and quiet.’

A thought occurred to him.

‘Why not Potluck Island’ There aren’t any ghosts. And the Emperor will never think of looking for us there.’

He pointed to the island on the western horizon.

‘It’s over there.’

‘Then that’s where we should go.’ Madame Hong seemed to want to go along with

his every thought.

‘Excellent!’ cried Trinket. ‘Let’s go then, all of us!’

He went over to the Princess and pulled her up from the ground.

‘Let’s all get into the boat and go!’

She swung at him and he ducked.

‘You can go if you like! I’m not going anywhere! I’m staying here!’

‘Are you sure” replied Trinket. This island’s crawling with ghosts, you know.

All kinds of them. Headless ghosts. Legless
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ghosts. Ghosts whose guts have been blown out and are trailing behind them.
Ghosts with lots of hands who feel up ladies-'

The Princess was trembling with fear despite herself. She stamped her foot.

'And horrible, dirty little ghosts like you who lie and fib and never stop
making a thorough nuisance of themselves!'

Out went her left foot, and landed a nasty kick on Trinket's long'suffering
backside. He gave a cry and leapt into the air.

It turned into a showdown between the Princess and Madame Hong, who came
running
to the defence of her new Lord and Master, threatening to give the Princess ten
times over everything that she gave Trinket.

'And who exactly do you think you are!' sneered the Princess. 'Just because
your
old man's dead and gone, does that mean to say you can come stealing other
people's husbands'

To which Fang Yi replied'

'And what about you' Isn't your husband dead too''

In the end the Princess (who had been used to having her way all her life) had
to swallow her pride. She did not want to be left alone on the island. And in
Madame Hong she knew she had met her match. Trinket was delighted to
observe
this new development. He had never been able to cope with this princess'shrew
on
his own-his ears were still hurting to prove it.

Madame Hong spoke to Fang Yi.

'Sister dear, will you tell the boatman to get ready. We must set sail.'

'Certainly, Madame. But tell me, why are you being so polite to me all of a
sudden''

Su Quan (for so we must now always call her, since her husband Leader Hong was dead and her new allegiance was to Trinket) smiled.

‘From this day forth, we must all be sisters. No more "Madame" this, or "Princess" that. And as for you, Fang Yi, once we’re on the boat, I shall give you the Antidote.’

Fang Yi was happy beyond belief at the thought of being liberated from her Mystic Dragon drug-induced oppression and servile dependence.

They boarded the boat, and set sail in a westerly direction. Trinket gazed happily out to sea. Madame Hong gave Fang Yi her Antidote. Then she opened the metal chest on the boat, and gave Trinket back his dagger, his poisoned darts, and his money-all

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the things that had been taken from him when he had fallen into the Leader’s hands. Zeng Rou and the others also had their weapons returned. Now that they were to be sisters, it was important to establish seniority. They all gave their dates of birth, including Trinket. Su Quan was the oldest; then came Fang Yi followed by Princess Ning. Trinket, Zeng Rou, and the Little Countess were all born in the same year. Zeng Rou was three months older than

Trinket, the Little Countess a few days younger.

The Princess was the only one not to enter into the new sisterhood idea with any

enthusiasm. She felt left out and neglected, and ended up bursting into tears.

Trinket did his best to comfort her. He suggested a game of dice to cheer everyone up. Zeng Rou somewhat bashfully produced the dice he had given her many

months earlier, and Trinket was touched that she should have kept them with her

all this time. He gave her a hug and thanked her, much to her embarrassment.

They tried throwing the dice, but after a few rounds Trinket stopped the game.

Playing with girls was not much fun, he reflected to himself. And then he started thinking ahead, to the place they were heading for, and to what his new life was going to be like on Potluck Island. Being an exile on a remote island did not promise to be great fun. There was going to be no money to gamble with

for a start, and nothing to spend his winnings on anyway.

And then he started thinking of the two other women who were so important in his life' Doublet and Green. What had become of them' It was not as if he could just forget about them.

'Let's not go to Potluck Island!' he said to Madame Hong.

'Where do you suggest then'

'Why don't we go up to the North'East and dig up that treasure'

'I thought we agreed that we wanted a quiet time for a while,' was her reply.

The Emperor will have men looking for you everywhere,' said Fang Yi. 'Let's lie low for a year or two. Wait for things to quieten down a bit.'

Zeng Rou and the Little Countess were of the same opinion. In the end, Trinket gave in.

As if to reward him, Fang Yi offered to cook him a meal' 'I'd like to make up for all the horrible things I've done to you in the past.'

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Fang Yi turned out to be a marvellous cook, and performed miracles with the limited ingredients on board the little boat. They all enjoyed their meal, and then Trinket taught them how to play the drinking'game known as Guess Fingers.

Even the Princess joined in, and after a few cups of wine she began to stop sulking and cheer up a bit.

At noon the next day they reached Potluck Island. Madame Hong supervised the

disembarking, giving the boatman orders to carry all the provisions ashore, and to store the sails, oars, cables, and rudder in a cave (thus ensuring that he did not try to get away without them).

New Arrivals on the Shore

Just as they were finishing the unloading of their things, they heard a great explosion out at sea. There were two junks out in the bay, which continued to fire their guns.

'It must be the Emperor's men come after me!' cried Trinket.

'Let's try to get away in our boat!' suggested Zeng Rou,

But Madame Hong pointed out that they had only just finished dismantling the equipment, and it would take far too long to bring it all back from the cave.

The only course open to them was to hide somewhere on the island itself.

They decided to hide in another cave high up in the cliff. Madame Hong cut down some branches to camouflage the entrance. Through the screen of branches they looked out to sea, and saw the two junks still heading straight for the shore. The junk further away continued to fire its guns, and the cannon balls fell around the boat nearest to them, sending great plumes of water into the air. It soon became clear that the further boat was in fact pursuing the nearer one, and that they were not after Trinket at all.

‘Why isn’t the front one firing back?’ said Trinket. Then they’d both end up at the bottom of the sea—all the better for us!’

The front junk was the smaller of the two, but it had the wind in its sails, and was moving faster, until it took a direct hit on its mast, and its sails all went up in flames. It started to capsize. A small skiff was launched, and from the cave they could see a dozen men jumping into it and rowing for all they were worth. They reached shallow water and the big junk pursuing them was unable to come any closer to the shore. It too launched five small TOW’

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boats. In a matter of minutes the skiff from the first junk was on the beach and the dozen men inside it were ashore, scouting up and down the beach, spying out the land. One of them spotted the cave in the cliff.

‘Let’s take cover up there!’ he shouted.

Trinket could have sworn he knew that voice. Surely it was his Shifu, the Helmsman, Chen Jinnan! The little band of men scrambled up the cliffside. The

man in front held a long sword, and directed the others up the cliff path. As he drew closer, there was no longer any doubt. It was Chen Jinnan.

Trinket leapt excitedly out of the cave.

‘Helmsman! Shifu!’

Chen spun around, and was both surprised and delighted to see Trinket.

‘What on earth are you doing here?’

Trinket hurried forward. And then it was his turn to have the shock of his life.

Standing there before him, in the Helmsman’s band of followers, was the bright-eyed, the snowy-skinned, the ravishingly beautiful Ah Kor’ Green Girl

herself!

'Green!' he cried, and threw himself forward. And then he saw who was standing

behind her' the Insufferable, the abominable, the despicable bounder and cad, Sir Zheng, Zheng Keshuang himself!

Trinket's expression of ecstasy froze on his face, and was replaced by a gloomy, silent stare. Even as he was standing there speechless, caught between feelings of joy and utter dismay, he felt a little hand wrap itself around his own, and when he turned, there was another sweet, smiling face that he knew so well. It was Doublet's, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. Trinket threw his arms

around her in delight and hugged her.

'Dearest Doublet! How I've missed you!'

He was so happy, he was ready to explode with joy. He had forgotten Green already.

'We must secure this path!' ordered the Helmsman. Feng Xifan (the Bloodless Sword-Insufferable's sinister mentor), and the Triad Brother Feng Jizhong, took

up positions on either side of the path leading up the cliff to the cave, swords drawn at the ready.

Doublet explained to Trinket that Brother Feng had taken them everywhere looking for him.

'We heard you'd set out to sea. And finally we've found you!'

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She was about to burst into tears again.

The five row'boats in pursuit had now reached the shore, and seventy or eighty Imperial troops could be seen making their way along the beach towards them. There was a tall commanding officer, who ordered them to line up and string arrows to their bows. Trinket recognized him at Shi Lang.

Take cover!' shouted the Helmsman.

Trinket was already hiding behind a large rock.

'Fire!'

The Manchu officer gave the order, and a shower of arrows was released, but the

cliff was too high and they fell well short of the mark, or at the most fell

feebly to the ground in front of the cave. Feng Xifan with his long sword, and Brother Feng Jizhong with his cutlass, stood there knocking away the arrows with their blades as they fell from the sky.

‘Come up here, Shi Lang!’ cried Feng Xifan the Bloodless Sword. ‘Come and fight me, if you have the guts, you spineless traitor!’

‘You come down here!’ returned Shi Lang. ‘Come down and fight me in single combat!’

The Helmsman held Feng back.

‘And you, Chen Jinnan!’ called out Shi Lang, deliberately refusing him any title, almost as an act of provocation. ‘Do the sensible thing! If you and Lieutenant Feng surrender now, I am sure the Emperor will appoint you both to posts of distinction.’

He still called Feng Xifan ‘lieutenant’, which was the rank he had held when he, Shi Lang, as one of Coxinga’s Five Great Generals, had defected from Coxinga’s army to join the Manchus. Both Helmsman Chen and Feng Xifan had fought under him in the past, during many a campaign. But they both made it immediately clear to Shi Lang (and to Sir Zheng, who in his usual pusillanimous manner had showed signs of wavering for a moment), that they had not the slightest intention of switching sides. They would rather fight it out to the death.

Doublet explained to Trinket (who understandably wondered how they had all arrived together on Potluck Island) that she and the Helmsman and Brother Feng had been on their way to the island, when they passed a boat carrying Sir Zheng, Green Girl, and Feng Xifan. The boat had been hit by a cannon’ball from a pursuing Imperial junk, and they had been able to save Sir Zheng and his people and bring them along with them.

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The Helmsman decided that it would be to their advantage to do battle now, before any further Imperial reinforcements came ashore. There were over a dozen

of them' the Helmsman, Feng Xifan, Sir Zheng, Brother Feng Jizhong, Green, Doublet, together with eight other miscellaneous Triads, and three of Sir Zheng's personal guards. The Helmsman ordered Sir Zheng, Green, Trinket, and

Doublet to mount guard on the cave, while the others went into the attack. He led the charge down the cliffside, brandishing his sword in the air. The others followed him shouting warlike cries. The Imperial troops fired another volley of arrows, which were all deflected by the expert swordsmanship of the Helmsman,

Feng Xifan, and Brother Feng Jizhong.

They made short work of the soldiers, who were only average fighters and soon fled in every direction. The Helmsman himself took on Shi Lang in single combat,

while Feng Xifan and Brother Feng Jizhong polished off the remaining soldiers one by one, littering the beach with fifty or sixty corpses. Such Imperial troops as managed to survive swam back to their ships. Two Triad Brothers were

killed, and one wounded. The remaining Triads now encircled Shi Lang.

Shi Lang, though hard pressed by Chen Jinnan, and surrounded by so many men,

showed no signs of losing heart.

'Surrender, Admiral Shi!' cried Trinket, who had now rushed down with Doublet

and Green to join in what was left of the fray. (Sir Zheng had decided to stay behind in the cave, so as not to 'endanger his person', which was so 'precious to the cause', and so on.) 'If you don't surrender,' continued Trinket, 'you'll be made into minced meat and fed to the dogs!'

Shi Lang paid him no heed, but fought on for some considerable time against the

Helmsman. In the end, however, he was no match for Chen's superb swordsmanship,

and he found himself pinned to the ground, with the Helmsman's sword'tip at his

throat.

'And do you think the Grand Marshal was right to treat me the way he did" he cried (the Grand Marshal being the great Resistance hero Coxinga).

Shi Lang's desperate cry threw the Helmsman into utter disarray. There was no doubt in his mind that Shi Lang had in fact been greatly wronged by Coxinga, who

in his later years developed noticeable maniacal tendencies and became

intensely
jealous of Shi's
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popularity. He had caused Shi Lang's entire family to be put to death. Shi Lang had fought bravely and brilliantly for Coxinga's father, Zheng Zhilong, and his desire for revenge was, in a sense, understandable. And yet his betrayal of the cause was surely unforgivable' The Helmsman hesitated. He had always been a man of honour, and even now he was reluctant to take Shi Lang's life.

'Come back to our side, and I will spare you!' he replied. 'Swear to devote your remaining days to fighting the Manchus and I will spare your life. You are a fine soldier. We all know that. There is so much you could still contribute to our cause.'

'Himl Contribute to our cause!'

The Helmsman heard a sneering voice behind him. It was Sir Zheng, who had meanwhile (once the danger was over) made his way down from the cave.

'All he wants to do is take revenge on my family, and wipe us all out! Let him come back to Taiwan, and it will be the end of our cause more like!'

At these words, Shi Lang made a desperate attempt to escape.

'I will vouch for him myself,' said Chen Jinnan.

'And who do you think you are, to do such a thing' Sir Zheng's voice sounded positively twisted. 'Do you rule Taiwan' I thought it was my family, not yours, that had charge of the island.'

And as the Insufferable spoke these words, the Helmsman felt something cold and metallic enter his body from behind, and come out in front through his chest. Sir Zheng had taken advantage of the confusion of the moment to stab him from behind.

This cowardly act was certainly in character. But it must also be seen in the context of the complex intrigue that was unravelling in the 'court' of the Zheng family on Taiwan. The Helmsman was and always had been unswerving in his

loyalty

to Coxinga's eldest son, Zheng Jing, who was still alive and held the title of Prince of Yanping. First in line to succeed the Prince was his elder son, Zheng Kezang, born to the family wet'nurse. The Insufferable Sir Zheng was the Prince's second son, but he had ambitions. He was supported in these ambitions,

and in particular in his claim to the succession, by his own mother (the Lady Dong), who was Prince Zheng's official wife, and by the sinister Feng Xifan, to whose daughter he was officially betrothed. One of the last remaining obstacles to their plans to put Insufferable on the princely throne was the Helmsman, who

continued to support (and was father'in'

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law to) the elder brother. By striking this cowardly blow, Sir Zheng was clearing the way for his own rise to power.

Death of a Hero

Trinket immediately pulled out his dagger and lunged at Sir Zheng. Feng Xifan (who had himself gone in pursuit of the escaping Shi Lang) returned to close in on Trinket, and in the next second the dagger fell from Trinket's hand and he felt himself being kicked through the air. Doublet and the Triads joined in the fray. Trinket scrambled to his feet and retrieved his dagger.

'That evil creature has killed the Helmsman!' he cried. 'He mustn't get away with it!'

Sir Zheng, for his part, had succeeded in bringing his own sword to within inches of Trinket's skull, when his thrust was blocked-by Green!

'Don't you dare harm my brother'in'arms!' she cried. Two Triads came to her aid.

Feng Xifan, meanwhile, was taken on by Doublet, Brother Feng Jizhong, and two

other Triads. He succeeded in killing one of the Triads. Then in answer to a pathetic plea for help from Sir Zheng, he rushed over to his side and disposed of another Triad who was making trouble there.

The Helmsman was dead. Now he must deal with Trinket. This was Feng's thinking.

He swung his palm down towards Trinket's head.

'Watch out, Master!' cried Doublet, throwing herself at Feng's back.

'You watch out too!' yelled Trinket, taking to his heels.

Feng Xifan now grabbed Sir Zheng under his left arm (he did not wish to leave him unprotected), and went in pursuit of Trinket. Even weighed down in this way,

he was still too fast for Trinket, who headed for the cliff. Feng was delighted.

There was only the one narrow path leading upwards, with the sheer cliff face on

one side, and a precipitous drop on the other. He would be able to come here. As Trinket began to stagger up the path towards the cave, struggling to evade Feng Xifan's grasp, he yelled out frantically

'Wives! To the rescue! Or you'll all be widows!'

Su Quan had been watching with the others from the mouth of the cave. She could

see that Feng was a more than formidable

fighter but, nothing daunted, she now emerged from the cave and swung her sword

at him. He was taken aback by this, and almost lost his balance. He paused for a

moment before kicking at her and sending her sword flying into the air. In that split second, Trinket was able to turn and take aim, releasing a shower of his poisoned darts. The deadly little projectiles embedded themselves in the bodies of both Feng and Sir Zheng.

Feng let out a great cry and dropped Sir Zheng to the ground. They both began tumbling down the cliffside. Doublet and Brother Feng Jizhong, who had raced after them and were already halfway up the narrow path, jumped aside as the two

of them went crashing down.

By the time the two men finally came to rest at the foot of the cliff, the poison was starting to work. They were both screaming like stuck pigs and writhing violently on the ground. Lady Iron Hand, when she became a disciple of

the Mount Hua School, had renounced the use of the virulent poisons that she had

once specialized in as Leader of the Five Poisons Sect. The poison with which the tips of Trinket's darts had been anointed was merely a knockout formula; it did not kill. If it had been one of her lethal potions, the two men would have died long before they reached the foot of the cliff. This did not prevent it from being extremely painful. Feng and Sir Zheng felt as if their bodies were crawling with hundreds of biting scorpions and other highly poisonous creepy-crawlies. Even that hardened warrior Feng Xifan was screaming like a child.

Trinket hastened to the scene, followed by Doublet, Brother Feng Jizhong, Su Quan, Fang Yi, the Little Countess, the Princess, Zeng Rou, and Green Girl. They

were aghast at the sight of the two men writhing in agony on the ground.

Trinket took a few deep breaths and tried to compose himself. Then he hurried over to where the Helmsman still lay, transfixed by Sir Zheng's sword. His Shifu was still breathing. Trinket took him in his arms and let out a great howl of grief.

Chen Jinnan, victor of many battles, master of many levels of kungfu, had still a small reservoir of Inner Force untapped.

Trinket,' he said, in a still quiet voice. 'We must all of us die. My whole life has been dedicated to my country. I have no regrets. Do not take it too hard.'

'Shifu! Shifu!' cried the distraught Trinket. It was true that, in all these years, he had never actually spent much time with the

had been not to betray his own iaox UL ^b””
his own inadequacy as a disciple. But nonetheless, in his own self-effacing way, the Helmsman had always been like a father to him. Like the father he had never known. He felt his heart bursting within him. He felt an uncontrollable impulse to die in the Helmsman's place.

'Shifu!' he sobbed. 'I'm so sorry! I never learned any of the kungfu you tried to teach me!'

Chen Jinnan smiled wanly.

'I just want you to be a good man. Then I will be happy. It really doesn't matter how good your kungfu is.'

Til do as you say, Shifu! I promise I will! I'll be good! I won't do anything bad! I promise!'

Chen smiled again.

'You're a good boy! You always were a good boy!'

'As for that vile murderer Zheng Keshuang...' Trinket clenched his teeth in bitter rage and sobbed violently. 'He's at my mercy now! I'll cut him into little pieces. I'll avenge you, Shifu!'

Tears were pouring down his cheeks. Chen Jinnan trembled as he hastened to reply.

'No! You must not do that! Never forget that I owe allegiance to his father Prince Zheng. Prince Zheng's father, the Grand Marshal Cokinga, was my great friend and protector all his life. We must never hurt his flesh and blood. However wicked he may be, I must never betray the trust placed in me by his grandfather! It is a matter of honour! Trinket, I am a dying man. You must promise me this one thing-not to stain my honour! You must promise!'

His gentle smile had given way to an expression of intense anxiety and concern.

'Promise me, Trinket, that you will set him free, and let him return to Taiwan. Or my spirit will not be able to rest in peace.'

Trinket had no choice.

‘Since it is your will, Shifu, I promise to let the wretch live!’

Chen seemed greatly comforted by Trinket’s words. He gave a long sigh.

‘Trinket. . .’ He was speaking very slowly now. ‘You must take good care of everything, when I’m gone. The Triads, and the great cause of the Resistance. The Manchus must be overthrown! The Ming must be restored! I know that if the Chinese people unite against their enemy, they will prevail one day! But alas! I will not be here to see that day. . . .’

His voice was already fading away. His breathing faltered. The life was gone from him.

Trinket held him in his arms and howled’ ‘ ; , , ; “ ; . .

‘Shifu! Shifu!’

But the Helmsman was silent.

Su Quan and the others were all deeply moved by this touching scene. She stroked

Trinket gently on the shoulder, and comforted him’

, ‘Trinket, your Shifu has passed away.’

‘He’s dead!’ sobbed Trinket.

It was as if he was mourning the loss of his own father. The Helmsman’s death brought it home with a devastating intensity. Trinket was now doubly fatherless.

He was more alone in the world than ever.

Negotiations for Sir Zheng’s Release

Su Quan made an effort to turn Trinket’s mind to other things.

‘How are we going to deal with this criminal who killed your Shifu” she asked.

Trinket suddenly pulled himself together, and began abusing Zheng Keshuang where he lay on the sand.

‘You filthy, putrid turtle! You disgusting, murdering traitor! My Shifu may have

owed things to your family, but I don't owe you anything! Out of respect for him, I'll spare your miserable worthless life! But don't expect that to be the end of everything. You still owe me ten thousand taels-remember' From when I let you go in Yangzhou. You obviously aren't planning on repaying me. So I'll help myself. I'll give you a cut for every tael.'

He had his dagger out and was holding it close to Zheng's body, and all the time he was speaking he was kicking him.

Til pay you everything I owe you when we get back to Taiwan!' pleaded Sir Zheng.
'I'll pay you ten times over-'

Trinket kicked him in the head.

'You filthy pig! You shameless turtle! Your promises are not worth a fart! No, I think I'd rather have those cuts.'

He ran the tip of his dagger across the Insufferable's face. Sir Zheng nearly fainted out of sheer terror. He looked at Green Girl pleadingly to come to his aid. But then he thought better of it.

'If she sticks up for me, it'll only maKe HIOLL^IO v.^,.^ - little shit's crazy about her!'

'Lodge Master Wei,' he stammered, trying another tack. 'I'll pay you a hundred times over! I promise to pay you a million taels. Can't you trust me''

'Trust you' Of course I can't trust you! My Shifu trusted you, and look where it got him'

He was just itching to start carving up Sir Zheng's face.

'Perhaps I should give you some sort of guarantee'' suggested Sir Zheng.

'Yes!' Trinket quipped back. 'Like your head! Then when you've paid me what you

owe me, you can have it back.'

'I was thinking of Green.'

Trinket had not anticipated this. For a moment he was thrown into a complete spin, and in his confusion dropped the dagger, which drove itself into the sand an inch or so from Sir Zheng's head. He gave a cry of terror and pulled his head in.

'You can have Green as a security, if that'll help you trust me,' Sir Zheng went on. 'You can have her for now. Then when I pay you the money, you can give her back to me.'

'Let me think about that for a moment' said Trinket.

'Definitely not!' cried Green, glowering angrily at Sir Zheng. 'I don't belong to you! You can't pawn me!' She was clearly outraged. Then she began wailing loudly.

This was too much for Sir Zheng.

'Just listen to her! Obviously she doesn't care for me in the least if she won't help me in my hour of need! I tell you what, Lodge Master Wei, I'll make you an

offer. I'll sell her to you outright! That way we'll be quits.'

'What's the point?' protested Trinket. 'She'd still be pining for you all the time-'

'That's what you think,' returned Sir Zheng. He had decided to throw caution to the winds. 'Not now she won't, now that she's carrying your child!'

At this Green let out a great cry, buried her face in her hands, and ran down towards the sea. Doublet followed her and held her hand.

'You promised me you'd never tell anyone!' cried Green.

'I'm sick to death of her!' said Sir Zheng. 'I've had enough of her. Ever since she spent the night with you in Yangzhou, and got herself pregnant, she does nothing but think about you, talk about

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you, dream about you. . . . Honestly, I've had enough of it! That's the truth!

Green's face went from bright red to deathly pale.

'Now you're telling them everything}.' she wailed.

Trinket was in seventh heaven.

'Right then! Oh well, in that case, you'd better just bugger off hadn't you, you stinking little tamardy dog'turd!'

Thanks! Thank you, thank you!' Sir Zheng hastened to reply. 'I wish the two of you many years of happiness together. I'll bring you my wedding present some other time.'

He picked himself slowly up off the ground. Trinket spat a great noisy gob of phlegm on the sand right beside the Insufferable.

'And don't forget' I want my money, but I never want to set eyes on your ugly mug ever again, as long as I live!'

Secretly he was thinking to himself

‘I promised my Shifu today to let him go, alive. But that won’t stop me from sending someone else later to kill him and avenge my Shifu’s death. I just won’t send a Triad. That way no one will be able to accuse my Shifu of having been disloyal to his precious Zheng Family!’

Meanwhile Sir Zheng had roused Feng Xifan (who had also been recovering from the darts), and with his three surviving retainers staggered down to the sea to find a boat.

‘Lodge Master!’

Trinket heard a voice whisper in his ear. He turned to see the Triad Brother Feng Jizhong.

‘Lodge Master! Just because you promised the Helmsman not to kill this man, that does not mean other people can’t kill him. Me, for example. The Helmsman wasn’t speaking to me!’

Trinket held his hand up to his ear.

‘I’m afraid I really can’t hear what you’re saying! Must be all those cannon’balls falling all over the place! All those guns going off! I must be going deaf! Anyway, whatever it is you’re planning to do, you’d better just go ahead and do it!’

The message was clear enough.

‘And another thing, Lodge Master,’ said Feng Jizhong. ‘Once I’ve killed him, once he’s out of the way, you can take the credit for killing the Helmsman!’

This time Trinket abandoned any pretence of being deaf.

Take the credit for it’ What on earth do you mean”

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‘I mean with the Emperor. You know that there are three men the Emperor wants to get rid of. The first, of course, is Satrap Wu. The second is the Helmsman.

Well, we all know that you didn't do it. And I'm going to do what's necessary to avenge the Helmsman's death. But the Emperor doesn't know all of that. If he can be made to think that you're the one who killed the Helmsman, you'll have done exactly what he wanted you to do in the first place! You'll be back in his favour!'

Trinket stared at Feng in utter astonishment. Something had suddenly dawned on him.

The Informer Revealed

'So it was you!' Trinket thought to himself.

For some time he had been wondering who had betrayed him to Kang Xi. That day in

the Library, the Emperor had suddenly seemed to know everything about his Triad

identity and his Triad activities, and had even learned by heart all those secret Triad verses. But on the other hand, he seemed to be quite unaware of Trinket's connection with the Mystic Dragons, and of his having laid hands on all eight of the Sutras. This all pointed to the traitor being a Triad. A Triad close to Trinket. But Trinket had until now been reluctant to believe that any one of his Triad friends could be capable of such base treachery.

Of course it had been Feng! That evening of the bombardment, he had been absent.

He clearly had inside information, and knew it was going to happen. And yet of all the Triads, he had been the least likely suspect. He had always been so silent and straightforward, a good fighter, a man who seemed a simple-hearted peasant. Almost any of the others would have been a more likely candidate' the talkative, tradesman-like Butcher Qian; the subtle, crafty Apothecary Xu; the competent, professional operator Gao Yanchao; the impulsive, wine-loving Father

Obscurus; the courageous man-of-the-world Su Gang; even Li Lishi, who was starting to show his age; or the sharp-tongued Tertius Qi Qingbiao- almost any one of them had seemed a possibility. But he had never suspected Feng Jizhong.

And then he remembered that on the same occasion Doublet had also been absent.

Should he be suspecting her too' Surely not. That would be a terrible blow. He thought a little more about it,

and came to the conclusion that Feng had taken her with him precisely because he

knew about the imminent bombardment, and he knew how much Trinket

cared for her.

He was afraid of one day being held responsible for her death.

All of this flashed through Trinket's mind in a matter of seconds. He decided to test Feng out'

'By the way, Brother Feng, I've always wanted to thank you for saving Doublet's life that night they bombarded my house.'

Feng's face fell.

'How . . . did . . . you . . .'

Trinket gave a little laugh.

'We don't need to have any secrets from each other. The Emperor told me everything.'

Feng knew that Trinket was very close to the Emperor. It seemed plausible enough that he should know.

'But why didn't you obey the Emperor's orders' Why were you so obstinate" he asked.

Every word he said proved to Trinket that his hypothesis was correct. Feng had been the Emperor's informant.

'Now you have a perfect opportunity to set everything to rights with His Majesty,' Feng continued. (He was even beginning to talk like a Manchu creep, Trinket thought to himself.) 'I said there were three men the Emperor wanted to be rid of. The third is this man Zheng Keshuang's father, the man who rules Taiwan and calls himself Prince Zheng. Take his son to Peking, and the Emperor may be able to use him to put pressure on the father to abandon Taiwan.'

So Feng had everything nicely worked out, thought Trinket. The slimy traitor! And what had he received from the Emperor for his pains' Trinket could not resist asking him outright. Feng had no hesitation in informing him'

'As a matter of fact, His Majesty made me a Captain in the Chinese Regiment of Guards,' he replied, obviously thrilled at the appointment.

‘My heartfelt congratulations!’ replied Trinket, thinking to himself that a piddling little rank like that was more or less the measure of this rat.

‘His Majesty was always talking about you, Colonel,’ said Feng. (Now that they were in each other’s confidence, he need no longer keep up the charade of calling him Lodge Master, he thought.)

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‘He would so very much like to see you back in Peking. I’m sure you’d be forgiven straight away, and probably promoted again!’

‘And no doubt you’d be made a Major!’

‘I should just be pleased to see His Majesty happy!’

‘And to lick His Imperial Arse!’ thought Trinket to himself, growing angrier by the second. ‘And to think I always took you for an honest soul! You little Emperor’s’cock’sucking creep of a turtle traitor!’

Feng continued

‘As I see it, the best plan by far is as follows. Now that Chen Jinnan is dead,’ (no Helmsman now, no need to mess about) ‘you’re the obvious person to be his

successor. Once you’re Helmsman, you can call a grand meeting of all the Lodge

Masters from North, South, East, and West, and all the most important Triad Brothers. Then, when you’ve got everyone together in one place, we can strike! It’ll be perfect!’

Feng’s plan was exactly what Kang Xi had wanted Trinket to do in the first place. However much he liked the idea of seeing his old friend Misty again, he knew now that it would always be on the same terms’ he would always be expected

to help him wipe out the Triads. And on that score, he was totally incapable of taking Feng Jizhong’s road. No, there was only one solution for the Feng problem. And that lay within the little metal casket containing his remaining poisoned darts.

‘Interesting idea,’ said Trinket, knowing that he had to keep talking so as not to arouse Feng’s suspicions. For the time being, Feng still saw him as an accomplice in treason. ‘But I’m not absolutely sure that it will work.

Incidentally, where has Sir Zheng got to’ What’s he up to now”

Feng fell for it. Even as he turned to look towards the sea, Trinket swivelled his chest round, took aim, and was about to release the trigger when Doublet walked towards him and stepped right between himself and Feng.

At that very moment, Feng saw Sir Zheng and his companions standing over by the

cliff. They were not ‘up to’ anything. He immediately suspected that Trinket’s question was a decoy, swung round, and grabbed hold of Doublet.

‘Lord Wei!’ he cried. ‘Raise your hands!’ Doublet was his human shield. He had already seen Trinket use the deadly darts on Sir Zheng and Feng Xifan’ he was taking no chances.

Su Quan, Fang Yi, Green, and the others came running over. Holding Doublet with one hand, Feng thrust his sword at Trinket’s throat.

‘None of you move!’

The womenfolk had no idea of what had passed between Brother Feng and Trinket.

They imagined that the disagreement had something to do with Brother Feng wanting to kill Sir Zheng, and thereby avenge the Helmsman.

Feng now moved behind Trinket and pulled the dagger out of his boot, pressing it into the small of his back. Trinket knew that the blade would cut clean through his magic waistcoat.

‘All of you turn around and drop your weapons!’

The women all obeyed.

Feng now called over the six other Triad Brothers, who were equally unaware of

the recent turn of events. With his right elbow, he dug into the small of Trinket’s back, immobilizing his Great Mallet Point; and with his left hand he swung his sword and, a few well timed and devastating slices later, the six fellow Triads all lay dead on the beach. His swordsmanship was both precise and

ferocious. The women watched helplessly as he ran amok. They stared in disbelief

at the butchered bodies, and at the blood draining into the sand, and cried out in terror and alarm.

Brother Feng was now left with the seven women and Trinket to deal with. If he could get Trinket and Sir Zheng onto a boat and take them with him to Peking to

present to the Emperor, then his own future career would be assured. The seven

women he could leave behind on the island. It was impossible to know how things

would turn out in the end between the Emperor and Trinket, and he thought it

prudent not to alienate Trinket too much by killing them all.

He had reckoned without the Princess. She was not used to being ordered around.

She reached down to the ground for her sword, and raised it to swing at Brother

Feng's head. Three times she swung. Three times he parried. To any other woman,

he would have shown no mercy. But he found it hard to be ruthless with the sister of the Emperor, the sister of the very man to whom he had so recently shifted his allegiance. He tried to dart out of her way.

'Stand still where you are, you putrid turtle!' shouted the fearless Princess.

'Let me split your nasty head in two! If I can't do it today, I'll ask my brother to do it for me when he next sees you!'

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As she spoke she kept on swinging her sword from side to side, hacking at Feng wildly, and he kept dancing to one side and then to the other, in order to avoid her. One of her fiercest blows was particularly ill-aimed, and Feng could see that she was about to slice heavily into Trinket's shoulder. He himself was in mid-leap at the time, and he lunged out with his left foot and managed to kick Trinket to the ground. At this point Doublet dashed forward, grabbed her master,

and ran. Brother Feng went after them both. Doublet was greatly slowed down by

the weight of Trinket, and he soon caught up with them.

Trinket himself was still unable to move.

'Put me down!' he whispered. 'I must try to use my darts!'

But there was no time. Doublet, in desperation, tried throwing Trinket beyond Brother Feng's reach. Feng ran forward and was about to pounce on him when he

heard an explosion behind, and was himself thrown headfirst forwards. His body

twitched once or twice, then he lay motionless on the sand.

Trinket managed to heave himself up slowly from the ground. He was unscathed. He

saw Doublet standing in the midst of a cloud of smoke. In her hand she held a gun-the Russian pistol Beggar Wu had given her months before, when they had sworn their everlasting oath, and had become brother and sister. It was one of a

pair that the Satrap had originally given to Trinket. Brother Feng's kungfu skills were of no avail against it.

Doublet was herself in a state of shock, and trembling from the explosion. She let the gun fall to the ground.

Trinket staggered over and stood above Brother Feng, releasing another shower of

the poisoned darts. But as they entered Feng's body, there was not the slightest motion or response. Brother Feng was already well and truly dead.

A cheer went up from the ladies, and they came crowding round. There was a lot

of explaining to be done, and Trinket did his best to tell them the whole story.

Doublet had never for a moment suspected Brother Feng. For her, he was just a trusty Triad like all the others. Little had she guessed what dark plans he was hatching.

And now he was dead. Looking at the gun lying on the ground, Doublet found herself thinking of the man who had given it to her in the first place' Beggar Wu, himself now dead. As she thought, it dawned on her that the real reason why

he had wanted to form

such a special bond with her was so that she would acquire a higher status in the eyes of the world. She would no longer be a maid, but the sworn sister of a General, and therefore eligible one day to marry Trinket-something Wu himself wanted to happen. What a big-hearted man he had been! An eccentric, an idealist.

She wept at the thought of his kindness, and of his untimely end.

An Unusual IOU

Doublet promptly set about releasing Trinket's points. Trinket noticed that Sir Zheng and his companions were still at the water's edge, about to embark on their little skiff.

That man killed my Shifu! I can't just let him go scot-free, as if nothing had ever happened!' he thought indignantly to himself. Pulling out his dagger, he went running towards them.

'Wait there a minute!' he cried.

Sir Zheng blanched with terror.

'Lodge Master Wei!' he stammered. 'You promised to let me go!'

'I promised not to kill you,' replied Trinket, gloating over Sir Zheng's discomfiture. 'I never promised not to hack off one of your legs!'

Feng Xifan would have leapt to Sir Zheng's defence, but he was still suffering from the effects of the poisoned darts, and could barely move. Sir Zheng fell to his knees, trembling like a helpless child.

'Lodge Master Wei! If you do that, I'm sure I'll die! And then-'

Trinket shook his head.

'You'll survive, don't you worry! You owe me a lot of money, don't forget. A hundred times ten thousand taels' a million! I always make sure to keep my creditors alive! And as for offering me my own wife, pregnant with my own child, as security for your loan- I'm afraid I don't think very much of that idea!'

By now Su Quan and the others were standing behind him and providing orchestrated moral support. Even Sir Zheng, in his confused state, could see that it didn't make sense to offer Trinket his own wife.

'Well, what do you suggest instead?'

'What I suggest is this' I hack off one of your arms, and one of your legs, and then when you've paid up the one million, you can

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have them back! How about that?'

He was enjoying himself. Sir Zheng was desperate.

'But just now you said that if I let you have Green, outright, that would make us quits!'

Trinket shook his head impressively.

'Sorry, things have changed since then. I was being stupid. I almost fell for your trick. I'm a lot smarter now. No, I think we may have a very interesting new business proposition here, a little bit along the lines of your original one, only changing one or two details. What I suggest first of all is that 'sell you your mother- we'll call that one million; and then your father-that'll cost you another million; and then your father's mother-another million; and your mother's mother-'

'She's dead!' muttered Sir Zheng.

'So' I'll sell you her corpse, then. And since she's already dead, we'll knock off twenty per cent. We'll just call it eight hundred thousand for the old lady, and I'll throw in the coffin free!'

Sir Zheng could see this very interesting, not to say highly ingenious, new business proposition of Trinket's going on for ever, and eventually including every one of his paternal and maternal ancestors. Even at thirty and forty per cent discounts, he would never be able to afford Trinket's asking price.

'I can't afford it!' he wailed.

Trinket was feeling generous.

'Very well then, I'll let you off that last one. We'll just stick to the first three items. That comes to three million taels exactly. Now, how would you like to pay'

'Yes!' chipped in the Princess with a broad grin on her face. 'What about payment' Now! In cash!'

'I haven't a penny on me!' wailed Sir Zheng.

'In that case, I'll have to have the goods back!' declared the merciless Trinket. 'That'll be, let's see' your father, your mother, your grandmother-and your mother's mother's corpse, plus the coffin. I've changed my mind about dropping that last item.'

Sir Zheng looked desperately at Green. But she was standing at a distance, with her back to him, as if she totally disowned him. Sir Zheng frantically kowtowed to Trinket.

'Lodge Master Wei, I know I did wrong to kill Marshal Chen, and that I deserve to die! But I beg you to spare my life! Whatever I owe you, I swear I'll find a way of paying it!'

Trinket had already vented a considerable amuu^.."

on the abject creature. He relented slightly.

Til need some sort of IOU.'

'Qi course!' Sir Zheng was ecstatic. Turning to one of his guards' 'Bring me some paper and a writing'brush!'

Such things were not to be found on that desolate beach. But the guard had an idea, and tore off a strip of his own shirt.

'There are a lot of dead bodies over there' he said. 'We can soak this in blood and you can use it to write with.'

He went off to drag over the nearest corpse, which happened to be that of Brother Feng Jizhong. But in that very instant, Trinket reached out and seized hold of Sir Zheng's right wrist. There was a flash of steel as his dagger sliced off the top joint of the index finger. Sir Zheng howled with pain.

'Write with that!' ordered Trinket.

Sir Zheng was shuddering with pain, and could hardly coordinate his movements at all.

‘Take your time!’ said Trinket reassuringly. ‘But whatever you do don’t let the blood dry or I’ll have to chop off another joint. Or another whole finger.’

Sir Zheng gritted his teeth, ripped off a piece of his own shirt’tail, and with the bleeding stump of his finger wrote on it’

T owe Trinket the sum of three million, eight hundred thousand taels exactly. Zheng Keshuang.’

He was almost fainting from the pain. He cowered kneeling and trembling on the ground.

‘Tut tut!’ mocked Trinket. ‘For such a well’bred young man, your handwriting leaves a lot to be desired!’

He took the IOU and handed it to Doublet for safe’keeping. Then he laughed out loud, and gave Sir Zheng a good kick in the face, which sent him reeling across the sand.

‘Now get the fuck out of here!’

Sir Zheng’s guards hurried over to help him up from the ground and bandage his wound. Then they carried him and Feng Xifan onto the skiff, and rowed forlornly out into the open sea. They had no choice’ Shi Lang and the few surviving members of his company had by now sailed away in the large junk, and the only other seaworthy boat available belonged to Trinket, and anyway had had its rudder and sails removed.

Trinket watched them, gloating over their humiliation. The

Pottuck Island Idyll

When he had ceased weeping, he lay down, exhausted, on the beach. So much had happened in such a short space of time. Although he had never suspected Feng

Jizhong of being a traitor, he felt a huge sense of relief now that the man was dead. He must have had an intuition that someone meant him harm. Of his other

enemies, none were left on the island. They had all either died, or fled. It had been a very eventful day. There was a strange feeling of peace.

Su Quan gently massaged his back, especially the points that Feng Jizhong had closed.

The ever rippling waves reflected the light of the setting sun. It was a spectacle of extraordinary beauty, like the glistening coils of a thousand snakes, constantly writhing on the water's surface. His womenfolk all sat down near him on the sand. In a matter of minutes he was snoring his head off. And not long after, they too were all fast asleep. ' i

Rules for Trinket's Harem

Fang Yi was the first to awake, about an hour later. She set off down to the other end of the beach to the tent that had once served as Trinket's headquarters, during the earlier campaign to destroy the Mystic Dragons on nearby Snake Island. There she prepared an evening meal. The inside of the tent

was illuminated by two pine torches. They all sat down in a circle and ate their food, and afterwards Fang Yi and Doublet cleared it all away.

Trinket surveyed the seven of them' Su Quan, Fang Yi, the Princess, Zeng Rou, the Little Countess, Doublet, and Green. Each of them had her charms, her individual qualities' more beautiful to look at, or more tender, or more vivacious, or more graceful. He felt a sense of joy and contentment, of peace and fulfilment. It was a feeling quite different from the one he had experienced that hectic and memorable night in the big bed in the Yangzhou whore'house. This

was such a tranquil, almost bucolic scene. Potluck Island' the place seemed destined to be his earthly paradise!

'Here we all are, together at last!' he declared euphorically. 'Long Life and Blessings to all of us!'

Trinket!' protested Su Quan. 'That's not in very good taste! I never want to hear that slogan again, as long as I live!' 'I'm sorry!' said Trinket abjectly.

His euphoria was short-lived. He soon found himself reflecting, not for the first time, that perhaps, apart from the seven beautiful women with whom it was

now peopled, the island had rather little to recommend it. It was not really such a paradise after all. It lacked most of the pleasures and amenities that had made him happy in the past' gambling dens, theatricals, storytellers, good food, yummy cakes, and so on. The list was endless. And none of the things on it were to be had here. This was obviously going to be a major drawback. Potluck might not prove to be such a lucky place after all. The trouble was, only big bustling cities like Peking and Yangzhou could provide the sort of entertainment that he craved. And in the present circumstances, such places were extremely dangerous for a wanted criminal like himself.

Thinking of Yangzhou inevitably made him think of his mother.

'There's one person missing here tonight!' he declared. 'My mum!'

'Where is she?' asked one of the girls, innocently. He duly replied with a sad sigh'

'A long, long way from here. At Vernal Delights, in Yangzhou.'

The mention of that den of sin brought a maidenly flush to a number of faces. The only one among them who had not been there with Trinket on that celebrated (and productive) occasion was the Princess.

That place" she piped up. 'You've talked about it so often, and you always said you wanted to take me there with you one day!'

Fang Yi laughed.

'He was having you on. It's a very bad place.' 'Why?' asked the Princess. 'What's bad about it' Have you been there' Why are you all looking at each other like that' Have I missed out on something"

Fang Yi masked a smile. The Princess put her arm round the Little Countess.

'Sister dear, be nice' you tell me!'

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The Little Countess blushed.

‘It’s ... a whore’house.’

‘A whore’house!’ Why would he and I want to go there’ What the tamardy hell would we do in a whore’house” exclaimed the perplexed Princess. ‘I thought that

was where men went on their own to have a good time.’

Fang Yi laughed.

‘Don’t take any notice of him. He’s always saying stupid things like that!’

Trinket was listening to all of this with a bemused expression on his face. That night in Yangzhou, when he’d snuggled up under that big quilt with seven women,

the one difference had been that in the place of the Princess, he’d had her vicious mother the Old Whore. True, the Princess was every bit as troublesome a

person as her mother, but at least she was a lot younger, and a lot prettier and sexier, and nothing like as devious and sinister. Trinket found himself breathing a sigh of relief. Life was so unpredictable, he reflected. One should try to be content with what one had.

Night fell as Trinket continued to philosophize silently to himself, surrounded by his seven wives. There remained the all’important and pressing question of which of his beauties was to spend the night with him. Fang Yi deferred to the Little Countess on the grounds of her princely blood. The Little Countess deferred to Doublet, on the grounds that she had fought with Trinket though thick and thin for so long. Doublet blushed and threatened to leave altogether, but Fang Yi held her back and hugged her. It was a touching scene.

Finally, Su Quan, the Elder Sister of the harem, suggested that Trinket should decide. But by now his thoughts were elsewhere.

Tomorrow we must give the Helmsman a proper burial,’ he said. They were all deeply impressed (and enormously surprised) by this evidence of devotion on his

part. They were equally taken aback by his next remark’

‘And as for choosing which one of you is to sleep with me, that’s easy! We’ll roll the dice!’

He took out his dice and threw them on the table.

The lucky winner spends the night with me!’

‘Big head!’ Needless to say, it was the Princess who said this. ‘What makes you think it’s such a big deal spending the night with you! [Mucky, I’d call it!’

Trinket laughed.

‘Maybe you’re right! Anyway, who’s rolling first’ But our history does not narrate the outcome of that first wild night on the island. It simply records that from that day onwards, this method was indeed the method formally adopted by Trinket and his seven wives to resolve this important question.

Modus Vivendi

The following morning the eight of them buried the Helmsman’s body, and there was a renewed outpouring of grief.

The only exception to this was the Princess, who still in her heart considered him a rebel. But even she forced herself to kneel by his grave and go through the motions. After all, she thought to herself, I may once have been a Manchu Princess. But what am I now? Just plain Mrs Wei, of Potluck Island. Just one among this man’s seven wives. Doublet is more devoted than I am; Green is prettier; Su Quan is a better fighter; Fang Yi is smarter; the Little Countess is purer and a better person; Zeng Rou is so sweet and childlike. I’d better watch my step, or I’ll end up losing favour in the eyes of my new Lord and Master! And then he’ll fix it so that I lose at dice every night!

As they returned from burying the Helmsman, they noticed to their horror that their boat, which they had moored in the bay, their one and only means of leaving the island, had disappeared. They searched the horizon, but saw nothing, nothing but gulls dipping and circling between the blue of the sea and the blue of the sky. Su Quan ran up to the top of the cliff, from where she had a view all round the island. Not a sign of a boat in any direction. Fang Yi ran back to the cave, and sure enough everything had been taken’ sails, oars, rudder, everything. They were stranded.

It must have been the boatman, they decided, who had made off with the boat under cover of darkness. They sat down to discuss what best to do, how they could plan for the future. Shi Lang might return with reinforcements, to capture Trinket and take him away. Sir Zheng might return to try and take back Green. At this suggestion, Green blushed fiercely, and swore that if he ever tried to take her back, she would kill herself. Trinket was more pleased to hear her say this than he would have been to learn of the arrival of ten ships! It seemed that she was finally his. After all this time. He threw his arms around her.

‘Darling Green!’ he cried. ‘Don’t be afraid. He’ll never come back. He wouldn’t dare! Don’t forget, he owes me three million, eight hundred thousand taels of silver!’

It was Su Quan who finally took the lead, and made one or two sensible decisions. They found a large cave in a thickly forested part of the island, which they thoroughly cleaned out and transformed into a reasonable sort of a dwelling. They decided to abandon the old bivouac on the shore again. That way, if anyone did come looking for them by sea, they would assume that they had already left the island.

At first they lived in daily apprehension of some new danger. But as the weeks and months went by, and they saw not a single stranger arrive on the island, not even a stray fisherman, they began to relax a little. No doubt Sir Zheng had been drowned at sea. And probably Shi Lang had decided to stay out of trouble.

They caught fish. They trapped wild game. They shot birds with bows and arrows, and gathered the wild fruit that grew in abundance on the island. Their days were busy, and undisturbed.

The Seasons of Potluck Island

Autumn came and went, and soon it was winter. It grew colder every day. And the three expectant mothers grew bigger. Fang Yi and Doublet were busy making warm winter clothes out of the hides of wild animals, for the eight of them, and for the three babies that would be arriving soon.

One day, there was a sudden, heavy fall of snow. In a matter of hours, the whole island became glisteningly white. They had made preparations, and their cave was well’stocked with provisions and firewood.

One evening the snow stopped falling and a strong wind got up. It came whistling through the cracks in their cave door. Doublet put some more wood on the fire, and Trinket suggested the usual evening game of dice. It was the Little Countess

who lost, and who was therefore selected.

Just at that moment, they thought they heard a voice carried faintly on the wind. Su Quan had already fallen asleep, but even she started up. They all exchanged startled glances, and the blood drained from their faces. The Little Countess snuggled close to Fang Yi by the fire.

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Minutes later, they heard it again. But this time it was loud and clear-a huge voice, bellowing'

'Laurie! Laurie! Where are you' Misty misses you!'

Trinket stood up.

That's Misty!' he cried, and his voice trembled. 'He's come to find me!'

'And who is Misty' asked the Princess.

Trinket was trembling from head to foot. The only person in the world (apart from Trinket) who knew of Kang Xi's secret name was Kang Xi himself. Something very weird was going on. Most probably Kang Xi was dead, and this was his ghost, come all the way to Potluck Island to find him. Tears started to his eyes, and he rushed to the entrance of the cave.

'Misty!' he yelled out into the night. 'It's me, Laurie! I'm here! I'm coming!'

The same words echoed back'

'Laurie! Laurie! Where are you' Misty misses you!'

It sounded like a giant's voice, or, to be more precise, like the voices of a thousand men all shouting the same thing but shouting it with one huge voice.

It

must surely be a ghost, thought Trinket, the ghost of Kang Xi.

All his life Trinket had been frightened of ghosts. But if this was his old friend, he must go and see him, come what may! He ran out into the cold night, in the direction of the great voice.

'Misty! Don't go! I'm on my way!'

The snow had frozen hard, and he slipped with every step he took. But he pulled himself up again every time and stumbled on. He finally rounded a corner in the path and came into view of the shore. There were fires lit down the whole length of the beach. They were like stars in the sky. There were literally hundreds upon hundreds of men down there, standing in serried ranks, with lanterns in their hands.

Trinket let out a cry of fear, and turned back. But it was too late. He had been seen and heard. A man came running towards him out of the throng.

‘Colonel Wei! We’ve found you at last!’

Trinket knew it was hopeless to flee. So many men, on such a tiny island. They were bound to find him sooner or later. Besides, the man’s voice seemed familiar. He took a deep breath and turned to face him.

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‘Colonel Wei!’ the voice continued. ‘We’ve all missed you greatly. Thank heavens we’ve finally found you!’

The man seemed to speak with genuine joy. He lifted high his torch and came hurrying towards Trinket, who finally recognized him as his old subordinate, Wang Jinbao. Wang had helped him once before in a tight spot. Trinket was glad to see him.

‘Friend Wang, what a clever ruse! It must have been the Emperor’s idea!’

By now the womenfolk had arrived. Trinket turned to the Princess.

‘It seems that your brother the Emperor has finally found us!’

Wang Jinbao knelt when he realized it was the Princess.

‘I suppose His Majesty wants us all to go back’ she said.

‘As a matter of fact, Your Highness, no. His Majesty did not even know that you were here,’ replied Wang.

The Princess looked down at her (by now) very large stomach and flushed.

Wang turned to Trinket.

‘I have been at sea for four months, and called in at over eighty islands looking for you. It is such a joy to have found you, Colonel!’

Trinket protested that he was no longer in anyone’s service, whether military or civil, and that such titles were quite out of order. Wang replied that before he said anything further, Trinket should hear the Emperor’s Edict. He called forward one of his aides, and as the man approached, Trinket recognized him as

Wen Youfang, his old gambling friend, the eunuch from Kang Xi’s Upper Library.

Wen proceeded to read out the Edict.

Two Tamardy Edicts

‘This Edict is marked Highly Confidential,’ announced Wen. ‘All others must absent themselves, save the recipient, Lord Wei.’

Trinket fell to his knees, and kowtowed before the bearer of the Imperial Communication, and Wang Jinbao and his men immediately withdrew to a discreet

distance. The womenfolk all did likewise, except for the Princess, who registered a protest as the Emperor’s sister. But when Eunuch Wen informed her

that he was under the strictest orders to communicate the Edict to Lord Wei, and

to Lord Wei only, on pain of death, and the probable

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execution of his own entire family, she relented and went with the others.

‘His Majesty commands me to communicate these two Edicts to you personally. You are to receive them standing.’

Trinket rose to his feet, and received in both hands the first Imperial’yellow envelope handed to him by the eunuch. He opened it, and unfolded the sheet of

yellow paper it contained. On it was a series of six pictures. The first showed two boys wrestling on the floor' this was clearly supposed to be Misty and Laurel, the boyhood sparring partners. The second showed Oboi, in the midst of a crowd of young eunuchs, lurching towards Kang Xi, with Trinket in the act of stabbing him. The third showed a young monk carrying an older monk, running, hotly pursued by a group of Lamas, armed with swords' this was clearly supposed to be a depiction of the time he had saved the Old Emperor, alias Brother Wayward, in the Wutai Mountains. The fourth showed a Nun dressed in white, descending from the ceiling to attack Kang Xi, and Trinket defending him and receiving a sword wound. The fifth showed Trinket in the Palace of Maternal Tranquillity, trampling the Old Whore on the ground, and propping up the True Empress Dowager in bed. The sixth and last picture showed Trinket with a Russian Princess, a Mongol Prince, and an old Tibetan Lama, dragging a big whiskered gentleman (clearly Satrap Wu) along by the pigtail' a reference to Trinket's 'great diplomatic coup' in breaking up the Russian'Mongolian'Tibetan axis which Satrap Wu had been trying to create against the Manchus. On the whole, Kang Xi had done a good job of the pictures. He personally had never set eyes on Satrap Wu, Galdan, Sangge, or Sophia, so it was not surprising if they hardly resembled the originals at all. But the others were very lifelike. Especially Trinket, whose lazy, mischievous personality had been captured to perfection by the Imperial brush. There was not a single word on the sheet of paper, but Trinket understood the meaning exactly. These were his Six Great Achievements. The youthful sparring hardly counted as an 'achievement', but Kang Xi clearly had fond memories of it. And several of his 'minor achievements', such as the destruction of Snake Island, and the capture of the Old Whore after her escape, had not been included.

Trinket stared at the pictures a long while, deep in thought. Tears started to his eyes.

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'If he was prepared to go to all this trouble, it must mean he has forgiven me!'

Eunuch Wen waited patiently before enquiring'

‘My Lord, have you "perused" the Edict sufficiently’

‘I have.’

Wen now opened the second yellow envelope, and took out another sheet of yellow paper.

‘I will now read the text of the Confidential Edict itself,’ he announced. He unfolded the second sheet of paper, cleared his throat, and began’

‘Laurie! Tamardy! Where the popping hell have you got to’ I’ve missed you like anything, damn it! You really are the most filthy, stinking, putrid turtle, to go and forget your old chum!’*

‘I never forgot you’ mumbled Trinket. ‘Never.’

Eunuch Wen paused for effect before continuing’

‘You’ve disobeyed me; you refused to follow my orders and take your Shifu’s life. You ran away with my sister! Tamardy! But I’ll still forgive you everything, if you just jolly well surrender and come back to Peking. I’ve already built you a new palace, and it’s much grander than your old one. And another thing’ I’m getting married! I really want you to be here for the party.’

At the word ‘party’, Trinket’s eyes lit up. There were not many parties on Potluck Island.

‘That’s it!’ he cried. ‘I’m on my way out of here!’

Wen continued to read’

‘But I must insist that from now on you obey me. Otherwise I’ll chop your head off. I really will. Now that your Shifu’s dead, there’s nothing to stop you from dealing with those Triads. I want the lot of them wiped out. I mean it! The lot of them! Then I’ll send you off to fight Satrap Wu. And you can marry my sister.

I’ll make you a proper Prince, I’ll make you richer and more powerful than you’ve ever dreamed of being. I’m your friend, Laurie. And I’m your Shifu-remember’ Holy Sage and Onion! A man’s word is his wand-remember’ So just bugger on back up here, will you!’

* Our author notes that this is certainly the one and only verifiable occasion in the entire recorded annals of Chinese history that an occupant of the Dragon Throne has been known to use the vulgar expressions 'tamardy!' and 'old chum!'

in a formal Edict.

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Wen had finished declaiming the Imperial document.

'Did you understand it all, Lord Wei'

'Every word' replied Trinket.

Wen held the sheet of paper in the flame of his lantern, and set the sacred document on fire. Trinket watched as Misty's Imperial excursion into the vernacular turned to ash. He was deep in thought.

'How can I possibly do what he asks' Turn on my own friends' Why, then I'd be a traitor, no better than the Satrap, or Feng Jizhong. But if I refuse to go back, who knows what the Emperor will do!'

He put the question to Wen'

'And if I won't come back with you, what are your orders' To take me by force' To kill me''

Wen lookly deeply shocked.

'I cannot believe that Lord Wei is even contemplating the possibility of disobeying the Edict!'

'Just answer my question, will you'' said Trinket.

Wen scratched his head.

'I really don't know.'

Trinket walked over to where Wang Jinbao was standing.

'Wang, old friend, His Majesty orders me to return to Peking. But I really can't. I mean, look at Her Highness the Princess, she's going to have her baby

any day now. I can't possibly leave her!'

Wang replied'

'My orders were simply to find you. And Wen Goong'goong's orders are to deliver the Edict. That is all.'

'My friend' said Trinket, in a somewhat uncharacteristic fit of honesty. 'I want to tell you the truth. His Majesty wants me to go back to Peking to help him wipe out the Triads. But the trouble is, I'm a Triad Lodge Master myself. I can't possibly turn against my own friends and kill them. I'd rather kill myself.'

As a matter of fact, Wang already knew all of this. And he had nothing but respect for Trinket's decision. He nodded his head gravely. To sell one's friends for the sake of one's own advancement was beneath contempt.

'Do nothing rash, Colonel' he said. 'Remember your friends. We all think of you.'

Trinket shook him warmly by the hand.

Then I can count on you to take a message to the Emperor, that I am desperately sorry, but I can't obey his command"

'You can count on me.'

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'Excellent!' cried Trinket. 'So much for business. Now let's have a game of dice. Tamardy, it's been an age since I had a decent game! There's no one I can play with properly on this wretched island!'

Wang was almost as much of a compulsive gambler as Trinket, and agreed willingly. He ordered some of his men to drag a flat stone over beside one of the bigger fires, then he sat down to play with Trinket. Six soldiers stood around them with lanterns raised aloft, to illuminate the proceedings. It was not long before Wen Goong'goong and one or two of the junior officers joined in

the game, which lasted well into the early hours. By that time Trinket had won heavily, and was feeling very happy with himself. He looked up to see that three

of his women-the Princess, Green, and the Little Countess-had fallen asleep by the fire, while the four others were struggling to stay awake. He felt a little guilty at having kept them up all night. There was still thick snow on the ground, and they must have been freezing.

‘Here, friend Wang.’ He pushed his big pile of winnings across the stone ‘table’. ‘Distribute this among your men.’

Trinket had taken the money off them in the first place, and they were beginning to feel the pinch. This impulsive generosity on his part (for which Trinket had always been famous) cheered them up no end.

Wang gave orders for some of the men to row back to the ship and bring supplies ashore for Lord Wei and his lady’s friends’ grain, meat, wine, and all manner of crockery, chopsticks, tables and chairs, and sundry items of cooking equipment. He also sent off a sizeable detail to erect a few cabins in the forest. In a few days, Potluck Island had been transformed into a considerably more comfortable living environment, and Wang felt he could safely leave.

Domestic Details

A fortnight or so later, Green gave birth to a son, and the very next day Su Quan also had a baby boy. It was another month before the Princess gave birth, to a daughter. She was very upset to be the mother of a girl, when the other two had both had boys, and she cried about it for several days. Trinket reassured her, and constantly reminded her that all his life he had preferred girls, and really had little time for boys. In the end she dried her tears, and began to be a little more cheerful.

They were sturdy, lively babies, and their seven ‘mothers’ certainly had plenty of fun learning how to look after them. Trinket was asked to think of names for them. Predictably, he suggested throwing dice.

Mumbling a little improvised prayer, along the lines of ‘Dear God of Gambling, we pray you to give us three fine-sounding names for our children’, Trinket threw the first dice. A Five and a Six, the combination known as the Tiger.

‘My first-born son certainly has a fine name!’ exclaimed Trinket with a merry laugh. Tiger Wei!

The second throw produced a One and a Six, the combination known as the

Mallet.

So the second boy was duly called Mallet Wei. The third throw produced two Twos'

commonly known as the Bench. Trinket was somewhat taken aback. Then he laughed.

'Strange name for our girl! Miss Bench Wei!'

The women were appalled.

'That's horrible!' said the Princess angrily. 'We can't possibly call our daughter Bench! Throw again!'

'You can't just change the Gambling God's chosen names!'

Trinket picked the baby girl up and gave her a little kiss on the cheek.

There's a nice kiss for Miss Bench! See, it's a lovely name really!'

'No it's not!' protested the Princess shrilly. 'She's my daughter, and I absolutely refuse to call her Bench! I refuse!'

She took the dice from Trinket and insisted on throwing them again herself. She

rolled them around in the palm of her hand, mumbling as she did so'

'Dear God of Gambling, give me a pretty name for my little girl, or I'll crush these dice of yours into little pieces!'

This time, you must promise to accept the decision of the God!' declared Trinket.

'I promise.'

She rolled the dice. To her great dismay, she came up with another double Two. The God definitely seemed to have Bench in mind. The Princess howled with disappointment. Su Quan comforted her'

'Don't be sad, sister. We can give her a nice nickname. Since she had a double number, why don't we call her Little Double! That's a bit like Doublet, too.'

UHA!ltKXO

The Princess was slightly mollified by this proposal.

With the three babies, life on Potluck Island became positively jolly. Thanks to Wang Jinbao's provisions, they were now able to live in much greater comfort than before. And as the months went by, and there was no sign of a return visit by the Imperial troops, bearing further Edicts from the Emperor, they all began to feel less threatened.

The summer of the following year, Wang Jinbao did return, this time with a long, formally worded Edict, and a detachment of five hundred soldiers whose mission was to protect the Princess. No mention was made of his previous expedition. But the soldiers brought with them all sorts of stores, and an additional retinue of maids and servants.

Trinket had mixed feelings about this new contingent of Imperial 'mindere'. It was beginning to seem as if he was destined to live out his days on Potluck Island. And that was not a prospect that greatly excited him. He sometimes yearned for the rough and tumble of life as he had lived it in Yangzhou. He yearned to be spanked and scolded. To have a bit of fun.

Earl of Potluck Island

The next expedition arrived in the twelfth month of the same year, under the command this time of Brigadier Zhao Liangdong. They brought the news that Kang

Xi had designated his infant son, Yin Reng, the Heir Apparent, and in honour of

the occasion had declared a General Amnesty. Trinket had been given a new honorary rank, Earl of Potluck Island, Second Class.

Over dinner, Brigadier Zhao reported on the war against Satrap Wu, which was not

proceeding too smoothly. Trinket asked him to take a message back to the Emperor, saying that he, Trinket, was still eager to join in the 'war, and help punish the traitor Wu.

'His Majesty is aware of your devotion to the Throne, Lord Wei, and is himself anxious to enlist your service in this war. But he continues to insist that you must first wipe out the Triad organization. If you still refuse to do so, he asks me to tell you that you'd better get used to the idea of spending the rest of your days here on Potluck Island, fishing and catching turtles!'

Trinket was almost in tears. The five hundred soldiers that had been there ever since the summer were in reality his prison

wall. even his new title seemed like a cruel joke. It was more of a life sentence than a life peerage. He could see no way out of his confinement. The

dinner was called to a premature close. Even Trinket was in no mood for gambling that night. He went back to his room, and sat there moping and staring into space, the occasional tear stealing down his face.

His seven wives tried to cheer him up. He begged Su Quan to think of some means of getting back to the mainland.

‘I can think of nothing at the moment’ she said. ‘We must just be patient, and wait for something to turn up.’

‘I’m fed up!’ cried Trinket petulantly, picking up a teacup and hurling it at the floor. ‘I think I’ll just run away on my own! I don’t want to be some tamardy Potluck Earl cooped up for the rest of my life on this boring dump of an island! I’d rather be a turtle of a waiter working in a whore’house! It’d be a whole lot more fun!’

Days, months, years went by. And for Trinket and his seven wives, life continued uneventfully on the island. Every winter, in the twelfth month, Kang Xi sent a regular expedition with presents for everyone. On one occasion, Trinket received a set of crystal dice, and gambling accessories made from precious stones. At least with his full-time ‘prison’ guard of five hundred, Trinket did not lack for people to gamble with.

Then one year, the usual twelfth month expedition was led by Colonel Sun Sike. Trinket noticed that his old friend was wearing a ruby button on his official cap, and the uniform of a military mandarin of the first rank, second division. He had clearly been promoted, and Trinket congratulated him heartily. Sun hastened to read him an Edict containing the good news that the Satrap and his fellow rebels in Guangdong and Fujian (Shang Zhixin and Geng Jingzhong)-the Three Feudatories as they were known-had finally been defeated. The war was over! Sun Sike, as one of the generals active in the war, had been promoted. And Trinket had been promoted too! From Earl Second Class to Earl First Class. And his first son, Tiger, had been made a Baronet.

Among the presents sent by Kang Xi was the exquisite screen of Dali marble that had once belonged to the Satrap (and that Trinket had once seen in Wu’s study

in
Kunming). It had been one of the Satrap's Three Treasures. And now it
belonged
to Trinket.

During that evening's banquet, Colonel Sun related the course of the war.
Trinket's four deputies-Sun himself, Wang Jinbao,

Zhang Yong, and Zhao Liangdong-had all distinguished themselves in some
way,
especially Zhang Yong, who had been in command of the north'western
provinces of
Gansu and Ningxia, and had successfully routed Wu Sangui's armies as he
marched
south. He had been promoted to an even higher eminence than Trinket, and
was now
a Marquis First Class, with the honorary title of Grand Guardian of the Heir
Apparent. Sun explained that ever since he had been wounded by old Gui that
night, Zhang had been unable to use his leg properly, and could not even ride a
horse. He had been obliged to direct military operations from a sedan chair.
All this talk of military exploits was beginning to make Trinket feel very left
out of things. But he was happy that his friends had done so well.
'And what about Satrap Wu' I hope you managed to give that ugly old turtle a
good tamardy kick up the pants!'
Sun shook his head.

'He just started to lose one battle after another. With each defeat he had to
retreat, and he ended up controlling less and less territory. But even though
things were going so badly for him, he insisted on making himself an emperor,
so

he dressed himself up as one, and sat on a throne, and called himself the First
Emperor of the Shun Dynasty! So we laid into him some more, and finally he
couldn't hold out any longer. After he was dead, they made his grandson the
new

Emperor in Kunming. Old Zhao Liangdong marched his men down to
Kunming, and

inflicted a major defeat on what was left of the Wu forces. Two of the old
Satrap's generals, Xia Guoxiang and Ma Bao, were captured in the fighting and
executed. In the end, the new Emperor took his own life. And then it was all
over.'

Trinket asked what had happened to Chen Yuanyuan, the Peerless Consort, but
Sun

was unable to give him any news. There was no sign of her. Nobody knew if she
had been killed during the fighting, or if she had succeeded in escaping.

After Sun Sike's departure, Trinket felt more cooped up and bored than ever.

He
seemed to be forever sitting on a rock and fishing. And his ten dependants
(seven wives and three children) began to seem like millstones round his neck.
More and more he dreamed of escaping on his own. Of leaving Potluck Island
for
ever.

It was almost the Mid'Autumn Festival, and the weather was still quite hot.
Trinket went fishing, and ended up as usual fretting

about his confinement on the island. He lay down on the rocks with his head on
a
stone, his line idly in one hand, and was dozing off, when suddenly he heard a
voice'

'Your Excellency Lord Wei, the Dragon King requests the pleasure of your
company!'

Trinket was astonished to hear this and gazed out to sea, where the voice
seemed
to be coming from. There, floating on the water, he saw a huge turtle, rearing
its great head. It spoke again'

'The Dragon King of the Eastern Sea finds life lonely and boring in his Crystal
Palace under the waves. He has sent me to request the presence of His
Excellency

Lord Wei at an underwater banquet, to be followed by a watery game of dice.
His

Majesty will be placing bets with precious stones-coral, crystal, and such like-
but ordinary silver taels will be accepted too.'

'Excellent! What fun!' cried Trinket.

The turtle messenger went on to describe the various actors and storytellers
who

would be providing entertainment that night in the Dragon King's palace
beneath

the sea. There would be singsong'girls galore singing 'The Eighteen Touches',
and

others of Trinket's favourite ditties, such as 'The Five Watches of the Night',
or 'The Four Seasons of Love'. The Dragon King had no fewer than seven
princesses, each more beautiful than the last, and they had all been yearning
for a chance to meet the dashing Lord Wei!

‘Wonderful!’ cried Trinket impatiently. ‘Let’s go! What are we waiting for!’

‘Just climb aboard,’ announced the turtle, ‘and we’ll be off.’

In one movement, Trinket was astride the turtle, which parted the waves and plunged down deeper and deeper into the murky depths of the ocean. They were greeted by the Dragon King in person, who led them on into his palace. His royal cousin the Dragon King of the South Sea was also there.

The party began, and a host of guests arrived. There was Pigsy, the fat porcine personification of Greed that Trinket knew from countless plays; there was the Bull Demon King; there were all sorts of great generals and kings of legend; and there was host of grotesque submarine extras.

When they had finished eating, the gambling began. Trinket was banker. And he just kept winning and winning. There was one particular player who could not bear to lose, and started hitting him, boxing him on the ears. Trinket’s head started buzzing.

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Trinket let out a great cry, and as he did so he pulled his line flying in. The hook caught on his neck, and he leapt to his feet in pain. His dream faded away. But even as the dream and its wonderful revelry melted into thin air, an alarming reality took its place, in the form of a loud explosion coming from the sea right in front of him.

CHAPTER 27

In which Trinket travels to Taiwan; and is sent as Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Russians, with Instructions to capture Fort Albazin and negotiate the Treaty of Nerchinsk

The Fall of Taiwan

The boom that woke Trinket from his noonday dream of underwater gambling was the firing of a cannon out at sea. It appeared to have come from a small squadron of

ships, which were making at some speed towards the island, with the wind full in their sails. As he hurried towards the cabins to tell his wives, he was met by the commandant of the island's garrison, who came running towards him excitedly to tell him that the ships, which he had been observing through his telescope, were flying the sun and

moon flag of Taiwan. It looked very much as if Zheng Keshuang was coming back

for his revenge. Trinket told the commandant to put the garrison on the alert and continued on his way to the cabins.

The womenfolk had already come outside to look and had seen the flags. Princess

Ning rather acidly asked Green Girl if she would be taking her Tiger boy with her to Taiwan. But in spite of some banter, everyone was nervous and apprehensive until Su Quan cleverly pointed out that the cannon-fire, which was

continuing at regular intervals, was producing no visible effect but smoke.

'Of course!' said Trinket, laughing. 'They're not bombarding. It's a salute.'

'Salute first, bombardment to follow,' said the Princess, who was sure that this must be Sir Zheng making a comeback. But the commandant now came back to report

that this appeared after all to be a Manchu squadron' a few minutes earlier, as if those on board had suddenly become aware of an oversight, the sun and moon

flags had been struck and the Qing colours run up in their stead.

Su Quan suggested that they must be captured Taiwanese vessels recently taken by

the Manchu forces in a naval engagement. This seemed the likeliest explanation

of their strange behaviour; but Trinket was still a little suspicious and told the commandant that, until the identity and purpose of the squadron had been established, he should allow only a small party from one of the ships to land.

The ships had now dropped anchor and a small boat manned by six or seven sailors

rowed out from one of them towards the shore. A man stood up in their midst and

shouted through a megaphone that Admiral Shi Lang was coming ashore to deliver

an Imperial Edict to Lord Wei of Potluck Island. Trinket hurried down to the shore, and by the time Shi Lang had landed and was standing there to deliver it,

he was already on his knees to hear it read.

It seemed that the Manchu fleet under Shi Lang's command had defeated the Taiwanese fleet near the Pescadores. Shi Lang had gone on to invade the island and Zheng Keshuang, the last ruler of Taiwan, had surrendered without a fight. Taiwan and the Pescadores were now part of the Chinese Empire. In recognition of the contribution Trinket had made towards this great victory by first recommending Shi Lang to his notice, the Emperor was advancing his ennoblement by one degree. He would now, instead of Earl, be Marquis of Potluck Island Second Class and an Honorary Grand Guardian to the Heir Apparent, and his baby son, Baronet Tiger, was to become a Baron.

When Trinket had kowtowed his thanks and was on his feet again, Shi Lang told him that when he had gone back to Peking to report on his victory to the Emperor and hand over Zheng and the other state prisoners whose immunity had been guaranteed in the surrender terms, Kang Xi had reminded him of the debt he owed to Trinket. It was Trinket's recommendation, when he was still living in obscurity, that had led to his attaining the position in which so great an achievement had become possible. And it was Kang Xi's own idea that Shi Lang should be the one to deliver the Edict to Trinket on his island, before returning to Taiwan to supervise the take'over.

Trinket listened to Shi Lang without enthusiasm. His feelings at this moment were, in fact, very mixed. These repeated promotions that the Emperor kept awarding him were meaningless. The island's garrison were supposed to be there for his protection, but he knew full well they were really there to stop him running away. Even if he was made Prince of Potluck Island he would still be a prisoner. He had always hated Sir Zheng, but if Taiwan was taken, it meant that the whole Ming cause that his beloved Helmsman had fought all his life to uphold had been finally defeated. The difference between Chinese and Manchu had originally meant nothing to him, but long association with Chinese patriots like his friends in the Triads had kindled an awareness in him that he belonged to a nation which had been taken over by a foreign race. And when he thought of

Shi

Lang, free and active and covering himself with glory in a big campaign, while he was stuck on this wretched island and bored out of his mind, he felt a pang of jealousy. Still, he had to say something and made a slight effort to be polite. 'Surely you must have had an award for this great achievement' Shi Lang

tried hard to suppress a smirk of satisfaction. 'His Majesty has graciously awarded me a Marquisate Third

Class.'

'Congratulations!' said Trinket.

His own promotion was to a Marquisate Second Class. It occurred to him that the

Emperor must have deliberately made him a grade higher than Shi Lang. Decent of

Misty to have been so considerate he thought, and felt rather pleased.

But then he rememoeieu mav. ^^ ^'.0

for the Helmsman's tragic death. The Helmsman had been weakened by fighting and

was pleading with Shi Lang to return to his old loyalty at the very moment when

he was treacherously struck down. Shi Lang would never have taken Taiwan so easily if the Helmsman had still been alive. And Shi Lang was so confident and so pleased with himself. Trinket was almost beginning to hate him. He decided to

take him down a peg or two.

'Those sun and moon flags you were flying gave me quite a turn, Admiral' he said. 'I thought at first we were being invaded by the Taiwanese navy. Now I see

you were just showing off your prizes.'

Shi Lang was a brave and honest man, but it was true that he had been showing off a bit. Now he felt humbled and ashamed and hastened to excuse his conduct.

'I wouldn't presume to do that, Lord Wei,' he said. 'It's just that I was in such a hurry to get here and the Taiwanese ships are so much faster than the Qing ones.'

'Oh, that explains it,' said Trinket. 'I wondered at first if you had been thinking of taking over from the Zhengs and setting up as an independent ruler of Taiwan yourself.'

Shi Lang was appalled and also a little shaken. Because of his former loyalty to

the Ming, there would always be a slight shadow of suspicion over him (there is always the thought that those who have changed sides once are capable of doing

so again). A mere word in the Emperor's ear from this odious little favourite (who knew all there was to be known about changing sides) would be enough to spell his ruin. His cheerful self-confidence deserted him and he at once became abject.

'No, no. It was a stupid oversight-unforgivably careless of me. You were quite right to point it out.'

To change the subject, he proceeded to introduce the officers who had sailed with him. One of these was a former Taiwanese officer called Lin Xingzhu whom

Trinket remembered having met once on a boat in the river at Liuzhou when he was

travelling through Guangxi Province on the journey back from Kunming. It was night-time, they were all a little drunk, and the Beggar General Wu Liuqi, although he couldn't swim, had insisted on going out in this boat in a storm into the middle of the river. Apart from the boatmen, just two of them had gone with him' Trinket, then acting

in his capacity as Triad Lodge Master-he couldn't swim either- and a local Lodge

Master from Guangxi called Ma. The Helmsman had boarded the boat to join them

when he'd heard Wu singing, and had introduced this man Lin as a former disciple

of Coxinga's trained in the Ditang School of kungfu who had been able to use Ditang methods against the musket fire of the Dutch. Trinket's surprise at seeing him here amongst Shi Lang's officers was as nothing compared with Lin Xingzhu's astonishment at finding that Trinket, who on that earlier occasion had

been introduced to him as a young disciple of the Helmsman, was a great Manchu

nobleman to whom even Shi Lang deferred.

That evening Trinket gave a dinner for Shi Lang to which five of his officers were also invited' four of them, two naval and two military, were the most senior Manchu officers on his staff; the other one was Lin Xingzhu. Before the dinner Shi Lang presented his gifts.

Taiwan is a fertile and productive island. Under Coxinga and his heirs it had developed commercial relations with Japan, the Philippines, Siam, and Annam and

had grown rich and prosperous from foreign trade. Trinket assumed that Shi Lang

would have exploited his victory over Taiwan to enrich himself, just as, in a like situation, he and his Manchu friends would have done. But Shi Lang, whatever his faults, was a scrupulously honest man and hated corruption, and his gifts on this occasion were not the gold and silver treasures that Trinket was expecting but samples of typical Taiwanese products-more in the nature of souvenirs, in fact. Trinket was disgusted by what he thought was Shi Lang's stinginess and felt that he had been insulted. More and more he was beginning to look on him as an enemy.

When the wine had gone round a few times and conversation had begun to liven up a bit, Trinket asked Lin Xingzhu, who was sitting next to him, to explain something in the Edict that had been puzzling him.

Tell me, Captain Lin' he said, 'why was Zheng Keshuang named as the person who surrendered Taiwan' I always thought Zheng Jing-the one they used to call Prince of Yanping-was running Taiwan. How did a rotten little fart like Keshuang come to be the ruler' He was the younger of the two sons anyway, wasn't he''

The Prince of Yanping-Zheng Jing, that is-died early this year, my lord,' said Lin Xingzhu. 'He had two sons, Kezang and

Keshuang. Kezang was a very intelligent, dependable young man. Everyone loved him and looked forward to his taking over when his father died. By rights he should have done, but his grandmother, the Lady Dong, hated him and got Feng Xifan, the Bloodless Sword, to assassinate him, so that her favourite, Keshuang, could inherit. Feng Xifan is Keshuang's father-in-law, you see, and when Keshuang became ruler he made Feng Xifan his Prime Minister. The two of them did some terrible things between them, killing off all the friends and supporters of Chen Jinnan.' (Lin Xingzhu couldn't very well say 'the Helmsman' in present company.) 'Chen Jinnan's daughter had been married to Kezang. She went to Lady Dong to protest when her husband was murdered, but Lady Dong just threw her out, and the poor girl, after she'd wept over her husband's corpse, went off and

hanged herself. Still, Lady Dong didn't come to a very good end herself. They say she was haunted by the young couple's ghosts and died of fright.'

Shi Lang interposed at this point to say that the story of the hauntings was based on a popular rumour and not necessarily true.

'We can't be sure that ghosts really exist' he said. 'Lady Dong was a very wicked old woman and she had all those deaths on her conscience. It was probably hallucinations made by her own guilty imagination that brought on her death.'

There you're wrong, Admiral,' said Trinket. The ghosts of people who die violently, especially if they have a grievance, definitely do come back for revenge. Think of all those Taiwanese ghosts you must have made in the naval battle. You want to be careful.'

Shi Lang looked rather unhappy, but forced a laugh.

'You can't fight a battle without killing people' he said. 'If all those killed in battle came back as ghosts to get revenge, no general who fought a battle would ever come to a good end.'

That's as may be' said Trinket, 'but in your case it's different. You were once on Coxinga's staff before you changed sides. A lot of those killed in the naval battle were once Coxinga's men and your fellow officers.'

Shi Lang was angered by this quite gratuitous attack but managed to keep silent.

Trinket continued to needle Shi Lang throughout the rest of the evening. He encouraged Lin Xingzhu to reminisce about the heroic campaign in which Coxinga had taken Taiwan from the

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Dutch, interrupting him from time to time with unflattering references to Shi Lang; and when one of the Manchu officers, sensing that his commander was in danger of exploding under these repeated provocations, tried to put in a word about Shi Lang's own by no means negligible achievements, Trinket snubbed Shi Lang yet again by saying that he found stories of Chinese triumphs against the foreigners interesting but had no stomach for stories about the victories of Chinese over fellow'Chinese.

This was a bit rich coming from a young Chinese who had grown rich and powerful by working for the Manchus, and Shi Lang, feeling that he had taken about as much as he could bear, excused himself on the grounds that he was feeling tired

and went off to bed.

Next day Trinket invited Lin Xingzhu to a private lunch, hoping to hear more about recent events in Taiwan. He learned that the former ruler of Taiwan and his chief minister-that is, Sir Zheng and Feng the Bloodless Sword-had been given grandiose titles as a reward for their prompt surrender and were now living comfortably in Peking. Lin also told him a few things about Shi Lang's behaviour in Taiwan. Apparently one of the first things he had done after the surrender was to make an offering at the tomb of his old chief Cokinga, for whom, in spite of everything, he still felt a very great respect. This had been a highly emotional occasion at which Shi Lang had read out a memorial address composed for him by a well-known writer. Lin could remember a few phrases from it which he recited for Trinket's benefit'

Even though enmity grew up between us, The memory of happier times remains. Not for me, then, to exact the vengeance Of him who hid in the rushes by the river.

'What in heaven's name does that mean" said Trinket, for whom this might as well have been in a foreign language.

The man "who hid in the rushes" was Wu Zixu,' said Lin Xingzhu. 'It's an old story. It happened thousands of years ago. He was running away from the King of Chu who'd already killed his father and brother, and when the fisherman who'd just ferried him over the river went off to fetch him some food, he hid himself in the rushes because he was afraid the man was going to give him

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away and set the soldiers on him. Afterwards, when he'd escaped to the neighbouring state of Wu, he became one of the King of Wu's chief advisers, and when the Wu army invaded Chu, Wu Zixu went with them, hoping to get his revenge.

By that time, however, the king who'd killed his father and brother was dead, so

Wu Zixu had his corpse dug up and gave it three hundred lashes with a whip. What

Admiral Shi was saying in those lines I just recited was that though he'd gone over to the other side when Cokinga had all his family put to death and, just like Wu Zixu, was now coming back with a victorious army when the man

who'd had
them killed was in his grave, he wasn't going to behave like Wu Zixu and take it out on the corpse.'

'He wouldn't dare-he'd be too scared of what Coxinga's ghost might do to him,' said Trinket, who was convinced that everyone else shared his unshakeable belief

in the malignant powers of the dead. 'I remember that story now. I once saw a play about Wu Zixu escaping through the pass. By the time it was morning, his hair had gone completely white.'

Lin Xingzhu nodded.

The conversation turned to the dinner party of the previous evening. Lin was worried that Shi Lang seemed to hold him partly responsible for the unpleasantness caused by Trinket's needling and, as a captured officer and very vulnerable, he feared the consequences. Could Trinket do anything to help him, he asked.

'Leave it to me,' said Trinket; and when Lin Xingzhu had gone, he began to concoct a plan. When it was fully formed in his mind, he proceeded to put it into practice straight away by inviting Shi Lang to dinner again that very evening. This time Lin Xingzhu was the only other guest. Trinket began by asking

Shi Lang how long his stay on Potluck Island would be.

'I assume you'll be staying a month or two,' he said.

'I'd like to very much, my lord,' said Shi Lang. 'I'd like to have stayed at least a few more days, so that I could profit from your conversation, but with Taiwan only just taken over, there's so much to do there, I really ought to be getting back. I'm afraid I shall have to take my leave of you tomorrow.'

'Do you really want to profit from my conversation?' said Trinket. 'I think you're just saying that to be polite.'

'No, no, I mean it,' said Shi Lang. 'I look back on those evenings we spent together on this island, when I was your second in command in the campaign against the Mystic Dragon people, drinking and gambling and having laughs, as a very happy time.'

'You could have that happy time again if you wanted to' said Trinket.

'Ah, but how?'

'Easy' said Trinket. 'Take me with you when you leave for Taiwan tomorrow!'

Shi Lang jumped to his feet, aghast.

'B'b'but, Lord Wei' he said in a shaking voice, 'I couldn't possibly take you without authorization from His Majesty. It would be more than my life is

worth.'

'I wouldn't want to do anything there' said Trinket. 'After hearing so much about the place, I just wanted to see what it was like. And I wouldn't want to stay very long. Just a month or so, then I could slip back here again. Just a little holiday. The Emperor needn't know if you don't tell him. ' never told him lots of things.'

'You are fortunate in enjoying the Emperor's favour, my lord' said Shi Lang. 'I don't enjoy that privilege. I am deeply sorry not to oblige you, but I really don't dare do what you ask.'

'Sit down, sit down, Admiral!' said Trinket. 'It was only an idea. Think no more about it!'

Shi Lang bowed and sat down again, greatly relieved.

'Funny though' said Trinket musingly, 'you say you wouldn't dare, but it was quite daring of you to pay your respects at Coxinga's grave when you were in Taiwan. I'd like to have been there to hear it' they say you made a very fine speech. Can you still remember what you said''

'I can remember a few bits' said Shi Lang, who had actually learned to recite the whole address by heart. He now proceeded to recite some choice lines from it, including the ones comparing himself to Wu Zixu.

'Excellent!' said Trinket. 'I couldn't do that to save my life. What does that stuff about the man hiding in the rushes mean''

Shi Lang explained it to him.

'Hm, I see' said Trinket. 'I hope the Emperor doesn't get to hear about it.'

'Oh'' said Shi Lang, clearly rather worried. 'Why do you say that''

'Didn't Wu Zixu later on get overconfident with his success and offend the King of Wu'' said Trinket. 'From what I can

remember of the story, the King of Wu had him executed, but before he was executed Wu Zixu asked them to take his eyes out after he was dead and stick them on top of the city gate looking outwards so that he could see the King of Wu's enemies when they marched into the city and overthrew his kingdom. If Wu

Zixu stands for you, the Emperor might begin to wonder if he's meant to be the

King of Wu and grow suspicious. Especially if he got to hear about your flying the sun and moon flags on your ships. Besides, you know what they say about victorious generals when they're no longer useful' "When the birds are something

or other"

'You mean, "When the birds are all shot, the bow is forgot"' said Shi Lang.

'Yes. When the Emperor hears you've been saying "When the birds are all shot, the bow is forgot", he's bound to get very suspicious.'

'But I've never said that' said Shi Lang.

'You said it just now' said Trinket. 'Captain Lin heard you.'

'You little rat!' thought Shi Lang. 'I expect you'd be quite capable of putting Lin up to telling the Emperor too, if it suited you.'

He was beginning to feel trapped, and a murderous look flashed for a moment from

his eyes-which Trinket was quick to observe.

'I think you've got two choices' said Trinket.

'What two choices' said Shi Lang.

The first is to kill me and Captain Lin and the others on this island, fly the sun and moon flags, sail back to Taiwan, and set up as an independent king.'

That's ridiculous' said Shi Lang. 'I'm the Emperor's loyal servant. What's the other choice'

Take me with you to Taiwan' said Trinket, 'and leave me to take care of Captain Lin.'

Shi Lang caved in completely. He had no friends at the Imperial Court and knew

he was completely at the mercy of this horrible youth who seemed able to do anything he liked with the Emperor. Trinket sensed that he had the upper hand.

He pointed out that if he went to Taiwan as an observer, he would be in a position to assure the Emperor of Shi Lang's irreproachable behaviour as the Emperor's representative on the newly conquered island. Instead of making difficulties, Shi Lang was now begging him to go, so that Trinket was even able to make conditions. He'd need to take his

wives and children with him, he said, for his peace of mind. Shi Lang agreed to everything. He set aside the largest vessel in the squadron for the use of Trinket and his dependents, and the very next day, after a night's time of frantic preparations, they all set sail for Taiwan.

Trinket in Taiwan

After a voyage of several days, they arrived at Anping, the port for the main city of Taiwan (the Dutch had called the place Fort Zeelandia). They disembarked

and completed their journey by land. At Trinket's special request, Lin Xingzhu

went with him to act as a guide and entertained him as they rode together with vivid accounts of Coxinga's campaign against the Dutch. Trinket's needling of Shi Lang had ceased, now that he had got his own way, and relations between them were cordial.

As soon as they were settled at his headquarters in the city, Shi Lang gave a splendid dinner to which everyone was invited. The party had reached a high level of joviality when the arrival of an Imperial Edict was announced and Shi Lang excused himself and went out to receive it. When he came back some time later, he had a worried expression on his face.

'Bad news,' he said. 'Taiwan is to be evacuated.'

'What does that mean?' Trinket asked him.

'It means, my lord, that the entire population will be deported to the mainland, the garrison will be withdrawn, and my command here will terminate.'

'But why?' said Trinket.

'I asked the emissary who brought the Edict' said Shi Lang. 'He said there's a party at Court who've persuaded the Emperor that Taiwan is too costly to defend.

They say there's always a danger of it falling into the wrong hands and proving a drain on our resources.'

'But if we move out, the red-haired foreign devils will move in again,' said Trinket. (He was referring to the Dutch, who had ruled Taiwan, or Formosa, the 'Beautiful' island, for nearly forty years, before being ejected by Coxinga.)

'Exactly,' said Shi Lang. 'Do you think the people at Court suspect me, because of-you know, the "man in the reeds" and so on'

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'It's possible' said Trinket. 'These things have a way of getting out. Listen, I'll tell you what you ought to do. Go to Peking straight away and see the Emperor yourself. Tell him the people of Taiwan are happy here and what a terrible thing it would be for them to have to move. His Majesty is a kind person, I know he cares about the good of the people and all that stuff. If you send a reply back from here appealing against this what'd'you'call'it, he might

suspect you; but if you're in Peking telling him this yourself, he'll know you're not plotting against him.'

Shi Lang at once saw the point of this and thanked Trinket warmly for his counsel.

'I'll take your advice, Lord Wei' he said. 'But someone will have to be in charge here while I'm away. As you're the most senior in rank here, I must ask you if you would be willing to do it.'

Trinket was immensely pleased with the idea, but wondered what Kang Xi would

think about it. After all, he wasn't supposed to be in Taiwan at all, let alone in charge of it.

'I'd be glad to help, Admiral' he said, 'but His Majesty won't be too happy if you hand over to someone else without first waiting for an Edict.'

It was Shi Lang's turn to feel apprehensive.

'This man is a disciple of Chen Jinnan and a friend of the Triads,' he thought.

'He's still in great favour with the Emperor, but he's not employed by him any more, and he's supposed to be living in exile on Potluck Island. If I do hand over power to him, and he and his Triad friends treat it as a golden opportunity to make a rising, I'll be guilty of a capital offence.'

But then he had an idea.

'I'll take the fleet with me' he thought. 'He can't do anything without ships. If he and his friends did try any funny business, it would be easy to sail back and deal with them.'

Having made up his mind, he told Trinket that he would take the risk. Bringing the banquet to a rather hasty conclusion, he convened an emergency meeting of

the Taiwanese administration and told the officials that he was temporarily handing over full powers to Lord Wei. Then he got an experienced secretary to compose a memorial to the Emperor in Trinket's name. Trinket was made to say

that he had, with great temerity-for which he craved the Emperor's forgiveness-

and acting purely out of concern for His Majesty's peace of mind, assumed temporary control of

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the island after travelling there to make a survey and satisfying himself that the people, most of whom had lived on Taiwan for generations, were peaceable

and obedient and could more suitably be left to go on living there undisturbed as His Majesty's loyal subjects than moving with much distress and inconvenience to another place.

After spending a great part of the night in preparation, Shi Lang was ready to leave first thing next morning; but Trinket feared that, being an honest, simple soul (far too honest, in fact), he was ill-prepared to face the officials at the Imperial Court who, on meeting a colleague who had just completed the conquest of a notably rich island, would be looking for a share of the spoils. When Trinket, in his inimitable way, tried to explain this, Shi Lang did not at first understand what he was getting at; but when he did, and begged Trinket to help him do whatever was necessary, Trinket summoned another meeting of the Taiwanese officials and told them that the Admiral was going to Peking to plead with the Emperor on behalf of the people of Taiwan. This was, of course, going to cost money; and as they stood to lose everything if he didn't succeed, he was sure they would help out in this emergency and come up with something pretty quickly.

There were a lot of very rich people in Taiwan and the rumour of deportation had seriously frightened them. In just a few hours the officials collected well over three hundred thousand taels. Trinket found that there was over six hundred thousand in the treasury and, adding the two amounts together, was able to hand over one million taels for Shi Lang to take with him when he sailed at about seven o'clock that evening.

The day after Shi Lang's departure Trinket called the Taiwanese officials together again. In speaking to them the day before, he had referred to the amount collected as the 'Save Taiwan Fund'.

'I'm afraid the "Save Taiwan Fund" we collected for Admiral Shi yesterday was short of what was needed by a million taels,' he told them. 'I managed to make it up with what I'd saved of my own money over the years and what I could raise on the jewellery of my seven wives. I was glad to do it for the people's sake, but it's left me and my family completely broke.'

The chief official bowed low in gratitude.

‘Your Lordship is like a father and mother to us. Be assured’ apart from making good the six hundred thousand taken from the

treasury, the people of Taiwan will see to it that Your Lordship’s million taels are reimbursed to the last penny.’

Trinket went on to suggest a way of assessing contributions that spread the burden fairly and, having made a cool million for himself after his first day governing Taiwan, was hailed by one and all as a benefactor.

Boots Aloft

A few days after this Trinket thought that, having heard so much about the famous Coxinga, he would like to see what he looked like and ordered the gear to

be got ready for making an offering at his shrine; but when they got to the little temple, he was rather disappointed with what he saw. The statue, seated in between two smaller standing figures, was that of a mild, smooth-faced man with a little wispy beard and moustaches, quite unlike the fierce, heroic-looking warrior he had been expecting.

‘Was he really like that?’ he asked.

‘Actually, it’s a very good likeness’ said Lin Xingzhu, who was standing beside him. ‘You have to remember, the Marshal started life as a scholar; it was only later on that he became a great soldier.’

‘Who are those two, the ones standing on either side of him?’

‘That one is his son, Zheng Jing, who was Prince of Yanping after him,’ said Lin Xingzhu.

‘What about the other one?’ said Trinket. ‘Is that supposed to be my Shifu?’

‘That’s the Marshal’s wife, the Lady Dong’ said Lin.

‘That old whore’ said Trinket indignantly. ‘She shouldn’t be here. Take her out and get a statue of the Helmsman to put in her place!’

Lin Xingzhu climbed over the altar rail and heaved the statue off its plinth, while Trinket dropped to his knees and kowtowed to the seated figure of Coxinga.

‘Lord Marshal,’ he said, ‘this wicked old woman caused so much trouble for you when you were alive, I’m sure it must make you angry to have her beside you now.

I’m having her taken away for you and putting the Helmsman in her place. I’m sure both of you will be glad to be together again.’

He was remembering the Helmsman’s cruel death as he said this, and the thought of it made him cry. When he got up again his face was wet with tears.

The people of Taiwan had hated Lady Dong, but cherished the memory of Chen the Helmsman who had done so much for them-land reforms, education, a host of other things. And yet during the brief reign of Zheng Keshuang (Trinket's Sir Insufferable), no one was allowed to speak ill of Lady Dong or any good of Chen. The 'Dong out, Chen in' story circulated rapidly and was much appreciated; and when they heard that Trinket had shed real tears while kneeling before the image of their national hero, the Taiwanese people were touched and grateful. It's true, they admitted, the new young ruler was a bit demanding when it came to money, but they preferred him to the honest, incorruptible Shi Lang and rather hoped that Shi Lang would be unable to return and the young one stay on permanently as Governor.

But it was not to be. Little more than a month later the Taiwanese fleet was at anchorage again in the harbour, the flagship was docked, and Shi Lang was stepping from it to the shore. Behind him followed a high-ranking civilian official who began smiling and waving at Trinket when he was only halfway down the gangway.

'Trinket, my dear boy! How I've missed you!'

It was Songgotu.

Trinket ran up the gangway to meet him and the two clasped hands and laughed excitedly.

'Good news!' said Songgotu. The Emperor's summoning you to Peking.'

Shi Lang had good news, too, for the people of Taiwan, which he announced as he stepped ashore. No deportation. The Emperor had relented. The crowd, who had gathered as soon as the first ships were sighted and had been waiting anxiously to hear their fate, suddenly erupted in wave after wave of cheering. The good news spread like wildfire and soon there was a sound of exploding firecrackers in every street and an air of festivity everywhere that would have made you think it was New Year.

Emperor would not, as formerly, be expecting him to betray his Triad friends. The situation had changed. He wanted him back again for a special mission' a Russian campaign. Now that Satrap Wu and the Mystic Dragon Sect and the heirs of

his attention to the problems of the north-eastern frontier. Russian colonists had been pressing eastwards through Siberia for half a century and, particularly since the building of the forts of Nerchinsk and Albazin, clashes were continually occurring between the Russians and Chinese along the Amur River.

“Give her the Eighteen Touches” Trinket suggested.

‘Apart from being covered with little gold hairs, I suppose she is quite pretty’ said Trinket. He didn’t sound very enthusiastic.

Shi Lang's readily granted permission, Captain Lin and his special force of wicker'shield'carrying troops were to accompany them.

his boots, which they then held aloft and displayed to the cheering crowd. This quaint little ceremony was normally reserved for the departure of an exceptionally benevolent and incorruptible governor and symbolized their wish that he could remain. This must have been the one and only time the ceremony was

ever performed for one who, in a stay of little more than a month, had extorted from the people under his charge a sum of nearly two million taels.

Trinket in Favour Again

The ship docked at Tanggu after a few days at sea and Trinket, Songgotu, and the

rest proceeded via Tianjin to Peking by land. Passing through the city gate was for Trinket like re'entering paradise after a long spell away. He set off to see the Emperor without delay.

As of old, he was summoned to a private audience in the Upper Library where Kang

Xi was seated on his chair of state waiting for his arrival. Trinket advanced, knelt down, and kowtowed. There, while he was kneeling down with his face on the floor, his pent up emotions got the better of him and he burst into tears. Whether it was from joy at being back or sorrow for everything that had happened he probably couldn't have said. Kang

Xi for his part had had equally mixed feelings on seeing him enter. Two-thirds of him was delighted to see his boyhood friend once more, but the remaining, Imperial, third was extremely angry.

The little bastard thinks he can get away with anything,' he told himself. 'This time I really must do something about it, otherwise it'll be the same this time as it was before' he'll take things into his own hands again and do exactly as he likes.'

But as Trinket knelt there in front of him, crying like a baby, his heart melted and he forgot his resolution.

'Tamardy, kid!' he said. 'What do you want to cry for when

you see me again"

'I thought I never would,' said Trinket between sobs. 'Oh, for goodness sake get up!' said Kang Xi. Trinket scrambled to his feet. His cheeks and chin were wet with tears and the snivel from his nose, but there was a little smile at the corners of his mouth.

Tamardy, how you've grown!' said Kang Xi, momentarily transformed, as he jumped down from his throne, into the cocky boy whom Trinket used once to wrestle with.

'Come on,' he said. 'Let's see which of us is the taller!'

He made Trinket stand back to back with him and felt above

their heads with the flattened palm of his hand. Trinket had already noticed that he was now a little taller than Kang Xi and deliberately flexed his knees so that he would appear to be an inch shorter than he really was.

‘We’re exactly the same height!’ said Kang Xi triumphantly. ‘How many children have you got now, Laurie?’ he asked when they were face to face once more.

‘Only three, Your Majesty,’ said Trinket. Two boys and a girl.’ Kang Xi laughed ‘Ah, there I can beat you! I’ve already got four sons and three daughters.’

That’s only natural,’ said Trinket. ‘It’s because of Your Majesty’s great-what’d you call’em-talents!’

‘You haven’t got very far with your education since last time I saw you,’ said Kang Xi, laughing. ‘Whatever have talents got to do with it’

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They always say he had great talents.’ T

The past year or two had been a worrying time for Kang Xi and he had missed having a young scapegrace like Laurie who could sometimes talk freely with him

and make him laugh. Instead of correcting him, he asked him about life on Potluck Island and what he had thought of Taiwan and its people. Trinket concluded a glowing account of the latter by telling Kang Xi how grateful the people were that the Emperor had decided to let them stay.

The advice my counsellors gave to evacuate the island was bad,’ said Kang Xi. ‘Government is to protect the welfare of the people, not make trouble for them. You and Shi Lang did right to protest. I shall count that to your credit.’ Trinket knelt and kowtowed.

‘I acted against orders, Your Majesty,’ he said. ‘I expect I deserve to be executed seventeen or eighteen times over. Forget about the credit. Just pardon

me. Let me live, so that I can go on being with you and serving you.’

‘I’m glad you realize you deserve to be executed seventeen or eighteen times over,’ said Kang Xi with a wry smile. ‘It’s a pity you haven’t got eighteen heads. I should cut off seventeen of them if you had.’

‘I’d be happy with just one,’ said Trinket, still on his knees.

‘Just a mouth to talk and eat with.’

‘We’ll have to see how you behave in future’ said Kang Xi. ‘If you’re loyal to me and carry out my orders faithfully, you can keep your head.’

‘I’ve always been loyal to you,’ Trinket said earnestly.

‘Do you know what the word means?’ ‘Well, honest and true’ said Trinket tentatively. ‘Honest’ said Kang Xi, laughing. ‘If you are honest, there isn’t a single slippery little crook living in the whole wide world.’

‘I’ve always been loyal to you,’ said Trinket. ‘In my heart, I have.’

‘Get up, get up!’ said Kang Xi.

Trinket got to his feet again.

‘With you it’s special,’ he said. ‘I might be a bit crooked with other people. I might even be a bit crooked sometimes with my friends; but I’d never betray them.’

‘If it’s the Triads you’re thinking of, you needn’t worry,’ said

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Kang Xi. ‘I’m not asking you any more to betray them. You don’t, in any case, need to apologize for being unwilling to betray your friends. When you refuse to

betray the Triads, I know that you’d never be willing to betray me. As a matter of fact, it’s one of my reasons for pardoning you now.’

A wave of affection swept over Trinket.

‘I don’t understand all that,’ he said. ‘All I know is-is-’ (he was becoming tearful) ‘if someone’s been good to me, I can’t bring myself to let them down.’

Kang Xi nodded.

‘What about the Russian Princess?’ he said. ‘She was quite good to you, wasn’t she? What if I told you I wanted you to go and fight her?’

Trinket laughed.

‘I helped her out when her life was in danger and thanks to me she ended up ruling the whole country. I owe her nothing. If she’s sent soldiers to steal land that belongs to Your Majesty, she must be stopped. I’d go myself to take her prisoner and bring her here for you to have a look at if it weren’t so far away.’

‘Yes, that’s the whole point,’ said Kang Xi. ‘It’s an enormous country. The Western priest Nan Huai ren tells me that Russia is bigger even than our

Empire.

If we have to fight them on the Amur River, the hugeness of their country is in one way an advantage to us, because all their supplies-men, horses, guns, food... everything in fact-have to be transported eastwards hundreds and hundreds of miles, whereas our lines of transport are much shorter. I've already

had two settlements, Aigun and Khumarsk, fortified to serve as bases and stocked

them with arms and provisions, with a chain of staging'posts along the routes leading up to them along which we can send more supplies. The disadvantage is

that if we lost a war with them, in no time at all they could be through the passes, and then it would be all up with our Empire.

'If we are going to fight them' Kang Xi continued, 'we have to win. We can't afford to lose. At the same time, we don't want to defeat them utterly. The country is just too big to conquer. They would simply rally their forces and eventually the same trouble would start all over again. And so it would go on endlessly. That's why I'm choosing you to command the expedition I'm planning.

It's not because you can fight battles. I have plenty of good soldiers who can do that. Some of them will be going with you. I want the

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Russians to be shown that we are a force to be reckoned with. I want them to be afraid of us, yet at the same time made to feel that we are a highly civilized people and willing to have friendly relations with them if they will behave. If you can do this without fighting, so much the better. Best of all would be if you could use your relationship with this princess to negotiate a peace. Something that will last, so that we can stop having this trouble on our frontier. I am putting you in command of a very large force-a very large force indeed. If you do have to fight, you'd better not be defeated. If you are, I shall come in person with another army and the first thing I shall do will be to cut off your head. Do you get the idea?"

'If I'm going to lose my head, it'll be in the fighting,' said Trinket resolutely. The Russians may cut it off, but I'll see to it that Your Majesty doesn't get the chance.'

That's all right, then,' said Kang Xi. 'As long as we understand each other. Now then. As you're going to be at the head of this whole undertaking, I'm making you a Duke, Third Class. I thought "Duke of Luding" would be a good title.

"Luding" means "deer and cauldron" and "Mount Luding" is the name of a mountain

near Albazin, the fortress that the Russians have built on our frontier which

has been causing so much trouble.'

Trinket kowtowed his thanks. He remembered seeing the funny symbols on the map

that Doublet had pieced together for him, and already guessed that Albazin, the fort where he had first met Princess Sophia, was in fact the Deer and Cauldron Mountain.

Kang Xi went on to tell him about the other arrangements he had made' the officers he had appointed who would be on Trinket's staff, the strengths of the various contingents making up the expedition, the number of pieces of ordnance

in the artillery, and so forth. Finally he asked him if he could think of anything else he might need. Trinket said there was a former Taiwanese officer called Lin Xingzhu who commanded a group of men specially trained to withstand

small'arms fire with their wicker shields. After sailing with him from Taiwan, Lin and his group were now stationed in Peking. He asked if he might take them

too. Kang Xi thought this was an excellent idea and agreed enthusiastically.

Then Trinket mentioned that he had a concubine who had been with him in Moscow

and could speak the language. Could he take her with him' (Officers were normally forbidden to take womenfolk with them on an expedition.) This, too, Kang Xi readily agreed to. He

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concluded the interview by wishing Trinket success. Trinket kowtowed and was already on his way out, when Kang Xi thought of something else.

'By the way' he said, 'it was Zheng Keshuang who killed your Shifu, Chen Jinnan, wasn't it'

'Yes' said Trinket, surprised to find that he knew.

'Zheng Keshuang offered surrender on conditions which I accepted' said Kang Xi.

'The terms of surrender guarantee his safety and that of all Coxinga's descendants. I don't want you making any trouble for him.'

Trinket had to give his word.

Arrangements for Revenge

He was walking along slowly from the Upper Library with his eyes on the ground, disgruntled that he was now obliged to abandon any thought he might have had of avenging the Helmsman's death, when a familiar voice caused him to look up.

The figure that met his eyes, that of a big, broad-shouldered man with a friendly smile, so exactly resembled that of the Intendant of the Palace Guards, Colonel Dolong, whom, with much regret- sacrificing this one friend to save many others- he had fatally stabbed some years before, that he took it for a vengeful ghost and was for some moments undecided whether to run in terror or kneel and beg its forgiveness. But whatever it was, it grasped his hand warmly and began addressing him in a very un'ghostlike manner. The shadow cast by the bulky figure as the sunlight shone into the covered passageway finally convinced Trinket that it was a living Dolong who was talking to him.

'Haven't seen you for ages, brother' he said. 'At first you just seemed to have disappeared; then we were told that you'd taken up fishing and gone to live on Potluck Island. I felt very happy for you when I heard that you'd been promoted- more than once, I believe.'

What Dolong went on to say increased Trinket's sense of guilt. It appeared that he was actually grateful to him for saving his life! Because of an unusual abnormality, the carefully aimed dagger had punctured one of his lungs instead of entering his heart. He had escaped dying, but had remained unconscious for several days after the stabbing. What he had been told after he regained consciousness

Trinket could only guess, but he appeared to believe that when he passed out Trinket had driven off an unknown assassin who had been trying to kill him. It was all supposed to be connected in some way with Princess Ning, about whose highly irregular behaviour it was always best not to inquire. Trinket calculated that it must have been Kang Xi who put this idea into his head and was duly grateful.

'Decent of old Misty to have done that for me!' he thought.

They talked about the Taiwanese campaign and Dolong told him that Sir Zheng

was

now a duke. The hateful Feng Xifan, the Bloodless Sword, had also been given a title and a fine house in the city. Trinket felt more indignant than ever at the injustice of the Helmsman's killers being honoured and rewarded; but he had given his word to Kang Xi that he would not meddle with them and dared not pursue them for his revenge.

Then it suddenly occurred to him that there was a way in which he could ease his

guilty feelings towards Dolong by doing him a good turn and at the same time make a lot of trouble for Zheng by getting someone else to do the mischief.

'Do you remember that time when you were collecting evidence about the Rat Trap

Congress in Hejianfu" he asked. 'You and some of the Imperial Guards did me a

favour by leaning on this Zheng fellow, who'd been giving me trouble. A few of the boys were roughing him up a bit and then I pretended to have a fight with you and you dropped off the wall and pretended you were dead.'

Dolong laughed at the recollection. 'Yes' he said. 'It was about a girl you fancied, wasn't it? She was a very pretty girl too. What became of her?'

'I married her' said Trinket. 'She's already had a son.'

'Congratulations!' said Dolong.

That fellow's an out and out crook' said Trinket. 'Over the years I've lent him thousands, but though he's had the whole of Taiwan for pickings, he's never paid

me back a penny. I don't see why even a duke shouldn't pay his debts.'

'You lent him ten thousand that time in Hejianfu' said Dolong. 'We all saw you.'

'Ten thousand!' said Trinket. 'You'd never guess what he owes me now. Three million, eight hundred thousand.'

Dolong made a face. 'It doesn't sound possible.'

'I've got an IOU to prove it' said Trinket. 'Written in blood.'

The scheme he now outlined was that he should farm out this huge debt by dividing it into shares of one or two thousand taels which would be taken up by Dolong's guards and collected by them individually as and when they saw fit.

That way he calculated would cause Zheng the maximum amount of anxiety and

inconvenience. Dolong at first resisted the idea that he and his colleagues should keep the money they collected, but Trinket insisted, and after promising to send someone to deliver the IOU into Dolong's keeping, he continued on his way out of the Palace.

Outside the Palace Prince Kang, Songgotu, and eight or nine other high-ranking Manchu and Chinese officials were waiting to congratulate him. They had come,

they said, to conduct him to his Residence in Bronze Hat Lane-Trinket found

this
puzzling for a moment since the bombardment by cannon had reduced his
palace
there to a heap of charred beams and blackened rubble. But then he
remembered
the Emperor telling him some time before in an Edict that there was a new
Residence waiting for him in Peking, bigger and more splendid than the last.
Prince Kang had personally supervised the building of it. It had, said the
Prince, for some time now been ready for his return. It was complete in every
respect except that the board over the main entrance which served as a
name'plate was still blank, waiting for a title to be given him by the Emperor.
This Trinket could now tell them, and LUDING GONGFV, or DEER &
CAULDRON PALACE,
was written for him by an Academician in characters a foot high and traced out
by a gilder onto the blank board.

When all these grand guests had gone, Trinket and his seven wives had a small
family celebration in the new Residence at which they drank to the success of
the Russian expedition. When he told them that he would be taking Doublet
with
him, there was a certain amount of grumbling about favouritism; but they were
mollified when he told them, not entirely truthfully, that it was on the
Emperor's orders, because she could speak Russian. In any case, Doublet was
always so gentle and unassuming that the others could not bring themselves to
feel jealous-except, perhaps, Princess Ning, who was still very conscious of her
Imperial connections and greatly resented that not she but a servant'girl should
have been chosen. But these days the Princess' arrogance was very much in
abeyance. When she did indulge it, the other six wives presented a solid front
against her, and Trinket would very seldom take her side.

It was Doublet's task to deliver the IUU mac ou i'm'n5 ^^ written in his own
blood to Dolong's place next day. She brought back Dolong's assurance that
this
written evidence would, as he put it, enable him and his fellow'guardsmen to
'squeeze a certain person dry'.

During the next few days Trinket was summoned almost daily to the Palace.
Kang
Xi had a huge map which he said Trinket would be taking with him on the
expedition. He had annotated it in his own hand and, as they pored over it, he
showed Trinket how he had planned each step of the campaign. Trinket had the
wit
to see that the Emperor would like to have been doing all these things himself,
but could not because of his position, and would, in a sense, be doing them

vicariously, through him. He tried in a clumsy way to express this, and Kang Xi's little smile told him that he had understood.

The Supreme Commander

On a day chosen for its auspiciousness by the Board of Astronomy, the great army left for the North, seen off with ceremonial pomp by the Emperor and his Court.

The ceremony took place in the vast paved area inside the Noon Gate, the southernmost gate of the Forbidden City, which is the main entrance to it and which is nowadays generally referred to as 'Tiananmen' or 'The Gate of Heavenly Peace'.

This great paved area is divided into two equal halves by the Brook of Golden Water, which runs through it from west to east in a marble channel and is crossed by five marble bridges with ornately carved balustrades. Trinket and his

general staff and the other officers, all in full battledress, waited in the area north of the Brook where a farewell banquet had been prepared, while the Court- princes, dukes, beikhs, and ministers of state, all in full Court rig, were assembled facing them on the terrace of the Great Harmony Gate, which is

the entrance from the north end of the paved area to the series of palaces beyond. A pavilion of Imperial yellow silk had been erected on this terrace, in the centre of which a throne had been placed for the Emperor.

When Kang Xi had entered and taken his seat on this throne, Lord Wei, Duke of

Luding, Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Expeditionary Force, advanced at the

head of his staff and knelt

before him. An official from the Inner Secretariat stepped forward and ceremoniously presented the Letters Patent setting out the purpose of the campaign in Manchu, Mongol, and Chinese and then, in succession, the Supreme

Commander's seal of office and symbolic gifts of a surcoat, a horse, a bow, and a sword.

After Trinket and the rest had kowtowed and joined the other officers below, Imperial bandsmen struck up some music and the banquet began, while troupes of

artistes appeared and entertained the banqueters with their various skills.

Trinket was summoned to drink with the Emperor, who stood up to present the wine-cup; and Trinket knelt to receive it and drank from it while still on his knees. His staff officers were offered their drinks by less exalted hands; but

everyone, even the rank and file on the other side of the Brook, was offered drinks by someone, and everyone received a gift of money and some cloth. When everyone had drunk and all the gifts had been distributed, the signal was given to rise and kowtow their thanks. Then the Emperor was borne to the Noon Gate to see them off. The Commander-in-Chief and his officers kowtowed once more and went through the ritual of begging the Son of Heaven to return to his Palace. Then the army could at last begin its march.

They made an imposing sight, and Trinket, riding at their head, felt very proud. The senior men at Court, however, saw this grinning youth, got up to look like a general but utterly lacking the appropriate martial air, as an illiterate guttersnipe with no military skill or experience, whose appointment would most likely result in defeat and national humiliation; but knowing he enjoyed the Emperor's particular favour, those princes and dukes and great ones merely smiled, and kept their thoughts to themselves.

Heads You Lose!

After some days the army marched through the pass at Shanhaiguan where the Great Wall reaches the sea. They were now in Liaodong, the homeland of the Manchus, which a few years previously Trinket and Doublet had traversed like hunted animals. Then it had been winter time and the whole land had been under a covering of snow. Now it was autumn' crisp and bright and clear; but as the army continued to march northwards, a cold wind began to blow and the temperature dropped appreciably.

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They were some thirty miles from Albazin when He You, commander of the Vanguard Battalion which had been advancing ahead of the main army, came to report the information that had been brought in by his scouts. Raiding parties had been going out from Albazin every ten days or so and terrorizing the countryside round about, pillaging, raping, burning down homesteads, and perpetrating every

kind of atrocity. He You estimated that they would probably make another sortie within the next few days.

Trinket had been instructed by Kang Xi what to do in almost any contingency. He

ordered the main army to halt where they were and encamp. Then he ordered He You

to set up a series of ambushes, stationing ten detachments of a hundred men each

at different points along a circle of ten miles radius from the fort. They were not to engage with any large force of the enemy, but only when the numbers were

such that they could be sure of overwhelming them. In any group they attacked,

every Russian soldier must be either killed or captured. None must get back to the fort. He You went off suitably impressed.

A few days later a dispatch from He You arrived at headquarters reporting a success. A party of Russians raiders had been eliminated' twenty-five killed and twelve made prisoner. When the prisoners were brought to camp that evening, Trinket said he would handle them himself. Sitting at a long table as if for a military tribunal, he had them brought up one by one to interrogate. They were surprised to hear him speak Russian, but were arrogant and uncooperative. All of

them said the same thing' it was only by trickery and superior numbers that they

had been overcome. They made it quite clear that they looked on the Chinese with

contempt.

Trinket got very angry. He asked the soldiers guarding them to bring two of them

up to the table again and untie their arms, then, taking a pair of dice out of an inner pocket and putting them on the table, he asked if they knew what these

were. They did, of course.

'Each of you take one and throw!'

The men looked at each other, surprised, wondering what sort of Chinese trickery

this was going to be. They threw, nevertheless' one a Seven and one a Five.

'You've lost,' he said in Russian to the one who'd thrown the Five. That means smerty (death).' He turned to the Chinese guards. Take his head off. Outside.'

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The guards hustled the man out of the tent. A surprisingly short time later they came in again with his head, which they placed on the table. The eleven

surviving prisoners gasped and looked rather ill.

‘Another two!’ said Trinket, and the guards pushed another pair of prisoners to the table and released their hands. But this pair refused to comply.

‘Smertyl’ said Trinket, and nodded to the guards, who had already grasped the meaning and dragged the struggling men outside. Soon their two heads had joined
the one on the table.

The next pair reacted differently from one another. One of them was trembling and picked up one of the dice resignedly, the other, a more aggressive character, snatched it from him and challenged Trinket to play with him himself.

Trinket let him have both the dice and took out another pair from his pocket. They were, of course, weighted. The Russian threw Seven and Trinket threw Ten.

‘Well’ he asked the man.

‘What is there to say’ said the Russian. ‘I’ve been unlucky, that’s all.’

‘How many Chinese have you killed since you’ve been in our country’ Trinket asked him.

‘Can’t remember’ said the man. ‘Seventeen or eighteen, I suppose.’

‘Now it’s your turn’ said Trinket.

Soon there were four heads on the table. Trinket pointed to one of the eight surviving prisoners.

‘You come and play with me!’

The man was trembling violently, but he took up the two dice in his shaking hands and threw. It turned out to be a very good throw. The pips added up to Eleven, which meant that Trinket needed a total of Twelve to win. Normally it would have been a certainty, but since he’d been given this very important commission and threatened with beheading if he didn’t succeed in it, he hadn’t once dared to gamble and was out of practice. To his intense chagrin his score was only Deuce. But Trinket was not to be beaten.

‘Ha ha! I’ve won!’ he said.

‘What do you mean, you’ve won,’ said the Russian indignantly. ‘Eleven beats Two, doesn’t it’

‘Not in this case’ said Trinket. ‘Not by Chinese rules.’

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‘But that’s ridiculous’ said the man. ‘In Russia the higher score always wins.’
‘When I’m in Russia, I’ll play by the Russian rules’ said Trinket. ‘Here you must play by mine. Smerty.’

Five heads on the table.

The next man Trinket proposed to play with was craftier. According to Chinese rules, would the higher or the lower score win this time, he asked.

‘According to the Chinese rules, if you’re a Chinese you win and if you’re a foreigner you lose.’

‘That’s totally unreasonable’ said the man. ‘Only a barbarian would talk like that.’

‘You come into our territory, raping and robbing and murdering the people who

live here’ who’s the barbarian” said Trinket in somewhat fractured Russian.

Then, to the guards (in Chinese) ‘Cut his head off!’

The row of heads on the table became six.

The next prisoner to be called out and unbound was a great strapping fellow with

an enormous bushy beard. He stepped forward quite fearlessly and spoke in a loud, contemptuous voice’

‘None of your fancy tricks for me, Chinese boy! If you’re going to kill me, kill me and get it over with! You only got the better of us because you came at us unawares and because there were so many of you. In a fair fight you wouldn’t have stood a chance.’

‘Is that so” said Trinket.

‘I’ll have a bet with you’ said the big fellow. Tick five of your best men to fight me. If I lose, you can cut my head off. If I win, you set me free.’

Doublet, who had sat silently watching all this, suddenly piped up’

‘Losha man no good. Chinese woman beat Losha man easy.’ (Her Russian was not

nearly as good as Trinket’s.)

The big Russian for the first time saw the pretty Chinese girl.

‘You speak Russian, eh’ That’s very good.’

Doublet didn’t feel that her Russian was good enough for a conversation. She stood and faced the big man, who towered a head and shoulders above her, and

put
up her fists. He laughed.
‘You want to fight me, then’
Teach him a lesson, Doublet!’ said Trinket.
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Doublet aimed a painful blow at his solar plexus. The man hit back then,
boxing
like a prizefighter; but Doublet dodged the blows and after a few quick feints,
shot out a foot and kicked him hard in the belly. He doubled up.

‘Hey, that’s against the rules!’ he said. ‘We don’t fight like that in Russia.’

This is China,’ said Trinket.

‘Can beat by Russian rules’ said Doublet, and when he had straightened up
again
and taken several swipes at her, she fainted a few times and then, with
lightning rapidity, jabbed him on two or three points with her outstretched
fingers, totally disabling him so that he lay helpless on the ground, unable to
stir. Trinket got up, walked over, and aimed a kick at him.

‘Admit you’re beaten,’ he said.

‘Witchcraft!’ said the man. The girl’s a witch.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Trinket. Take him outside and cut his head off!’

The guards had to lift the man and carry him out. Soon there were seven heads
on
the table facing the five ashen’faced survivors, who were all visibly shaking
with fear.

‘What about you lot” said Trinket.

‘Mercy!’ said one of them ‘I’ll do whatever you want.’

‘And so will I.’ ‘And so will I’ said the others.

‘Good!’ said Trinket. ‘Now, give these men something to eat’ he said to the
guards. ‘And drink. And treat them well. Look after them. We’re going to need
them.’

During the days that followed, the Vanguard Battalion brought in several lots

of
prisoners, sometimes only one or two, sometimes as many as sixteen or seventeen
at a time. These Russian soldiers were mostly from the dregs of society' brutal
men-criminals, convicts, penniless adventurers, and the like-bold enough when
the despised Chinese settlers were their prey, but little inclined to heroics
when they were caught. When the prisoners whom Trinket had tamed told
these new
arrivals how all those who dined with the Chinese leader had been beheaded,
whereas those like themselves who did as they were told were given good meals
and had plenty to drink and were treated better than back in barracks, they
offered no further resistance to their captors but quickly learned to be docile
and obedient.

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Human Shashlik

The Governor of Albazin at this time was a man called Tolbusin, the previous
Governor Golitsyn, who was the Regent Sophia's lover, having been recalled to
take up an important post in Moscow where he could be near her. When
several of

Tolbusin's raiding parties ('foraging parties' he called them) failed to come
back, and the scouts sent out to look for them reported that no trace of them
could be found, he knew that some enemy, assisted no doubt by the local
people,

must be at large in the area, and decided to investigate in person. It would be
necessary both to locate the enemy and to teach the natives a lesson. A large
force would be needed. Half the entire strength of the garrison rode out with
him that day.

For some time there was no sign of any enemy, only one or two Chinese
hamlets

which they torched, massacring the inhabitants before proceeding on their
way.

Then, at a distance of seven or eight miles from the fort, a company of Chinese
cavalry came galloping towards them and discharged a flight of arrows.
Tolbusin

laughed.

'I don't think these people are going to give us much trouble' he said to the
officers riding beside him. They don't seem to have heard of the gun.'

He ordered his men to return fire with their muskets and ten or more Chinese
riders dropped from their saddles. A gong was sounded and the Chinese troop
wheeled round and galloped off to the south. Tolbusin ordered his men to
pursue;

but the Chinese were mounted on specially chosen horses, too fast for the

Russian cavalry to catch up with them.

The Russians pursued them for several miles and had already lost sight of them when they saw, on the outskirts of a little wood ahead, a flagstaff from which fluttered a yellow silken banner. Drawing nearer, they saw that it was in the midst of a Chinese encampment consisting of seven or eight large tents. They halted when they were within range and, aiming at the tents, fired a couple of volleys with their muskets. A few mounted Chinese soldiers, who must have been

guarding the camp, appeared from the trees and rode off to the south, after first turning to shoot at the Russians with their bows.

Tolbusin dismounted and looked inside the tents. In all of them there were signs

that they had been recently abandoned. Clothes, tot

armour, and weapons were lying about everywhere, as if snatched up and then dropped in the hurry to get away. In the largest tent, which had the flagstaff in front of it, there was even an unfinished meal on the table and some money and valuables amongst the litter on the floor.

To horse, everybody!’ cried Tolbusin. The Chink commander is sure to be somewhere ahead. A reward to anyone who can catch him! He’s probably got gold on him, too.’

The troops stopped their looting, jumped on their horses, got back into some kind of formation, and continued the chase. After several miles more they began

to approach mountainous country. As they rode on, they once or twice passed recently dead cavalry horses at the side of the road.

‘Look!’ said a Russian officer. They’ve been ridden to death. The Chinks must be in a bad way.’

They had reached the mountains now, from which faint shouts and cries could be

heard like the sounds of a distant battle. Ahead of them the track they had been following entered a narrow pass between steep rocky sides’ a classic setting for an ambush. Tolbusin halted suspiciously at the entrance to the pass. But just at that moment they distinctly heard Russian voices’

‘Look, the Chinks are surrendering!’ They’ve surrendered!’ ‘Ha ha, they’ve surrendered!’

Tolbusin assumed that some of the missing 'foragers', acting without orders and beyond the call of duty, had taken on a larger force of Chinese and beaten them.

'What unit are you' he shouted.

They appeared to have heard his voice but not heard what he was saying, for they did not answer his question. Instead, a number of Russian voices shouted back in unison'

'We're in here. The Chinese have surrendered.'

'Wait!' Tolbusin shouted back. 'We're coming in to join you.'

And he and his whole force entered the narrow defile. When the last man had entered, fire flashed out at dozens of points from the trees high up on the steep sides of the valley, closely followed by the deafening roar of cannon. At the same time hundreds upon hundreds of Chinese soldiers seemed to materialize out of nowhere and rained down crossbow and small'arms fire on the Russian troops below.

Turn the horses about!' shouted Tolbusin. 'Get out of the pass!'

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But even as he gave the order, an avalanche of rocks and tree'trunks was rolling down the slopes on either side of the entrance, blocking it completely.

'No, change that order! Charge ahead!' said Tolbusin. 'We must try to get out at the other end.'

But those who attempted to do this were blasted from either side by cannon, until the piled'up bodies of men and horses formed another barrier. The scene in

the pass was now indescribable as those trapped inside attempted to control their horses, jostling and trampling each other, unable either to go forwards or to turn back. The shouts and screams of men and the whinnying of horses could be

heard intermittently above the roar of the cannon.

Tolbusin gave the order to dismount. They would abandon their horses and scramble out on foot, relying on the superior power of their small arms to shoot their way out. Those nearer the entrance to the pass tried to climb over the great pile of rocks and timber that now blocked it. A large number lost their lives when a huge bomb exploded, blowing many of them high into the air. Those farther back who tried scrambling up the sides of the valley presented an easy target to the Chinese soldiers above and were shot down in droves. Many escaped being shot but lost their footing and were killed or injured on the rocks below. There was clearly no hope of escape. Reluctantly Tolbusin gave the order to stop firing. The cry of 'Cease fire!' was taken up by the soldiers. The Chinese, too, stopped firing and the boom of the cannon ceased, creating an eerie silence. A voice was heard from the Chinese side speaking Russian through a loud hailer 'Russian soldiers, Russian soldiers! Throw down your muskets! Throw down your swords! Take all your clothes off!' Tolbusin shouted back indignantly 'We shall lay our arms down but not undress.' The voice repeated the order and added, 'If you do as we say, you will be treated well. If you do not take off your clothes, you will be killed.' The cannon resumed firing to reinforce this message. Several of the Russians who had already thrown down their weapons began to undo their buttons. Tolbusin was furious. He took out a pistol and shot the man nearest him who had started to undress. 'It is an offence to take off your uniform,' he said. 'I shall shoot any man who does so.'

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THE PEER AND THE CAULDRON

But the soldiers feared the cannon more than they feared their commander and already several of them had thrown off their clothes and were clambering, stark naked, up the sides of the pass to laughter and applause from the Chinese troops above. The cannon fire ceased. Nine out of ten of the soldiers were now kicking off their boots and unbuttoning their jackets. Tolbusin, having lost control, held the pistol to his head and would have killed himself had not one of his

officers wrested it from him and persuaded him that his country might yet have need of his services. The unseen Russian speaker on the Chinese side was now heard again'

'Russian soldiers! Tolbusin also must be undressed. If not, firing will recommence.'

Several of those round Tolbusin were looking at him with calculating eyes. Suddenly one grabbed at the sword that was hanging at his side, while a naked man jumped on him from behind and wrapped a throttling arm round his neck. Five or six more wrestled him to the ground and began tearing off his clothes. When he was completely naked, they carried him between them, struggling convulsively, to deliver him into the hands of the waiting Chinese.

As each naked Russian emerged from the narrow valley, a pair of Chinese soldiers laid hands on him and bound his arms behind his back, before passing him on to join the other prisoners. The prisoners were marched in a long column for a mile or two to a stretch of level moorland, where they were made to form up in lines as if for a parade. Shivering in the chilly wind of autumn, broken and defeated, they presented a sorry spectacle-until Governor Tolbusin appeared, frogmarched between two guards, and was placed in front of them. The sight of this much'feared martinet standing bare'arsed on parade was too much for some of them. They began to titter.

'No laughter!' barked Tolbusin. 'And stand to attention!'

This set them off. A little wave of laughter started in the ranks which grew and grew until every soldier was laughing hysterically. The laughter ended as quickly as it had begun when the young Chinese commander, accompanied by a flag'bearer and a large body of scimitar'bearing guards, rode slowly up and halted at a little distance from the parade of naked men. Holding a feather fan (rather superfluous at this time of year) and striking a theatrical gesture, he threw back his head and laughed three times, in a descending

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cadence, just as he had seen an actor do playing the part of the great general

Cao Cao on the stage.

‘Ha!’ ‘Ha!’ ‘Ha!’

Then he spoke, surprising them by addressing them in their own language.

‘You have surrendered to the army of the Great Qing,’ he said. ‘If you are willing to submit yourselves to the mercy of the Great Qing Emperor in Peking, you will be given food and clothes and treated well.’

‘Never!’ said Tolbusin. ‘I would rather be hacked to pieces. I regard you as a contemptible trickster, and I protest most strongly at being humiliated in this way.’

‘How have I humiliated you?’ Trinket asked him.

‘Look at the state I am in.’

‘Oh’ said Trinket, ‘who took off your breeches’

Tolbusin was silent.

‘And what about you?’ said Trinket, turning to the ranks of shivering Russian prisoners. ‘There’s a white flag over there. Anyone willing to submit should walk over to that flag.’

It was fairly plain that many would have liked to, but although they had laughed

at the sight of their naked Governor, they were still somewhat afraid of him and none of them ventured to move. They hung their heads and each man eyed his neighbours. Trinket, using dubious but highly effective methods, set about persuading them to change their minds. There was a delicacy he had learned to appreciate during a visit to their country called shashlik, he told them. He rather fancied trying some shashlik now, using pieces of their flesh. Ten men were led from the ranks by men in butcher’s aprons and taken into what appeared

to be a canteen tent. Although they were out of sight, the howling of these men, from terror rather than pain, when a few superficial cuts were made on their bodies, convinced the horrified men outside that the slivers of grilled meat later served up on skewers ‘were not pieces of good prime beef but human flesh

a
la brochette. In ones and twos at first, but then in one great body, they left their ranks and drifted towards the flag. Tolbusin was left standing alone.

‘Well,’ said Trinket. Will you submit?”

‘Never!’ said Tolbusin. ‘I have told you’ I would prefer to die.’

‘Very well’ said Trinket. ‘I’ll send you back to Albazin.’

This was so unexpected that Tolbusin was at first lost for words.

‘If you are allowing me to go back to Albazin’ he said, ‘at least give me back my clothes.’

‘I’m afraid that won’t be possible’ said Trinket, and ordered a colonel on his staff to take Tolbusin with an escort of Chinese troops to the gates of Albazin

and deliver him up there after first parading him naked three times round the walls of the fort.

Tolbusin had to endure the taunts and jeers of the Chinese troops on the march there and the scrutiny of the Russians who crowded the walls for an unusual glimpse of their Governor when they got to Albazin.

As for the Russian prisoners, except for twenty with good strong voices who were retained for future use, they were dressed in Qing uniforms and sent under escort, with news of the victory, to Peking.

Winter sets In

Trinket ordered a victory celebration for the army with a generous distribution of food and drink. Early next morning they struck camp and moved to positions

nearer to Albazin. The campaign to take the fort now began in earnest. Cannon were placed on all sides of it and opened a bombardment. Unfortunately the Russians' answering fire was more effective, killing many Chinese soldiers, whereas the Chinese cannon-fire, though wrecking a number of dwelling-houses

inside the fort, seemed to make little impression on its walls, which were enormously thick. An attack on the walls using scaling ladders led by one of the Manchu officers was very nearly successful, until the officer himself was severely wounded and many of his unit lost their lives. The Russians were emboldened to make a sortie and did much damage with their small-arms. They were

only halted when Lin Xingzhu and his specially trained troops with their wicker shields performed their curious rolling act, putting many of the Russians and their horses out of action and causing the rest to retreat back into the fort. For a long time after that no further sallies were attempted.

So far little progress had been made. Trinket summoned the commanders of the different units to a council of war in his headquarters tent to discuss the future conduct of the campaign. Both the Manchu and Chinese officers were trained soldiers who had done many years of service, and much of their discussion was

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way above his head. As far as he could make out, three completely different strategies were being proposed'

- (1) tunnelling into the fort, or, alternatively, tunnelling in order to mine the wall and make a breach in it;
- (2) throwing up an encircling rampart of earth and starving the defenders into surrender;
- (3) provoking the defenders into making sorties so as to further exploit the successful tactics of Lin Xingzhu's special force.

Trinket was quite incapable of judging the relative merits of these different proposals. His solution was to approve them all, merely insisting that the tunnellers should confine themselves to undermining the wall and not attempt any

tunnelling inside. He was a little worried that tunnelling inside the fort might interfere with the Dragon Line on which his friend Kang Xi's fate depended, and

which might one day lead him to the Treasure.

None of these strategies, which from next day onwards began to be put into effect, was entirely successful. Hong Chao, the officer who had been the loudest advocate of the plan to provoke the Russians into attacking outside the fort, got his soldiers to learn a choice range of Russian insults from the prisoners. These they assiduously shouted at the Russians on the walls; but the Russians were unwilling to expose their horses again to Lin Xingzhu's vicious tactics and declined to be drawn outside.

The Chinese sappers made a good start at undermining the wall. They had tunnelled halfway through, inserting as they went the wooden props they would

afterwards burn to make part of it collapse, when one of the wells inside the fortress suddenly dried up, and Tolbusin, guessing that the cause was probably an enemy mine and skilfully calculating where the mine was likely to be, had a bomb dropped from the wall near the surface above it that caused it to collapse and bury the soldiers inside.

The rampart of earth was rather more successful. Chinese peasants from the villages round about, who had suffered from the depredations of Russian raiders

based in the hated fortress, were willing to help the soldiers with their digging, and Tolbusin watched anxiously from the walls as the circle of earthwork began gradually to close. He had some hopes that a relieving force might arrive soon from the Russian settlement at Nerchinsk, unaware that Kang Xi

had already sent a Chinese force to the Nerchinsk area who would prevent any relief from getting through. But Albazin was

plentifully stocked with supplies of every kind and capable if necessary of sustaining a very long siege, and winter was not far off now, when it would be impossible for a besieging force to camp outside.

It was, indeed, beginning to get much colder. Already the ground was getting too

hard to dig, and after the first day or two of snow, the peasants left, promising to come and help next year after the thaw and strongly advising the soldiers to move further south. Those of the senior officers who had been in the North before knew that frostbite was the least of the dangers they would be facing if they stayed on. In winter the night-time temperature in these parts sometimes dropped to levels that could kill a man. Already one or two cases had

been reported of men who had died in their sleep.

Trinket was unable to make up his mind. He knew it would be unsafe to stay much

longer, and yet it seemed feeble to leave when hardly any of the tasks that Kang Xi had set him had been achieved. While he was still hesitating, an envoy arrived from the Court with an Imperial Edict. In it Kang Xi congratulated his Supreme Commander, Lord Wei, on the late victory. He had sent one of the captured officers with a letter to the court in Moscow urging a cessation of hostilities and the holding of talks with a view to making a pact of lasting peace. If next year the Russians on the Amur proved still intransigent, the offensive against them should be renewed and brought to a successful conclusion.

Meanwhile the Emperor, concerned for the welfare of his troops in the inclement

northern climate, ordered the Supreme Commander to withdraw them to winter

quarters in Aigun and Khumarsk, where they could rest and recuperate. Gifts of

money, food, wine, and clothing were to be distributed to all officers and men according to their rank.

When Trinket and the senior officers had offered formal thanks for this Edict, it was taken and read to the troops of every unit, who showed their appreciation

with noisy cheering.

Piss Attack

Preparations now began for the withdrawal. With gleeful triumph the Russians saw signs that the Chinese army was planning to depart and crowded the wall'top, hooting derisively, to watch them breaking camp. As a farewell message, they undid the flaps of their breeches and pissed in the direction of the Chinese troops below.

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Trinket was furious. He ordered all available Chinese soldiers to line up facing the fort and piss back at them. Several hundred Chinese soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder and pissing with all their might was undoubtedly a brave sight; but apart from an impressive band of yellow snow parallel to the wall, it had very little effect. In this unequal contest the Russians had the advantage of height.

But Trinket refused to be beaten. Pointing a menacing finger at the Russians on the wall, he threatened them with obscenely dreadful reprisals. The Imperial Envoy was shocked. The Supreme Commander should not demean himself by competing

with these disgusting Russian barbarians. It would be better for his dignity to ignore them.

'I can't do that' said Trinket. 'We don't want to lose face.'

He asked the Quartermaster General if the army had any firefighting equipment.

In answer to his question a mobile pump- a pump mounted on a sort of handcart-

was produced. Trinket ordered it to be pushed up on top of the earthen rampart.

As all water everywhere was frozen solid by now, Trinket asked one of the army chefs to heat thawed'out ice in the cookhouse and had the boiling but rapidly cooling water poured into the pump; then, to the Imperial Envoy's visible distaste, he pulled his clothes up and his trouser'top down and pissed into the water. Two or three soldiers volunteered enthusiastically to pump, and a stream

of the greatly'diluted urine was directed at the wall, catching by turns two of the Russian soldiers in the face. The Chinese troops sent up a cheer.

'Idiocy!' said the Imperial Envoy to himself.

But Trinket appeared to have lost interest. He was having an idea.

'How many of these things have we got' he asked the Quartermaster General.

'Eighteen.'

'I need hundreds. A thousand.'

They thought he had taken leave of his senses. Even a hundred would be impossible to get hold of. And how would they produce enough piss' It wasn't a piss'attack he had in mind now, he said. They could do a great deal of damage to the Russians if they could shoot a lot of water into the fort-more damage, perhaps, than cannon'

fire had so far been able to achieve. Water would instantly freeze' on the ground, on clothing, on everything in fact. But there 'would have to be a lot of it.

The idea was not without its attractions, but how on earth would they get the pumps' A fairly junior officer asked permission to speak. 'In my part of Fujian people can't afford proper fire'fighting pumps when there is a fire' he said. 'We use lengths of very large bamboo pipe with a coin'sized hole at one end and a wooden plunger at the other. Then we siphon the water up and squirt it through the hole by working the plunger.'

Ingenious, they thought. But there wasn't any bamboo in these parts. And anyway, it sounded too small'scale' even if they made hundreds of them, they would be quite inadequate for blanketing a large fortress with ice. However, a master'carpenter among the army tradesmen had been giving the matter some thought.

There is plenty of fir and spruce everywhere round here,' he said. 'You could cut the trees into six' or seven'foot lengths and hollow out the middles-'

'How would you do that' Trinket asked him.

'Well, I take it it's only a rough job you want' something that only has to last for a day or two. You could saw them in half lengthways and chisel out the middle. Then you could fasten the two halves together again with metal hoops. Or, for a quick job, you could use large nails. I think I could work out the other parts. You'd need to mount them on something. And I don't think you'd be able to siphon the water up into them' they'd be too big for that. We'd have to find some other way of filling them. The water's another problem, but that's for someone else to work out. If you give me a bit of time, I think I could knock up something for you to try out.'

Trinket encouraged him to go ahead. By the next day the master'carpenter and his

team of workmen had produced something that looked rather peculiar and was very laborious to operate, but which projected a very satisfactory jet of water, powerful enough to carry a hundred yards. It emptied quickly and needed constant refilling, but Trinket thought that if they could make enough copies of this crude water'squirting tree'cannon in a hurry, his plan could go ahead.

The troops were divided into squads, each with a different task. Some were put to felling and lopping trees, some to sawing

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up and chiselling the timber, some to assembling the various parts that made up the 'cannon', some to stacking fuel for the fires, and some to piling up huge mounds of snow and collecting all available iron vessels for heating it and buckets for carrying the water in.

The Russians watching from the walls were mystified. Now, instead of leaving, the Chinese were running about like an army of busy ants, all seemingly occupied

with incomprehensible tasks. Even when the water'cannon, hundreds of them, with

the tree'bark left on them for speed of manufacture, were pushed and heaved to the top of the earthen rampart, the Russians remained mystified. Governor Tolbusin, informed of this puzzling development, went onto the wall to inspect these things in person. A day or two previously he had seen the fires, dozens of which the Chinese had kindled near the foot of the earthwork for heating water. He assumed that they had changed their minds about breaking camp and decided to

stick out the winter, relying on the fires to keep them warm. He put this down to their inexperience.

'Wait and see, my friends!' he had said to himself. 'You don't know the Russian winter. Just stay there, my Chinese friends, and freeze to death!'

But these strange tree'like objects were another matter. They puzzled him as much as they had the troops. What devilry were the Chinese up to now?

He was answered sooner than he could have wished. At that very moment the 'objects' opened fire and a hundred jets of hot water shot towards the Russian soldiers on the wall. One of them caught Tolbusin full in the chest, knocking him off his feet so that he fell down flat on his back and had to be helped up by two of his officers.

'Damned Chinese witchcraft!' he said; but to the soldiers on the wall he shouted 'Come on, men, use your muskets! Fire on them, you fools!'

But the men scarcely heeded him. His authority was much diminished since

they
had seen him paraded naked round the fort. The jets kept coming. As steam
from
the water rose like a cloud around them, they began to panic, and with cries of
'Witchcraft!' they fought each other to get to the steps that led down from the
wall.
Each water-cannon needed a team of six to operate it' two on each side of the
horizontal bar that worked the plunger and two to
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fetch water and fill the cylinder. The barrage was kept up, despite the delay
for refilling, by dividing the line into groups of three or four cannon and
discharging them in sequence. The water cooled rapidly and quickly froze.
Much
of it was falling inside the wall' and, as the barrage continued, it spread
farther and farther into the fort. Where there was any snow, it first melted it
and then froze, making an even thicker covering of ice. There was ice
everywhere, and more and more people were slipping and falling on it.
Clothing
became soaked and had to be quickly removed. Wet clothing could freeze to the
body in this climate, and when you took it off, your skin came away with the
clothes.

For some time now morale in the fort had been very low. The Russians were
hugely
outnumbered by this army of Orientals, who, in addition to their numerical
superiority, seemed to possess supernatural powers. Supplies in the fort were
plentiful and as yet there were no shortages; but no end of the siege was in
sight, and they were likely to be stuck in this remote and unattractive outpost
indefinitely. Tolbusin's harshness and cruelty made matters worse. He had,
from
the first, been an unpopular Governor, but since his humiliation by the Chinese
he no longer even had the authority which had previously enabled him to
maintain
discipline and conduct an efficient defence. Some of the inhabitants,
particularly among the small civilian population of government clerks,
Orthodox
priests, small traders, and prostitutes who catered to the needs of the
soldiers, had already begun discussing the relative advantages of a surrender.

This new calamity was the last straw' this steaming water that poured on them
from the air and turned into ice, the mysterious invention of a seemingly
all-powerful enemy. A small deputation approached Tolbusin as he was
crossing

the central square accompanied by several of his officers. He grew angry. He called them traitors and threatened to have them shot. Suddenly a snowball from somewhere in the square was aimed in his direction. It missed him, but then it was followed by another one which didn't. Tolbusin grew furious, pulled out his pistol, and fired in what was intended to be the direction of the assailant, but the man who fell dying was a member of the deputation. There were angry cries. More people were gathering and many were throwing snowballs- snowballs with stones or lumps of ice in them. Tolbusin shouted to an officer to order out the cavalry and clear the square, but the

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officer merely looked away and did nothing. At this Tolbusin seemed to go berserk. He struck out wildly at the officer, and when the man dodged and attempted to slip away, chased after him in a most undignified manner with hand upraised to strike, pursued all the while by catcalls and a rain of snowballs. In his rage Tolbusin forgot about the ice. A particularly hard snowball caught him on the neck and he slipped up, sailing through the air spectacularly and landing on his back. He landed in what, in summertime, would have been seen as an open drain; but the evil-smelling water, carrying in it all kinds of ordure, had frozen and been covered over with snow, now temporarily thawed by water from the Chinese cannon. He lay in this channel, with only his head and shoulders above the surface, shouting for someone to come and pull him out. Several ran over and stood around him watching, but no one made the slightest effort to help him-indeed, someone poked him with his foot in a furtive attempt to push him in even further. Whether he had been seriously injured by his fall or because his body was paralysed by the cold, he appeared to have lost the ability to struggle and lay there immobile. His shouts turned into gasps; then the gasps, too, ceased, and, as they watched in fascinated silence, his face turned blue and his staring eyes became glassy. They continued to stand there watching for several minutes, until it occurred to them that he was dead. Only then did they try to pull him out' but Governor Tolbusin had frozen into the ice. Meanwhile the barrage of jets was gradually easing off as more and more of the crude water-cannon were jamming or splitting or beginning to fall apart and the

supplies of fuel and water were running out. Trinket's brilliant plan appeared to have ended in failure, and the huge efforts all had put into it now seemed wasted. As he stood gazing, in deepest dejection, towards the fort, he saw the gates suddenly open and a great crowd of Russians stream out, waving their arms above them and calling out 'Surrender!' The change from gloom to joy made him incoherent' he began rushing about deliriously, uttering incomprehensible orders.

It was fortunate that the seasoned officers, Chinese and Manchus, under his command, knew what to do. In the hours that followed, the prisoners were marshalled, numbered, and taken care of, the occupation of the city was carried out professionally, inventories made of armouries and stores, and the Governor's

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residence made ready for Trinket and his staff to enter. Tolbusin's corpse was hacked out of the ice and put inside a coffin.

Songgotu and the Imperial Envoy were both fulsome in their praise. The Emperor had specified that victory over the Russians was to be obtained with the minimum of bloodshed. The taking of Albazin with the loss of hardly a single life was surely unprecedented. His Imperial Majesty could congratulate himself on the wisdom and ingenuity of his Supreme Commander. Trinket could not resist a little boasting.

'We could have taken the fort before' he told the Envoy, 'but I thought I'd like to wait till Your Excellency had arrived so that you could see how it was done with your own eyes.'

Trinket had seen enough of Court officials to know the right things to say, and so he added'

'Of course, I couldn't have done it without the advice of you two gentlemen.'

Although Songgotu and the Envoy were both civilians and had not contributed one iota to the campaign, Trinket knew that a little praise cost nothing and would guarantee a report in which anything unfavourable had been suppressed.

Wobbleski and ChHlingoff

Trinket and Doublet spent that night in the master's bedroom of the residence-the room in which, in Governor Golitsyn's time, Trinket had made his first entry into the fort. It had been made warm and cosy for them by the orderlies, with a brightly burning stove and fur rugs on the floor and a pile of well'warmed, fur'lined blankets on the bed. Trinket tried the lid of the great chest. It opened easily, and though the clothes and furs inside may have been different ones, it all seemed pretty much as it had been two or three years before.

'Looking for a Russian princess, Master'" said Doublet teasingly. (She still called him 'Master'.)

'You're my Chinese princess' said Trinket, closing the lid. 'What would I want with a Russian one"

'Your Chinese princess is in Peking' said Doublet. Trinket ignored this.

'This victory definitely deserves a little "celebration", don't you think" he asked her.

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This was the intimate code he always used with her; and she blushed, as she always did on these occasions-though it was quite some time now since she first shared his bed.

The two of them sat shoulder to shoulder on the edge of the bed, talking about this and that. Suddenly they thought they could hear a faint cough. They stopped

talking and looked towards the chest. They waited for some time in silence, but there was no further sound. Doublet stole quietly towards the door and opened it. Four startled bodyguards saw her point towards the chest and whisper' There's someone inside there.'

They went inside the room and quietly opened the lid. Trinket gestured to them to remove the contents; then, as they leaned in, peering through the hole in the bottom, there was a loud bang and one of the men fell backwards with a bullet through his shoulder.

As well as the large stove which heated the room, there was a small charcoal'burning brazier for warming things up on or boiling water for tea.

Trinket gestured to the bodyguards to empty the burning coals down the hole in

the bottom of the chest. This dangerous feat was executed by the most adventurous of the three. There were cries from below and a voice in Russian shouted 'No, no, don't do that! We surrender!' 'Throw out your weapon first!' Trinket shouted back in

Russian.

A pistol came flying upwards, and presently the blackened face appeared of a Russian soldier. His beard was still on fire, and he climbed, coughing and spluttering, from the chest, followed by another soldier in the same sorry state, except that his hair and not his beard was burning.

By this time more guards had come running into the room. They extinguished the

Russians' burning hair and whiskers-none too gently-and trussed them up with their arms behind their backs. Trinket looked from one to the other smut-covered

face with a puzzled expression. Suddenly he gave a start of recognition.

'I know you' he said to one of them. 'You're Wobbleski, aren't you'

'Yes, yes, Excellency Chinese Boy' the man said, breaking into an enormous smile

and bowing repeatedly. 'I am Vobolsky.'

Trinket turned to the other Russian.

'And you must be Chillingoff.'

The other man, too, started bowing. 'Yes, Excellency Chinese Boy. Your old friend Chironov.'

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Trinket had got to know them last time he was in Russia. They were the two musketeers who had distinguished themselves during the disorder which had preceded Princess Sophia's release from the Imperial Hunting Lodge, and after she became Regent she had rewarded each of them with a captaincy. Later they had

volunteered for service in the East, where prospects for anyone wanting to make

a fortune were said to be good. After Tolbusin's death, when the rest of the garrison were talking about surrender, they had broken into the empty residence

and climbed into the tunnel, which they had heard much about and located without

much difficulty, intending to get out of the fort by this means and so escape capture by the Chinese. Unfortunately they had found the exit blocked, and when

they crawled back again to get out by the way they had entered, the room

overhead was already occupied.

Trinket told the guards to untie the men. Let them be taken away and given something to eat, he said. They should be treated decently. It was too late to interrogate them now, but he would want to see them again in the morning, after a good night's sleep.

Next day Trinket had Vobolsky and Chironov summoned to his office and asked them for the latest news of Princess Sophia. The Regent Sophia controlled everything, they said. The two young Tsars did just as they were told. She was always asking about Trinket. There was no one like her Chinese Boy. She had sent them to the East specially to ask him if he would return to visit her.

'Bloody liars!' said Trinket.

No, no. They swore it was true.

'Well, never mind that' said Trinket. 'I want you to take her a letter. But one of you will have to write it for me. I can't do your squiggly Russian writing.'

Vobolsky and Chironov looked sheepish. Like most Russian soldiers, they were illiterate.

'We could get a priest to write one for you,' said Chironov.

'All right,' said Trinket. 'Go and find one.'

One of the principal duties of the Orthodox priests who served as chaplains in the Russian army, apart from administering the sacraments and urging the soldiers to fight, was writing the letters that the men sent to their wives and sweethearts back home.

The one whom Vobolsky and Chironov brought back in tow had a large, bushy beard and was clearly very frightened.

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‘The peace of Almighty God be upon the Chinese General and all his house,’ he said in Russian. (He knew no Chinese.)

Trinket made him sit down at a table on which letter’paper, a Chinese writing’brush, and an inkstone with a little pool of freshly ground ink in it had been placed in readiness.

‘I want you to write a letter to Princess Sophia,’ he said.

The priest picked up the brush, and when Trinket, in his rather fractured Russian, started dictating, began to write. He found the brush impossibly soft for writing Cyrillic letters with-they came out thick or thin in all the wrong places-but dared not complain for fear that the Chinese commander might grow angry.

‘Since we parted I have always been thinking of you and want to come and make you my wife . . .’ Trinket began.

The startled priest gave a little gasp and the word he was writing turned into a blot.

The Princess and His Excellency are sweethearts,’ Chironov explained. ‘She thinks a Chinese lover is a hundred times better than a Russian one.’

‘A hundred times better,’ echoed the priest, looking a little bewildered. ‘Dear me, a hundred times better.’

But he had no difficulty in supplying, freehand, a few of the phrases habitually used in the letters he wrote for Russians to their sweethearts, since clearly a word for word transcription of Trinket’s mangled Russian would not do.

‘Your Russian soldiers have been taking land belonging to us and killing the Chinese who live here,’ Trinket went on. The Chinese Emperor is very angry. He

has sent me with an army to stop them. I have captured your soldiers and I was going to cut them up for shashlik-’

‘My God!’ the priest exclaimed.

‘-but for your sake, I have not made shashlik of them. If you will promise never again to invade our land, Russia and China can be friends. If you don’t, I will come with an army and kill all the Russian men and then you will only have Chinese men to sleep with.’

‘I don’t see how that follows,’ thought the priest, but refrained from comment.

‘I am sending Wobbleski and Chillingoff with this letter and some presents for you,’ Trinket concluded. ‘Do you want to be my sweetheart or my enemy’ It’s up to you.’

This didn’t strike the Russian priest as quite the way in which a Letter of State ought to end. What he actually wrote was a little different’

‘. . . Ever mindful of Your Highness’ gracious kindness, I offer these tributary gifts as a humble expression of my deep affection, and remain ever Your

Highness' devoted Servant, in earnest hope of a lasting peace and the return of Russian prisoners to their beloved homeland.'

These words smuggled in at the end were, of course, an expression of his own sentiments. If peace between the two empires was not concluded, he had visions of himself dying in a foreign land.

That's all' said Trinket. 'Now read it through.'

Nervously the priest picked up the letter and, while pretending to read, reproduced as far as he could remember an approximation to the words that Trinket had dictated, omitting, of course, anything about prisoners at the end. Trinket's Russian was too poor for him to be able to notice any differences, and to the priest's intense relief, he seemed quite pleased, for he gave orders for him to be suitably rewarded.

To this curious document, neither a love'letter exactly nor yet a diplomatic Note, Trinket added the vermilion impression of the great gold Supreme Commander's seal that Kang Xi had given him, taking great care that it was exactly square with the paper. Then he ordered one of the Chinese secretaries to make out a suitable envelope for it (which took longer than writing the letter, by the time all the right styles and titles had been ascertained and painstakingly inscribed on it in formal kaishu calligraphy) and to select a few choice items from the late Governor's possessions to send as gifts. When all was ready, he told Vobolsky and Chironov to choose a hundred Russian soldiers as escort and go with all possible speed to Moscow to deliver his letter and presents to the Princess Sophia in the Kremlin. Again and again they bowed to him in gratitude and kissed the back of his hand, making him laugh because he was tickled by what remained of their beards.

A Loyal Servant

It was now high time to comply with Kang Xi's Edict and move to winter quarters in the south. Leaving a small garrison in Albazin

under the command of Lin Xingzhu, but taking the majority of his Specials with him, Trinket divided the army in two sections. He and Songgotu took up residence in Aigun 'with one half, the other half was stationed at Khumarsk under a

Manchu

officer called Sabsu.

Trinket had the Russian prisoners from Albazin dressed in Manchu uniforms and

got Chinese instructors to train them in shouting a few slogans in Chinese. 'A long, long life to the Emperor!', 'The Chinese Emperor brings blessings to every land!' -that sort of thing. When they were sufficiently word-perfect and could shout them in time, he had them marched by stages to Peking. They were told to

shout them as they were paraded through the streets and when they came into the

presence of the Emperor. The louder they shouted in the Emperor's presence, they

were told, the greater would be their reward.

Three weeks later an Edict arrived conferring distinctions on all members of the

expedition, both officers and men. Trinket's dukedom was raised to Second Class

in addition to which he received a personal gift from Kang Xi, a casket, which turned out to contain the golden rice-bowl originally given him by Shi Lang. It had been retrieved from the ruins of his former Residence after its bombardment

by Father Schall's cannon. It had been badly damaged, but Kang Xi had had it restored and a new inscription added 'For a Loyal Servant'. He understood the message a new beginning. That evening he gave a big dinner for the Envoy and all his officers.

Rather more than a month after this Edict, a second one arrived, this one more in the form of a reprimand. Kang Xi had been greatly displeased by the shouted slogans. He disliked empty flattery and he disapproved of a defeated enemy being

humiliated. What the Envoy read out was quite a stern lecture and should have made him squirm; but it was completely wasted on Trinket, who felt sure that no

one could be really averse to flattery. He put down the Emperor's displeasure to

some fault in the way the slogans were pronounced. It was all the fault of the instructors' they must have done a bad job. He summoned them to him and gave

them a dressing-down. But even this had not greatly worried him, for after bad-mouthing them for a bit, he took out some dice and suggested that they should have a game.

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More Russian Blarney

Except for missing his family, Trinket was very comfortable in Aigun. Once or twice during the long winter months a courier arrived with gifts and little messages from his six wives (knowing he was illiterate, they didn't write); but apart from that, there was no other news from Peking; until one day in spring, when winter at last was over, a small party of distinguished men arrived from Court with an Edict from Kang Xi. The bearer of the Edict was Kang Xi's maternal uncle, Tong Guogang, a Manchu Bannerman, though he was in fact of pure Chinese descent. (His sister, the late Empress Kang, was Kang Xi's mother. Unknown to Trinket, Kang Xi was half Chinese.)

The Edict reiterated Kang Xi's desire for a peace treaty with the Russians. Trinket and Songgotu were to be the leaders of a Chinese delegation to discuss the terms of the treaty. The other members of the delegation were to be Tong Guogang himself and the three distinguished persons who had accompanied him.

When he had finished reading the Edict, Tong Guogang passed on some of the things that Kang Xi had told him informally before he left Peking. The Emperor had gained useful knowledge about Russia from some Dutch priests, one of whom Tong had brought with him as an interpreter. The Russians, the Emperor had said, seemed to be both overbearing and devious. For example, an intercepted letter from a previous Tsar to a Russian envoy spoke of the Chinese Emperor as a future vassal; whereas a letter recently received from the Regent Sophia spoke of a desire for peace, pretending to know nothing about the aggressive Russian behaviour in the Amur region or the fall of Albazin, yet asking for the repatriation of prisoners! Kang Xi thought that the fall of Albazin made this a good time to make peace. But the delegates would still need to be very careful' sometimes they would need to seem hard and unyielding, sometimes soft and polite.

'First a kick up the bum and then a pat!' Trinket suggested.

The distinguished delegates wondered what qualified this ill'bred youth to be one of their leaders in the forthcoming talks.

'The Emperor wants an extramural treaty,' said Tong.

'What's that' said Trinket.

‘It’s the kind of treaty that’s made when a country’s main city is besieged by a big army and the people in the city sue for peace,’

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said Tong. ‘The treaty is made outside the city walls, with the besieging army having the upper hand and getting what they want. The Russians will be in Nerchinsk, so the talks should be held under the walls of Nerchinsk. Not that we

are planning to besiege it; but the Emperor thinks it would be a good idea to let them first see the size of our army before we begin discussing terms. He thinks they might be more reasonable if they know our strength.

Preparations now got under way for moving the army northwards. Dispatches were

sent to Sabsu in Khumarsk telling him that the troops there, too, should be put in readiness to depart. The two halves of the army were to join up at a rendezvous south of Nerchinsk.

When the army at Aigun finally got under way, it was already early summer. The

snow had all melted and the northward march was easy and even pleasurable. They

had reached the River Hailar and were temporarily encamped on its banks when one

of the advance parties reported that there was a small Russian troop in the area, led by two officers who were asking for the commander of the Chinese army.

Trinket said he would see them. As soon as the Russian officers were inside his tent they began bowing obsequiously.

‘Ah! Good, good!’ said Trinket. ‘Wobbleski and Chillingoff. You’re back!’

They had brought a letter from Princess Sophia, which he handed to the Dutch priest to translate. Trinket had kept the Russian priest with him, although he spoke only Russian, thinking that he might still be useful occasionally. This Russian priest was there now, in the tent, and fearful that the letter would contain something that would give him away—a reference to something he had written in the letter to Princess Sophia for which there was no equivalent in what Trinket had dictated. Craning over the Dutch priest’s shoulder, he quickly glanced through it. He saw that he need not have worried. The Princess merely said that she missed Trinket very much and hoped that he would visit her in Moscow after the treaty was signed. She very much wanted this treaty. Russia and

China were both great empires. If they were friends, apart from the advantages for their two peoples, they could share the world between them. But if they were

enemies, they would destroy each other.
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When the Dutchman had finished translating it, Trinket could see the two Russians making signs to him with their eyes and dismissed the priests so that he could speak with them alone.

‘Well, what is it’ he said.

‘Excellency Chinese Boy’ Vobolsky began, ‘Her Highness wants you to visit her very much. She thinks Excellency Chinese Boy better than all Russian men. Number One in the world.’

‘Russian blarney!’ Trinket said to himself; but to Vobolsky he said, ‘I wish you’d stop calling me "Chinese Boy". I’m not a Chinese boy. I’m a Chinese man.’

‘Yes, Excellency Chinese Man. We have presents.’

He and Chironov opened their jackets. Each had hanging round his neck a leather pouch with a lock on it and a little key on a chain. Each took off his own key and unlocked the other one’s pouch with it; they emptied the glittering contents onto the table in two little piles’ one of rubies, sapphires, and topazes, and one of diamonds and jadeite. Trinket had seen many gems in his time, but never any as large and beautiful as these.

‘Her Highness loves all Chinese things,’ said Vobolsky. ‘She has heard that the Chinese make wonderful bridges of stone that can stretch from one side of a river to the other in a single arch without needing piers to stand on. She says can Your Excellency Chinese B-, er, Chinese Man send her workmen to make her such bridges. She would love to stand on a Chinese bridge and dream of Chinese Excellency when he is not there.’

‘More Russian blarney!’ thought Trinket. ‘What does she want Chinese bridges for’ There’s something fishy about this. I don’t trust that woman.’ He hesitated a moment.

‘I’ll think about it,’ he said. ‘I’m on my way to Nerchinsk at the moment. You

two had better come with me. I'll tell you what I've decided when we're there.'

They thanked him and bowed their way out, then went off to fetch their little troop.

Nerchinsk

The name of the Russian plenipotentiary appointed to negotiate a treaty with the Chinese was Golovin' Fyodor Alexeyevich Golovin. He and the rest of the Russian delegation were staying at Nerchinsk. When he was informed that a large Chinese army was in the area,

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he sent a polite note by dispatch'rider to the Chinese commander suggesting that

he should halt the army and stay where he was until he, Golovin, could come out

to meet him. When this had been translated, Trinket replied, equally politely, that he wouldn't dream of putting the Russian envoy to so much trouble. He looked forward to meeting His Excellency in Nerchinsk itself and intended to proceed there without delay. This message, translated by the Dutch interpreter with improvements suggested by the Russian priest, was carried back by the same

rider. By the time Golovin received it, he saw with dismay that Nerchinsk was about to be besieged by a Chinese army large enough to engage in a major battle.

Hastily he composed another note, as polite as the first one but this time much longer and more insistent. He had, he wrote, been sent by the Tsars to negotiate

a peace treaty, and had been given to understand that it was also the wish of His Celestial Majesty the Chinese Emperor that a peace treaty should be discussed. His Excellency would surely understand that it would be impossible to

discuss the terms of a treaty while the proximity of opposing military forces posed the constant threat of a clash.

When he had received this note and had a translation of it explained to him, Trinket consulted his senior colleagues about it. They all agreed that, having already shown the Russians their strength, they ought now to demonstrate how

culturally superior they were by deferring to their wishes. Trinket accordingly ordered the army to withdraw southwards and established his headquarters on the

bank of the River Shilka.

Golovin saw with relief that the Chinese army had withdrawn and sat down to compose another note, this time proposing three conditions to be agreed to by both parties before the talks could begin. They were'

(1) The talks should be conducted at a point halfway between the River Shilka and Nerchinsk.

(2) The number of persons in each of the delegations engaged at any one time in

the talks should not exceed forty.

(3) The military escort of either delegation should not exceed two hundred and sixty men. Swords or sabres might be carried, but no firearms.

He suggested that if the Chinese found these conditions acceptable, the talks might begin the next day.

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The Chinese could see nothing to object to in these conditions and having calculated the approximate mid'point between the fortress and their camp, they

erected and furnished during the course of that one night a tent'like structure in which the talks could take place.

Early next morning Trinket, Songgotu, Tong Guogang, Lin Xingzhu (who had joined

them from Albazin), and the other Chinese delegates rode to the place of meeting

at the head of a marching column of two hundred and sixty infantry, all taken from Lin's Specials. Some minutes after they had arrived, and as they sat waiting on horseback with Lin's Specials drawn up in ranks behind them, the gates of Nerchinsk opened and out rode the Russian delegation followed by a formidable cavalcade of two hundred and sixty mounted Cossacks riding four abreast, tall men on very big horses.

'Dammit!' said Tong Guogang. 'We forgot to say anything about horses. The Russians have scored over us already!'

When the Cossacks had formed up, four ranks of sixty'five men each, and sat motionless in their saddles, very haughty and intimidating, each with a bare sabre held upright in his right hand, they dwarfed the Chinese foot'soldiers who

stood facing them.

‘His Majesty has instructed us to conduct ourselves in all things with the courtesy befitting a highly civilized people,’ said Tong Guogang loudly and pointedly. ‘I suggest that we dismount.’

He and the rest of the Chinese delegation got down from their horses and bowed to the Russians. The Russians thereupon got down from their horses and bowed back. But not the Cossacks’ they remained seated impassively in their saddles.

An exchange of courtesies followed in which the leader of each delegation offered his own ruler’s felicitations to the ruler of the other. This was greatly protracted by, in each case, having to be translated by an interpreter into the other’s language.

It still rankled with Trinket that the rows of supercilious Cossacks remained mounted. He burst out suddenly in his bad Russian, impatiently ignoring the interpreter ‘Look here, Fee’oh’dore,’ (he was under the impression that ‘Fyodor’ was his surname) ‘these men you’ve brought with you are a pretty rude lot. Why don’t they get off their horses in the presence of My Excellency’

Golovin smilingly remonstrated ‘It is the custom in our country. When the Cossacks are on duty, they remain mounted even in the presence of the Tsar.’

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That’s as may be’ said Trinket, ‘but this isn’t your country, it’s China.’

Golovin smiled. ‘Oh no, Your Excellency. Nerchinsk was founded and built by us.

This is indisputably Russian territory.’

Actually, before the Russians built Nerchinsk, the whole area was terra nullius and had not been claimed by either country.

‘It’s Chinese,’ said Trinket. There’s lots of proof.’

‘I would like to know what it is,’ said Golovin suavely. ‘Perhaps Your Excellency will be good enough to instruct me.’

His Excellency couldn’t, of course, do any such thing, and because he was rattled, lapsed into Chinese and began cursing and swearing in his native Yangzhou dialect, to the despair of the interpreters, who interpreted a particularly indecent oath of Trinket’s as a desire of His Excellency the Chinese Ambassador to marry His Excellency the Russian Ambassador’s mother.

Golovin looked rather pleased.

‘My mother was a great beauty in her day,’ he said. ‘It’s true, she is now widowed and theoretically could remarry; but she is in her late sixties’ a little old for Your Excellency. However, should Your Excellency ever visit Moscow again, I should be pleased to introduce you to her.’

When this was translated, Trinket concluded that Golovin must have been overawed

by his display of anger, and changed instantly from angry aggressiveness to affability.

‘Very good, very good!’ he said, shaking Golovin warmly by the hand. ‘Next time

I’m in Moscow, you’ll be seeing quite a lot of me at your house.’ Holding him by the hand, he began walking with him into the tent. The two delegations followed.

When they were inside the tent, the delegates arranged themselves so that they sat opposite each other along the sides of a long table, with Trinket and Golovin facing each other in the centre. Golovin began.

‘Her Highness the Regent Sophia is of the opinion that the frontier problem can

best be solved if it is approached in a spirit of complete sincerity and fairness, with neither side taking advantage of, or seeking to outwit, the other. In this spirit we propose that the River Amur should be taken as the boundary between our two empires, all land to the north of it to be the sovereign territory of Russia and all land to the south the sovereign territory of China.’

‘Is Albazin north or south of the river?’ Trinket asked.

‘North’ said Golovin. ‘We built it. And Nerchinsk. For that reason we claim all land north of the Amur as our territory.’

‘What do you call that little mountain near Albazin?’ said

Trinket.

Golovin consulted one of the Russians sitting at his side.

‘Kozulya,’ he said. ‘We call it Mount Kozulya.’

Trinket knew that kozulya was the Russian word for ‘deer’. ‘Do you know what my

title is?’ Trinket asked him. ‘You are, I believe, the Duke of Luding’ said

Golovin. ‘We Chinese call that mountain Ludingshan’ said Trinket. ‘It means Deer

and Cauldron Mountain. I am the Duke of Albazin. And what about your title?’

Golovin, it appeared, was a marquis with estates somewhere west of Moscow.

Trinket suggested that a solution might be for him and Golovin to do an exchange' he would have Golovin's estates west of Moscow and Golovin would get Albazin and Nerchinsk. He would suggest this to Princess Sophia next time he was in Moscow. The proposal was preposterous; but Golovin had heard that the Princess was quite besotted with her young Chinese lover, and there was no knowing what that capricious young woman might not consent to in the heat of passion.

After some rather undignified exchanges, Golovin began to waver and agreed that perhaps, in view of Lord Wei's special connection with it, an exception might be made in the case of Albazin itself. Perhaps Albazin and a small area around it might be conceded, with access from the Chinese side. But that was the most that could be allowed in the way of compromise.

Trinket insisted that the Russian proposal to take the Amur as the boundary was unacceptable. When challenged to produce a more satisfactory alternative, he proceeded to make a succession of proposals, each more preposterous than the last, ending with the suggestion that they should establish the boundary by means of dice, each successful throw representing so many square miles of territory. Golovin's suave self-assurance was rapidly giving way to irritation and anger.

Songgotu (although he was Trinket's friend) had so far inclined to the opinion, privately held by most of his colleagues on the Chinese delegation, that the appointment of an illiterate young clown, merely because he was the Emperor's favourite, to be China's chief representative in these important talks was a folly that was

likely to end in disaster. He now began to see that there was a good deal of sense in Kang Xi's choice. Trinket's idea of diplomacy was risible; but at least his clowning had stalled the Russian attempt to gain instant recognition of their right to retain what they had seized by brute force or guile. And in the case of Albazin, the young clown had even gained a concession. Entering into the spirit of the thing, he decided to try a little Golovin-baiting himself. 'Of course,' he said, 'if occupying land gives you the right of ownership, you could argue that Moscow itself is really Chinese territory.'

‘Our settlements north of the Amur are, I should have thought, sufficient grounds for claiming ownership,’ said Golovin. ‘But-ha ha-the notion that Moscow

belongs to China is grotesque. A

tasteless joke, my dear sir.’

‘Not at all’ said Songgotu. ‘Russia is, I believe, a large country, containing many peoples.’

‘Indeed,’ said Golovin. ‘Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Tartars’ we include many peoples in our great empire. But all are subjects of the Tsars. All, in that sense, are Russians.’

‘We, too,’ said Songgotu. ‘We, too, are a large country containing many peoples’ Hans, Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, Miaos, Uighurs . . . but all subject to our Emperors, all in that sense Chinese.’

‘I am sure that is so’ said Golovin. ‘But I fail to see in what way it is relevant to your extraordinary assertion that Moscow is Chinese.’

‘I know nothing about Russian literature’ said Songgotu, ‘but I am sure there must be written history. Doubtless you will have heard of Genghis Khan, who overran the whole of Russia with his Mongol horsemen four hundred years ago. His

successors ruled as Emperors in China. We call them the "Yuan dynasty", and Genghis Khan we call the Founder of the Yuan dynasty. The Mongols are one of the

peoples of China. Mongols occupied Russia for many years-far longer, I believe, than the Russians have occupied the land north of the Amur. I think our claim on

Moscow is quite a good one.’

‘Holy ting’a’lings!’ said Trinket. ‘So Moscow is really Chinese. I wouldn’t mind a golden yurt in Moscow!’ He turned to Golovin ‘There’s no need to carry on with

these talks. You can go back to Moscow straight away and ask the Princess when

she can be ready to hand over.’

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Golovin’s face was livid. He got up from the table, knocking over his chair as he did so, and stormed out of the tent. A long silence followed, during which those inside wondered what they should do next. Suddenly there was a thunder of

hooves and Trinket, momentarily panicking, hid underneath the table. Almost at

the same moment an agitated Lin Xingzhu came rushing into the tent. ‘Lord Wei-”

‘Just coming,’ said Trinket, emerging rather ashamedly from under the table.

‘He’s up to something with those Cossacks’ said Lin Xingzhu. ‘What do you want me to do’

‘Bring your men nearer’ said Trinket. ‘Don’t do anything yet, but if he tries any funny business, have him surrounded.’

Lin Xingzhu went outside again, followed by Trinket and several of the others. Golovin had got the Cossacks performing manoeuvres. In perfect formation the two hundred and sixty horsemen charged with drawn sabres towards the tent where the talks were being held, then, at a single word of command, they reined to a halt at barely ten yards from it, still perfectly in line. At another word of command they separated into two squadrons of one hundred and thirty, each of which rode off in opposite directions and then, after riding in a straight line for a considerable distance, wheeled round in two great arcs, finally coming together into a single body again and ending up where they had started, in perfect formation. It was a breathtaking performance.

‘Well, my lord’ Golovin said, with a triumphant laugh, ‘what do you think of our Russian cavalry’

Trinket wasn’t going to be intimidated. He saw that Lin Xingzhu’s troop had re’formed closer to the tent.

‘Just circus stuff,’ he said. ‘Not much use when it comes to fighting.’

This time Golovin completely lost his temper.

‘Charge to disperse!’ he called to the Cossack captain. ‘From four hundred yards.’

The order was given in Russian and would have been meaningless even to a Russian unless he was a cavalryman; but Lin Xingzhu and the other non’Russian speakers saw what was intended when the Cossacks turned round their horses, withdrew a short distance, then faced about and were evidently preparing to charge. Lin

Xingzhu turned to the man beside him and muttered something.

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The Cossack captain barked an order and his men dug in their spurs, held aloft their sabres, and began to move forwards, uttering bloodcurdling cries. Just as they were getting up speed, four of Lin's men darted out and, quick as a flash, had Golovin surrounded and their sword-points touching his throat and other parts of his body. The Cossack charge had to be aborted. The captain, having frantically brought it to a halt, dismounted and began walking forwards, as if to ask Golovin for instructions; but as he drew near, he suddenly swivelled round, pulled a pistol from inside his jacket, and pointed it at Trinket. Without his needing to say anything, the meaning was clear enough 'Kill my leader and I will kill yours.'

Once more Doublet saved the day. Trinket had allowed her to put on the uniform

of a Chinese soldier and she had been serving as one of the orderlies during the talks. A young, unarmed batman could pose no threat and attracted no attention

and she had slipped behind the captain and closed several points on his body before anyone noticed what she was doing. He could neither move nor utter a sound, and she was able to take the pistol from his hand rather like detaching a movable part from a statue.

There was outrage on the Chinese side. It was Golovin himself who had drawn up

the rules which were to be observed throughout the talks, one of which specifically prohibited the carrying of firearms. Songgotu formally protested at this breach of faith and his protest was translated into Russian by one of the interpreters. Replying through the interpreter, Golovin claimed that it was in disobedience to his orders that the captain had been carrying the pistol' he had expressly ordered his guards to leave their firearms behind.

Tell him to get them all to dismount and lay down their weapons' said Trinket. 'Including firearms.'

While this was being relayed and then translated by the interpreter, and while Golovin, with two swords still at his throat, was giving this order to the Cossacks, Trinket sent a runner to the main Chinese army in the rear with orders

to advance, bringing the cannon with them, and take up nearer positions in full view of Nerchinsk. Meanwhile the Cossacks had begun dismounting and laying down

their sabres. None of them, apparently, had any firearms.

'I think we'd better try searching one or two of them, just to make sure' said Trinket, who didn't trust the Russians and suspected that the captain was not the only one who had brought a pistol.

His suspicion proved not unfounded. Three soldiers of Lin's company began searching the men in the front line of the Cossacks. They searched each man in turn, two of them standing guard while the third did the actual searching. They had only reached the third man in the row when they had already found four pistols' the first and third Cossacks had a pistol each, the one between them had two. As each pistol was produced, Golovin expressed astonishment and indignation. This was disgraceful, he said. The men would be severely punished for their disobedience.

'You can't trust these people,' said Trinket. 'Better strip'search those fellows in case you've missed anything.' (He didn't for a moment think they had missed anything, but he had other reasons.)

Protesting somewhat, the three were stripped to the buff in front of all their fellows. Trinket suggested that the rest of the Cossack guard might prefer to hand over their firearms themselves rather than submit to the humiliation of being publicly undressed. This was translated by an interpreter, Golovin being, by now, speechless with confusion and shame. It had the desired effect. A total of two hundred and seventy-five pistols was collected. That is to say, not counting the captain and the three who had been searched and stripped, the remaining two hundred and fifty-six men all had one pistol each except for fourteen of them who each had a pair.

Trinket told the four men surrounding Golovin to lower their swords and withdraw, so that he could speak to him, man to man.

'If you can't rely on your men to obey your orders, I don't see how they can be trusted to stay here,' he said. 'I think we'd better send them back to Nerchinsk under guard for you to deal with later.'

Golovin made no reply.

Trinket ordered that the Cossacks have their hands tied behind them. They were then made to form a column and marched off, guarded by Lin Xingzhu's Specials, and handed over at the gates of Nerchinsk. The garrison of Nerchinsk, witnessing this debacle but scarcely understanding what had happened, did not know what to

do. Then they looked at the massed forces of the Chinese army and the numerous cannon trained upon the fortress and wisely decided to do nothing.

‘Well, after that interruption, let’s get on with the talks,’ said Trinket brightly.

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The two delegations trooped back into the tent and resumed their places on opposite sides of the table, Golovin facing Trinket, very stiff and silent and resolved not to say anything. Outside, the Cossack captain immobilized by Doublet was left standing alone, statue-like a source of merriment to Lin Xingzhu’s wicker-shield-carrying guards. From time to time heads would pop up

above the walls of Nerchinsk it was members of the garrison, curious to get a glimpse of this latest example of what Chinese sorcery could do to its victims. Inside the tent Trinket was confident that, having gained the upper hand by humiliating the Russians, he would be able to impose what terms he liked on them. But he had greatly misjudged his man. When he smilingly proposed that they

should resume the talks, Golovin obdurately refused.

‘I am your prisoner,’ he said. ‘You may do with me as you like, but it won’t make any difference. Any terms obtained under duress will be invalid.’

And when Trinket, who didn’t understand what this meant even when it was translated by the interpreter, persisted in urging that they should continue, Golovin took a large handkerchief from his pocket and tied it round his mouth. The delegates on both sides of the table looked at each other helplessly and wondered what to do. A member of the Russian delegation whispered in Golovin’s

ear. Golovin nodded, and when the Russians had whispered among each other for

several minutes, they rose from their seats together (with the exception of Golovin) and said that, as the talks appeared to be temporarily suspended, they would like to go back to Nerchinsk.

This could hardly be refused. Lin’s special troops were ordered to escort them, taking the horses, handguns, and sabres confiscated from the Cossacks to be returned to their original owners as a sign of Chinese goodwill. The unfortunate

Cossack captain was allowed to go with them. After a few deft touches from Doublet he regained his mobility and power of speech, but having stood for so long in one position, he was too stiff to walk or ride, and was obliged to sit in the cart which was carrying the two hundred and seventy-five handguns and two

hundred and sixty sabres.

After the departure of the other Russians, Golovin continued to sit, solitary and mute, on his own side of the table, the handkerchief still tied conspicuously round the lower half of his face. Songgotu and the other Chinese delegates were all

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nonplussed-except for Trinket, who firmly believed that in an awkward situation

like this there was nothing that a few drinks couldn't do.

'I think we should take a bit of a break now for food and refreshment' he said.

As the Chinese orderlies began busying themselves with preparations, and savoury

smells began to suffuse the tent, Golovin was seen to be showing a certain interest. Trinket had hit, quite by chance, on his one little weakness' Golovin was a gourmet and, talks or no talks, he was not going to miss a chance of sampling the Chinese cuisine and tasting some Chinese wine. The orderlies set several dishes on the table and poured heated wine into several small wine'cups.

The Chinese each picked up a wine'cup and looked towards Golovin.

'Qing!' said Songgotu and Tong Guogang.

'ZdorovyemV said Trinket.

Golovin removed the handkerchief from his mouth and put it in his pocket. Then

he picked up the nearest wine'cup and tossed off the contents in one gulp. When

the Chinese picked up chopsticks, Golovin reached for a spoon and helped himself

from the dishes, one after the other, smacking his lips and showing every sign of enjoyment. But still he didn't speak. They refilled his wine'cup, once, twice, three times . . . finally they lost count. In fact several times they had to fetch another kettle of it. And in between knocking back cupfuls of the wine, he ate voraciously. At last, when all the plates were empty and when he had drunk far more than any of the Chinese present, he took out his handkerchief and

tied it once more round his mouth. One thing was clear' there was one aspect of Chinese culture that Golovin appreciated; but he was not disposed to talk.

The Chinese held a muttered consultation.

‘What are we going to do with him’ said Trinket.

Songgotu and Tong Guogang made suggestions involving varying degrees of violence and brutality, but Trinket pointed out that the Emperor wanted a peace treaty and might not be too pleased if all they succeeded in doing was giving the Russians a beating.

‘You’re right’ they said. ‘But what do we do, then’ Just let him go”

‘I think we shall have to’ said Trinket. ‘Let’s keep him here tonight, though. I think I could put on a little show tonight that

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might persuade the tamardy old turtle’head to change his mind. We can let the bugger go in the morning.’

It was explained to Golovin through the interpreter that he was being invited to spend the night in the Chinese camp. A tent was being placed at his disposal. He could, if he wished, return to Nerchinsk in the morning; but meanwhile he would appreciate that, for his own safety, it would be necessary to place a Chinese guard on the tent. Golovin made no objection, having already made it clear that he regarded himself as a prisoner and was acting under duress, and when the soldiers arrived who had been detailed to show him where he was to sleep, he offered no resistance, but rose from the table and followed them in silence.

During the next hour or two Trinket was kept busy organizing his ‘little show’. This involved separate briefing sessions with the three soldiers guarding Golovin’s tent, the Dutch and Russian priests, his Chinese and Manchu colleagues in the talks, and the commanders of units of the main Chinese army who had moved to forward positions during the day.

Conspiracy in the Tent

Golovin’s tent was warm and the bed was comfortable, but he found himself

quite

unable to sleep. Hour after endless hour he tossed and turned, assailed by successive waves of worry, fear, and regret. It was well after midnight when he suddenly became aware of a thunderous sound of snoring outside the tent. It

was

coming, he found, when he got up and looked through the tent'flap, from the Chinese guards, all three of whom were asleep, propped up against one of the side'poles of the tent, with the evidence that they had been drinking at their side.

'A God'given chance to get away!' he thought.

He sat down on the bed and pulled his boots on, then gently crept outside. Just at that moment one of the guards gave a cry. Golovin's heart missed a beat, and for fully half a minute he didn't move. But the man still seemed to be asleep, for after the cry he only muttered some dream'talk and a little while afterwards resumed his snoring. Golovin breathed once more.

There were several tents in the encampment. A couple of sentries paced quietly round the perimeter in contramotion, but it took them quite a long time to make

the circuit and Golovin found

it easy to dodge from tent to tent without being seen. All the tents were in darkness except one large central tent from which light was coming and a faint hum of voices. What could the Chinese be doing at this hour, he wondered' After

a brief hesitation, his curiosity got the better of him and he tiptoed over.

Crouching down in the shadows on the darkest side of the tent, he tried to make

out what was going on inside.

They were speaking Chinese, but he heard his own name mentioned and once or

twice he thought he heard someone say 'Moscow'. Then there was some Russian

spoken' the pidjin Russian of the appalling Chinese boy and the Russian of one or other of the interpreters. Then more Chinese. This time he distinctly heard 'Golovin', followed by a burst of laughter. He found that by getting down on his knees he could lift the bottom edge of the tent and peep inside. He saw Trinket sitting fully dressed at a table with several high'ranking Chinese officers wearing full armour. It looked as if they were being briefed for a campaign. Presently the demon Chinese boy said something to the Dutch interpreter who began explaining it in Russian to the Russian priest. Only then did Golovin fully grasp what was being planned.

The peace talks were a ruse! What the Chinese were planning was nothing less than a full-scale invasion of Russia. While peace talks continued interminably at Nerchinsk, with poor, silly Golovin from time to time reporting back on their progress, a large Chinese army would be marching steadily across Russia on an unprepared and totally unsuspecting Moscow. It seemed preposterous; but then

Golovin reflected that the Chinese had already, on more than one occasion, given

evidence of possessing some sort of supernatural power. And four centuries earlier the Mongols had swept through Russia, Poland, and Hungary with only twenty thousand horsemen. One thing was very clear. He must get that treaty signed as quickly as possible. His mind was made up. He stole swiftly back to his tent, stepped past the sleeping guards, and got into bed again for a well-earned sleep.

Not by Halves

Next morning, after an excellent breakfast, Golovin was conducted by the guards to Trinket's tent.

'Well, Your Excellency,' said Trinket, 'did you have a good night'

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'Thank you,' said Golovin. 'These fellows took such good care of me that I slept the whole night through.'

'Good,' said Trinket. 'I hope you are not feeling angry any more. Are you ready now to discuss the boundary with us'

Golovin took his handkerchief from his pocket and made signs of tying it round his mouth. It was now Trinket's turn to be angry; but Golovin only repeated what

he had said the day before' he could not discuss anything, because as long as he remained a prisoner, nothing he agreed to would be valid.

'All right,' said Trinket. 'You can go back to Nerchinsk then. Perhaps we could continue the talks after a break of ten days or so, when you're feeling a little more at ease.'

'Thank you,' said Golovin. 'That's very handsome of you. Let me respond by proposing that we begin talks again this afternoon. A ten-day moratorium will not be necessary.'

‘Surely there’s no hurry’ said Trinket. The talks will go all the better after we’ve all had a good rest.’

‘Our two rulers are both anxious for an early conclusion,’ said Golovin. ‘We must get a treaty signed as quickly as possible.’

Three days at least then,’ said Trinket. ‘I don’t think my Emperor is in such a hurry.’

‘No, no, this afternoon. I insist.’

‘Very well. But I must warn you,’ said Trinket, ‘we shall want to argue about that boundary inch by inch.’

‘Yes,’ thought Golovin, ‘I’m sure you will. And meanwhile your army will be well on its way to Moscow.’

When Lin’s Specials were escorting him back to Nerchinsk, he could see no sign of the Chinese troops who yesterday had seemed to be everywhere. Tents, cannon, horses, soldiers had vanished overnight.

The Chinese don’t do things by halves,’ he thought. ‘When they say they’re going, they go!’

An Object for a Cult

Promptly at two o’clock that afternoon Golovin, accompanied by some ten or a dozen Russian delegates-no military escort this time-arrived at the tent where the talks were to be held. Trinket, Songgotu, Tong Guogang, and the Chinese delegates arrived a little later. After a brief exchange of courtesies, the boundary talks

1 Ht DEER AND THE CAULDRON

proceeded straight away. No reference was made to what had taken place the day before. This time the talking was done almost entirely by Golovin and Songgotu; Trinket played virtually no part.

The talks lasted four days in all. At one point Trinket got thoroughly bored with the whole proceedings and went off to sit by himself at a little side-table

where refreshments were laid. He passed the time nibbling at cakes and pastries or silently humming his way through a little repertoire of songs. From time to time, when he glanced towards the main table, Golovin and Songgotu would always be hunched over an enormous map, each with a finger on it. Golovin's finger seemed always to be retreating before Songgotu's. To Trinket it looked like some sort of complicated game, but not one that he felt any inclination to learn.

Golovin was made so anxious by the thought of the Chinese army marching westwards that he was conceding everything. The resulting treaty was extremely favourable to China, defining as Chinese a great deal of territory that has since reverted to Russia. As the definitive version of the treaty was to be in Latin, most of the four days were taken up with the interpreters on both sides arguing about the translation. There were to be four copies of the treaty, one in Russian, one in Chinese, and two in Latin, each side getting a copy in their own language and another one in Latin to refer to in case of dispute. By the evening of the fourth day all four copies were ready for signing.

When it came to the signing ceremony, Trinket for the first time in his life felt truly embarrassed. Normally he could sign documents with his imposing seal of office, but this time he would have to write his name. Songgotu noticed that he looked worried, and put him out of his misery.

'Just the first character of your name will do,' he said. (None of the Russians would be any the wiser, he argued, whatever he wrote.)

The first character in Trinket's was easy-'little' a vertical line with a big dot on either side. He had practised it many times when idly doodling. The one he wrote on the Russian copy was particularly striking. The dots were a bit too low and the vertical a bit too tall, but he had taken great pains to write it and was rather proud of the result.

'You know' he said to Songgotu, 'now I come to look at it, it's a bit like a you-know-what.'

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Songgotu looked and laughed; the Chinese delegates looked and laughed; even the Chinese soldiers on guard duty in the tent cottoned on to what the joke was and

began laughing too. The Russians, of course, were mystified. More ceremonies followed the signing. Solemn oaths were taken, cannon were fired

off in salute, and there was an exchange of presents. The Russians gave telescopes, silverware, sabres, and swords. The Chinese gave saddles and harnesses, gold cups, silks, and brocades. In addition, to show that there was no ill feeling and to compensate them for their humiliation, the Chinese gave a gift of twenty silver taels to each of the two hundred and sixty Cossacks. After the ceremonies there was a very grand banquet for the members of both delegations.

Poor Golovin! In the midst of all this celebration he looked very glum. Trinket knew what was worrying him, but pretended not to notice. However, two days later

a Chinese army was reported to be approaching from the west and Golovin saw it

for himself with his telescope from the highest point in the fort and forgot his worry. The army had in fact been camping out of sight for the past few days only

a few miles from Nerchinsk, waiting for news that the Treaty had been concluded.

It remained to have boundary'stones made for placing at a few key points to mark

the frontier. These were inscribed in five languages' Manchu, Chinese, Mongol, Latin, and Russian. Stonemasons were put to work and after several days of frantic activity the work was finished, and selected units from each side had to travel to each site in turn and supervise the setting up of the stones. During the considerable time it took to transport and install them, Trinket employed the masons on a private work of his own. At last, when the last boundary'stone had been erected and the boundary marking was complete, the time had come for

the delegations to take leave of each other and return to their own capitals.

Before he left, Trinket summoned Vobolsky and Chirinov, who had been waiting all

this time for a response to the Princess Sophia's request, and showed them the gifts he had assembled for them to take to her. They included a very beautifully embroidered Chinese bedspread and pillow, which, he laughingly assured them,

would remind her of their happy times together. Vobolsky was unimpressed.

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'Her Highness loves Excellency Chinese Man' he said. 'Chinese bedding will wear

out in time. Not so the Princess' love. Always she will love you. She wants

Chinese stone bridge. She is so romantic. A bridge will last for ever.'

'I've thought of that' said Trinket. 'I've got something else for you to take to her.'

He gave an order, and eight sweating guardsmen appeared, staggering under the

weight of a crated object slung between carrying poles which looked rather like a large coffin. It was seven or eight feet long and three feet broad and weighed nearly half a ton. Several thin metal bands encircled it, like the hoops of a barrel. They were sealed with sealing wax bearing the impress of a seal.

'I want you to take very good care of this on the journey' he told them. 'I can guarantee she will be very pleased to get it. And it will last every bit as long as a Chinese stone bridge.'

The transporting of this monstrous gift all the way from Nerchinsk to Moscow cost the luckless pair a very great deal of trouble; but Trinket was right when he said that it would give her pleasure. When the bands were broken and the crating had been levered off and the packing removed, a life-size sculpture of Trinket in a state of nature was revealed. On the statue's chest, chiselled in Cyrillic letters, were words that the Dutch interpreter had supplied

'WILL LOVE YOU ALWAYS

Thereafter it graced the Princess' bedchamber in the Kremlin, a source of wistful, fond memory to her and emulation to her lovers.

But Trinket had been wrong when he said that it would last as long as a stone bridge. When the young Tsar Peter seized power and banished his half-sister from

the Kremlin, he had the statue destroyed. Only a fragment of the lower part of the torso survived, a fragment somewhat resembling the 'vertical line with a dot

on either side' that was the first part of Trinket's name. It was smuggled out by one of the soldiers engaged in the statue's destruction. The secret of where it was hidden was not long kept, and soon it became a place of pilgrimage. Among

ignorant peasant women the stone fragment was widely believed to have magic powers. It was said to be wonderfully efficacious if barren wives prayed for a son while they fondled it with one hand and crossed themselves with the other.

CHAPTER 28

In which Trinket returns yet again to Peking, and is obliged to supervise the Execution of his Old Friend Whiskers Mao; he meets four Gentlemen of the Resistance; and finally decides to call it a Day and retire from Public Life Altogether

An Old, Bewhiskered Friend

Trinket returned from Nerchinsk to Peking in total triumph. All the chief ministers of state came out to the city gates to greet his carriage. He went immediately to see the Emperor, together with all the other mandarins who had

accompanied him on his mission, including' Songgotu, Pengcun, Sabsu, and Lin

Xingzhu. Kang Xi

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expressed his enormous pleasure at the success of the negotiations, and elevated

Trinket (yet again!) to Duke of Luding First Class. There was nowhere higher for

him to rise now, other than to a Princedom of the Realm. The others were also rewarded with appropriate promotions.

In a private audience, Trinket gave a truthful enough account of the taking of Fort Albazin and the final settling of the border treaty. Kang Xi, to express his pleasure, gave presents for Trinket's wives and children, and threw a grand banquet for him that very evening.

After the banquet, Trinket was carried home in great state, with a number of official criers clearing the way for him and others following in the rear.

Suddenly, from the depths of his palanquin, he heard a very familiar voice, shouting from the roadside'

There goes Trinket Wei-I know him! I'd know that little guttersnipe anywhere, the filthy, rotten knave, the dirty, ungrateful scoundrel!'

Trinket looked out through the curtains and in the dark he saw a great burly figure of a man come out from under the eaves, running towards him, gesticulating wildly, and swearing nineteen to the dozen'

'Trinket Wei! You shameless rogue! You've sold out to the Manchu Tartars! You've

killed your own Shifu, and your own Brothers, brave men and true! So the Emperor made you a Duke for it, did he! Well bully for you! Because I'm going to run this sword of mine right through you, Duke Puke!

As the man came closer, Trinket could see that he was completely naked down to the waist. He was a fierce-looking character, with a very hairy chest, bushy eyebrows, and big, deepset eyes. And then suddenly Trinket knew who it was. It was none other than his old friend, the very man who had brought him to Peking in the first place-the outlaw Whiskers Mao, his Would-be Master!

Mao pulled out the short sword he was carrying concealed in his leggings and dashed towards Trinket; but before he knew what was happening, a dozen guards had pounced on him, beaten him up, and bound him tight. None of this deterred Mao from continuing his tirade

'You dirty little son of a whore! And to think it was I who brought you here in the first place! And you-with all that fancy talk about Honour and Brotherhood-ended up selling out to the

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Tartars and betraying your own friends! You've got the Helmsman's blood on your foul turtle hands!

The guards began to punch him on the mouth, but even that failed to stop him cursing and swearing. Trinket ordered them not to treat the man so roughly. Finally they stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth in a last effort to silence him, and now all he could utter was a series of muffled (but still outraged) grunts and groans.

Take this man to my palace,' ordered Trinket. 'Don't be too hard on him. Give him food and drink. I shall question him myself later.'

As soon as he reached home, Trinket had a meal set out for two in his study, and

invited Whiskers to join him. As a precaution, he secretly told Su Quan and Doublet to stand by, disguised as menservants.

Mao was brought in, and Trinket gave orders that his gag and shackles were to be

removed, and that the two of them were to be left alone. He gave Whiskers a smiling welcome.

‘Brother Mao! How have you been keeping?’

‘Me’ Keeping” blustered the still unrepentant Whiskers. ‘I’ve been keeping extremely poorly, I’d have you know, ever since the day I met you!’

‘Please sit down, Brother Mao,’ said Trinket. ‘Have a drink or two, and relax. Then we can talk about whatever it is you think I’ve done to offend you.’

‘I’ll kill you first!’ cried Whiskers, and advanced on Trinket, brandishing his great fists. Su Quan rushed forward, seized Whiskers’ wrist in her left hand, and gave it a sharp twist, while at the same time striking him twice on the shoulder with her right hand. Whiskers went numb immediately, and slumped into a

chair, still cursing and swearing, still struggling to jump up and fight, and muttering, ‘Little guttersnipe!’

Su Quan was by now astride his shoulders, and had both hands pressing his twin

shoulder points. He sank helplessly back into the chair. He was easily twice her size, but no match for her.

It soon transpired that Whiskers’ misunderstanding stemmed from the fact that

Kang Xi, in his Edict elevating Trinket to the Dukedom First Class of Luding, had deliberately listed as one of his ‘great achievements’ the killing of the ‘notorious Triad ringleader’ Chen Jinnan. Trinket was greatly perplexed at this, and deeply upset at the thought that anyone should think him capable

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of doing something as base as taking the life of his own Shifu. He assured Whiskers in forceful terms that it was not he, but Zheng Keshuang, who had done

this terrible deed. Why, Zheng was even now living in Peking, and they could go

and confront him with it.

Just then, the arrival was announced of Colonel Dolong, bearing an Imperial Edict. Trinket fell to his knees and kowtowed.

‘His Majesty commands that the man who abused you in the street should be taken

straight to the Palace for questioning.’

Trinket shuddered when he heard this, for his old friend’s sake. He knew only too well what ‘questioning’ meant.

‘But why’ he protested to Dolong. ‘It was nothing! In fact, I’ve already “questioned” the man myself, and he meant no harm, he’s simply a bit mad! He was shouting all sorts of nonsense, raving about the Jade Emperor in Heaven! It was all quite harmless. Anyway, I’ve already agreed to release him.’

Whiskers was not prepared to go along with this. He staggered forward and brought both his fists crashing down on the table, sending cups and bowls flying everywhere.

‘Bit mad, am I’ Oh no I’m not! I know what I was saying. I know a filthy Tartar when I see one, and I know a Tartar’lover too, and I’m not afraid of any Tartar Emperor either!’

‘Drat!’ muttered Trinket silently to himself. Trust old Whiskers to miss the point! I was only trying to pull the wool over Dolong’s eyes so I could set him free! Now he’s in real trouble!’

‘Come along!’ ordered Dolong, and his men dragged Whiskers from the room. The last thing he did was to take aim and send a great gob of phlegm flying directly at Trinket. It hit him right between the eyes.

Trinket feared the worst for Whiskers. He would probably be tortured, summarily questioned, and then executed. He must think fast, and find a way to rescue his old friend.

Making Choices

Trinket followed Dolong to the Palace, and went straight in to see Kang Xi, who was in the Upper Library.

‘That man shouting at you in the street-he was your friend, wasn’t he’ A Triad, was he”

‘He was my friend, Majesty, yes, but he’s never strictly speaking been a Triad. He knew my Shifu, Chen Jinnan, and got

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very upset when he heard, from your Edict, that I was supposed to have killed him.'

Kang Xi smiled.

'I thought you were supposed to have broken all ties with the Triads' Wasn't that our agreement?"

'I have, Majesty. On this last mission, to deal with the Russians, none of the Triads came with me.'

'And if they should ever try to get in touch with you"

Then I'll refuse to see them.'

Kang Xi nodded.

'You can't go on for ever serving two masters, Laurie. You have to make a choice. If you're with them, then you must be against me.'

Trinket looked horrified by this remark. He fell to his knees and knocked his head on the ground.

'Never! I could never be against you! I've learnt my lesson, Majesty. I've turned over a new leaf. Really I have.'

'Excellent!' Kang Xi nodded and smiled again. Then I want you personally to supervise this man's execution-tomorrow morning!'

Trinket kowtowed again.

'But Majesty, it's thanks to him that I came to Peking in the first place. It's thanks to him that I met you. Please, I beg you, spare his life! What has he done, anyway' You can cancel all the titles you gave me for my Russian mission and demote me back to plain Marquis if you like.'

Kang Xi's face was stern and expressionless.

'Don't think you can bargain with me! You've got a nerve!'

Trinket kowtowed frantically.

'I don't mind how far down I go! I'll go all the way back to being Earl of Potluck if that'll help. Anything!'

Kang Xi looked at Trinket prostrate on the ground before him, and realized that

wealth and glory, rank and title, meant nothing to him. He was still a street urchin at heart. It made him angry. It offended him. But at the same time he could not help being amused by it.

Tamardy! Hot poppas and mommas! For goodness' sake stand up man!'

Another kowtow or two, and Trinket obeyed. Kang Xi's face was still stern.

'Very well. I will make a deal with you' if you really want me to let him keep his head, then I'll have to cut off yours!'

Trinket pulled the most wretched face he could muster.

That's a bit of a hard deal, isn't it?"

'Very well, I'll be soft on you. I won't cut off your head, but you can cut off your balls, and I'll let you enter my service as a real eunuch!'

'That's still a pretty tough deal, Majesty.'

That's as far as I'm prepared to go. If you refuse to kill that man, it proves that you're disloyal to me.'

'But I'm not!' cried Trinket. 'I'm loyal to you, loyal as anything! But I'm also true to my friends, and to my mother, and to my wives . . .'

Kang Xi laughed out loud.

'What a perfect human being you are! No, I'm afraid a decision is a decision, and first thing tomorrow morning I want to see a head' if it's not his, then it'll just have to be yours!'

Trinket could see that Kang Xi was adamant. He kowtowed once more and left. Just as he reached the door, Kang Xi called after him'

'I hope you're not thinking of trying to run away again!'

'No' replied Trinket. 'Not this time. I just need to go home and do some hard thinking. Somehow I have to find a way to please you and at the same time be true to my friends.'

'Very well, very well.' Kang Xi smiled. 'By the way, the Empress Dowager said she'd like to meet those wives of yours, and your three children. Bring them over for a visit, right away.'

Trinket the Debt'Collector

As he made his way out, Trinket thought to himself'

'Inviting them here for a "visit" is just another way of putting pressure on me. He'll hold them here as hostages, and then I'll never be able to get away!'

He was met by a smiling Dolong.

‘What excellent news! I mean the visit. I imagine Her Majesty has it in mind to present your family with substantial gifts!’

Trinket pumped his hands together somewhat absent-mindedly.

‘Another thing, my friend,’ continued Dolong. ‘I’ve managed to squeeze about three-quarters of the money out of that Zheng fellow. I’ve collected around two million six hundred thousand taels of his debt already. I’ll bring it round in a day or two.’

‘Well done!’ Trinket smiled. Anything unpleasant happening to Sir Zheng was a cause for celebration. He reflected bitterly on the fact that Whiskers’ present predicament was a direct consequence of Sir Zheng’s cowardly killing of the Helmsman.

‘Come,’ he said to Dolong, ‘let’s go to Sir Zheng’s residence together and see about the part of the debt he still hasn’t paid.’

Dolong was only too pleased to comply.

Since his surrender, Zheng Keshuang was, it is true, technically a duke. But his title was a nominal one, bestowed on a surrendering rebel, not a genuine honour

earned by meritorious service and accorded to one of the Emperor’s favourites (as had been the case with all of Trinket’s long string of titles over the years). Zheng’s ‘palace’ was correspondingly unprepossessing, when compared with

Trinket’s.

Trinket and Dolong sauntered in and sat down in the main hall. When Zheng finally appeared he was unrecognizable. It was only a couple of years since Trinket had last seen him. But in those two years he had aged thirty. He was a wreck of a man. He had been obliged to sell off most of his family possessions in order to meet the extortionate demands of Dolong and his men. On the present

occasion, he managed to scrape together some cash and a few valuables for Trinket. But he had nothing of any real value left to sell. He was terrified enough already, and when Trinket started taunting him afresh, he almost broke down. When he spoke, he trembled with fear. Trinket felt no pity for him.

‘You should have thought of this the day you killed my Shifu!’

A few moments later, Zheng was joined by the tall figure of his evil mentor and father-in-law, Feng Xifan, the Bloodless Sword. By contrast, Feng was as proud and fierce as ever. He tried to instil a little pride into Sir Zheng.

‘It was my idea to kill Chen Jinnan,’ he declared, addressing Trinket. ‘So if it’s vengeance you want, you’d better take it on me.’

This veiled threat was enough to spur Dolong into action. In seconds, a dozen of

his men had closed in on Feng. Threats were exchanged, but in the end Trinket took his leave of Sir Zheng with a parting shot’

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'I'll give you a fortnight to have some more cash sent over from Taiwan. I'll be back for it!'

The implication, that they were still in contact with the Taiwan Zhengs- something that, according to the terms of their amnesty, they were absolutely forbidden to do, on pain of death-elicited a final defiant protest from Feng.

A Small Favour

Trinket, Dolong, and the guards went on to Trinket's palace, where a fine feast was spread before them. Dolong sent for the four chests containing everything paid up so far by Sir Zheng, and they counted it out together.

'I must thank you all,' said Trinket, 'for helping me avenge the death of my Shifu, in the only way I can. The Emperor has forbidden me to harm Sir Zheng's person, so I must hurt him in whatever other way I can. He must be made to suffer! Some of this money will go to Taiwan, to build a memorial shrine for my Shifu. The rest, I want you all to divide amongst yourselves.'

Earnest protestations were forthcoming from Dolong, to which Trinket replied, candidly, that he had himself already accumulated more money than he knew what to do with. In the end Dolong acquiesced in Trinket's generosity, much to the delight of the soldiers, who celebrated by getting thoroughly drunk and playing cards and dice well into the night.

When everyone was in the highest of spirits, Trinket took Dolong aside and said to him'

'I've got one small favour to ask of you, my friend.'

'Anything! Anything at all-'

But Dolong seemed to remember one thing'

'-anything, that is, except something connected with that whiskered fellow, the one the Emperor has given me strictest orders to have executed tomorrow, under your supervision. Ask me to interfere with that, and I'm a dead man!'

That was of course the one favour that Trinket had wanted to ask.

‘Drat!’ he thought to himself. ‘Not even a million taels can save my friend’s life now, it seems.’

Trinket thought fast. He would have to approach this by a more devious route.

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‘No, no! Of course I wouldn’t dream of going against the Emperor’s orders! No, it’s not him’ it’s that foul turtle earlier today at snivelling Zheng’s place, that tall, nasty’looking creep, Feng Xifan.’

Dolong’s men overheard the name, and were all for going straight to Feng’s house and smashing the place up. Trinket had a more subtle plan.

‘I’d rather no one placed the blame for whatever happens on my friends in the guards. Let Zhang and Zhao go, and pretend to be acting on the orders of Colonel

Tai, the commander of the Vanguard. I want them to pay Feng Xifan a little visit, and then when they’ve got him down a side’s street, clap him in chains, blindfold him, gag him, and bring him here-but by a very roundabout route. Then

we’ll give him a good thumping, strip him bare, and send him over to the bed of Colonel Tai’s new concubine!’

There was great hilarity among the troops at Trinket’s excellent scenario for the rest of the night’s entertainment. And what made it even more amusing was that it would all be blamed on the hated Vanguard! The new Vanguard commander

(since the dismissal of the unfortunate Ajige) was a particular pet hate of Dolong’s. Dolong was absolutely delighted at the plan.

‘Old Tai’s terrified of his wife! He’s never dared bring home a single one of his concubines. He keeps this new one of his, his Number Eight, in a little love’nest in Sweet Water Lane. I can’t wait to see his face when he finds Bloodless Sword Feng naked in bed with her. He’ll have a fit!’

Dolong’s men removed their Palace Guard insignia, and set out on their mission.

Necessity, the Mother of Trinketian Invention

All went according to plan, and an hour or two later the trusty Captain Zhang

Kangnian returned to Trinket's palace with a shackled, blindfolded, and gagged Feng Xifan.

'In accordance with Colonel Tai's orders, I have brought in the criminal Feng Xifan for questioning' announced Zhang, carefully maintaining the charade that

it was the Vanguard who had arrested Feng. Trinket gave the silent sign-a tightly clenched fist-and the guards went to work'

'Colonel Tai's orders-the criminal Feng is to be tortured.' Prolonged punching and kicking followed, till Feng (despite

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his enormous strength) was more dead than alive. Blood was streaming from his

nose, and he had sustained massive internal injuries. Trinket began to feel a certain sense of pleasure. His Shifu's death had been at least partly avenged. He gestured to the men to stop short of actually killing him. Then he ordered his own guards to strip Feng (or what was left of him) naked, and wrap him (unconscious as he was) in a rug.

'And now, to the house of Colonel Tai's Eighth Concubine!'

Dolong rubbed his hands in glee.

'Why not strip the woman too, and tie them up together' suggested Zhao Qixian,

and the men roared their approval, all entering into the spirit of the thing. Dolong decided he wanted to be personally present, to witness the spectacle of old Tai's woman stripped naked.

Just as they were about to set off, one of Trinket's men came hurrying in. He was one of the group sent ahead to Sweet Water Lane (where Colonel Tai's Eighth

lived), to scout out the land. The latest news was that an entire regiment of country women had descended on the lady's residence, armed with all sorts of rustic implements, and had dragged her out into the street. Old Tai had come rushing over on horseback (one shoe on, one shoe off), to find that this whole event had been stage-managed by his jealous termagant of a wife.

Clearly now their original plan for Feng Xifan was going to have to be modified. For the guards' benefit, Trinket looked disappointed that it would no longer be possible to see the hated Feng humiliated in this comical and scandalous manner.

But in actual fact he had already (as was his wont-with Trinket, necessity was often the mother of invention) dreamt up an even better plan. It was now almost dawn, and that very morning Whiskers Mao was due to be executed. To find a way of saving his old friend was still in the forefront of Trinket's mind and, while racking his brains for an idea, it had occurred to him that many was the opera he had seen in which one person was substituted for another at the last moment, just before the executioner's blade fell. . . .

Trinket issued the necessary orders (and distributed the necessary largesse), and then went in to his personal apartment. It seemed lonely in there, without his wives and children, all of whom were already in the Palace, at the Empress Dowager's invitation. He stretched himself out fully clothed on his bed, and was soon sound asleep.

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First thing in the morning (a mere hour or two later), Trinket was woken up by a messenger bearing an Imperial Summons' Lord Wei, Duke of Luding, was to supervise the Execution of the Notorious Brigand Whiskers Mao Eighteen. When he went out to his reception hall shortly afterwards, he saw Oolong's men dragging in Whiskers, bruised and battered, his face caked in blood, after his night of 'questioning' in the Palace jail. 'So!' cried the indomitable Whiskers. 'You're to be my executioner as well as the Helmsman's! See how the little guttersnipe I hauled all the way from his mother's whore'house has grown up to be a spineless traitor and licker of Tartar arses!' Whiskers was transported, still cursing and swearing, to the Execution Ground on the site of the old Vegetable Market, in the southern part of the Inner City. Dolong followed on horseback, Trinket in a large horse'drawn carriage. Whiskers himself stood in an ox'drawn cart, his hands bound, and a wooden signboard tied

at his throat, inscribed with his name and the grim words FOR IMMEDIATE EXECUTION. The cart went via the Horse Market, where a large crowd had already gathered. Whiskers stood upright and shouted defiantly as the cart rolled down the street. The crowd cheered and shouted out noisy hurrahs, to the effect that the criminal was indeed a Brave Man and True! They reached the Execution Ground, which was at the crossroads formed by Horse Market Avenue and Martial Gate Street. Dolong had posted two thousand Palace Guards around the square, forewarned by the Emperor of the likelihood of a Triad attempt to rescue the condemned man. Whiskers stood in the middle of the open space and yelled at the top of his lungs' 'One day they'll die-the filthy Tartars who stole our land!' Trinket descended from his carriage and took his seat in the covered stand erected for the occasion at one end of the square. He invited Dolong to sit next to him. Dolong looked worried. The sooner we have this man's head off the better. He's saying the sort of things that are likely to inflame the crowd.' Trinket gave the order, and four men dragged Mao before the stand. He refused to kneel. Trinket turned to Dolong' 'You are absolutely sure that this is the man' 'Absolutely sure.' 'Very well. The criminal has been duly identified. Proceed immediately with the execution!'

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With a brush he drew the necessary red circle on the wooden signboard and threw it to the ground. One of the guards picked it up and Mao was dragged away again.

Trinket turned to Dolong.

'I've something here that might amuse you.'

He produced a wad of folded silken handkerchiefs from his inside pocket, and passed them to Dolong. The top one was decorated with a finely painted and very

titillating erotic scene, done in a most lifelike manner. Dolong's eyes lit up. He examined the next one, which depicted an extremely intriguing sexual posture.

'Hm . . . most interesting!' he commented, with a big grin on his face, and carried on leafing through the collection. The pictures became more and more 'interesting' the further down the pile he got' one man with two women, two men with three women. . . . Dolong was becoming unmistakably aroused.

'Where did you get these from' Any chance you could buy me a set''

'Keep them,' replied Trinket. They're a present.'

Dolong was effusive in his thanks, and folded his new treasure and put it away in his inside pocket. At that very moment there was a loud report as the three guns were fired to signal the commencement of the execution proper. A guard came hurrying up'

'It is time, sir.'

Trinket took Dolong by the hand, and walked out from the covered stand. Mao was now kneeling in the middle of the square, his head hung, his old defiant spirit apparently quite crushed. He almost looked unconscious. The drummer beat his drum. The brightly clad executioner raised his arm and down came the great blade. Off fell the head, and with his left foot the executioner kicked it free. The criminal's body tumbled forwards, as fresh blood pumped from the neck.

'His Majesty's orders have been carried out' said Dolong. 'I shall report to the Palace.'

Trinket sobbed to Dolong'

That man was very close to me, and I could do nothing to save him!'

He wiped his tears away with his sleeve, but continued sobbing. Dolong did his best to console him'

'At least you can try to give him a decent burial.'

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The reason Trinket had wiped away his tears with his sleeve was simple' the sleeve contained a quantity of fresh ginger, and the ginger had the effect of immediately stimulating tears and making his eyes convincingly red. Trinket was in fact silently laughing to himself, rejoicing in the success of his little scheme. He climbed back into his carriage and returned home, leaving some of his guards to wrap the dead body in a length of rush matting, place it in a coffin that had been procured especially, and nail it down securely.

When Trinket reached home, he stepped down from his carnage and went inside. The carriage itself carried straight on, making its way out through one of the main city gates and heading south towards the city of Yangzhou.

Aftermath of an Execution

A few days later, Dolong called on Trinket to report the 'strange disappearance' of Feng Xifan. Dolong himself suspected that Trinket had probably had him beaten to death, but he was glad enough to lay the blame at the door of Colonel Tai's Vanguard men.

What Dolong did not know was that the extraordinary coincidence of Colonel Tai's wife suddenly leading her army of women to Sweet Water Lane had in fact been no coincidence at all. Trinket had planned it all, in order to abort their original plan for Feng Xifan, whereby Feng would have ended up in bed with Tai's Eighth Concubine. He had thought of a far better plan' he had seen to it that a false compartment was built into the wall of the stand at the Execution Ground, and that the semi-conscious Feng was hidden there. Once Dolong had positively identified the condemned man, at the very moment when Mao was being dragged out

to be decapitated, Trinket had distracted Dolong with the pornographic hankies, while his carefully briefed men swapped Feng for Mao. It was Feng's head that rolled onto the square. And Mao had been smuggled out aboard Trinket's carriage,

gagged (who knows what he might have tried to shout otherwise'). The carriage then made post'haste towards the South, and only once they had crossed the Yellow River did they stop to explain to Mao what had really happened. He was

given three thousand taels and set free. He now knew that he owed his life to Trinket, and that Trinket was not a traitor or a bad man after all. He vowed never to abuse him publicly again.

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Safe House

Trinket found life extremely tedious as the Emperor's well-behaved loyal subject, constantly enjoying the good life, but unable to make any contact with his Triad friends for fear of alerting one of the Emperor's countless spies. One day he could stand it no longer. He disguised himself as a wealthy young man about town, and set off (with Doublet dressed as his valet) towards the Bridge of Heaven district, where soon enough they ran into Apothecary Xu with his medicine chest, sitting in a little local tea-house.

Trinket strolled in and sat down next to him.

'Brother Xu!'

Xu looked at him and jumped angrily to his feet, then strode immediately out of

the tea-house. Trinket followed him out and trailed him to a lonely side-street. Xu began criss-crossing his way through town, until he finally turned a corner (there was an old ginkgo tree growing there, Trinket noticed), walked down a narrow alley, and knocked on the door of the fifth house. Who should appear at the door but Fan Gang, the Triad with the big bass voice, whom Trinket remembered from the early days. This was clearly a new Triad safe house. Trinket hurried forward and greeted him.

'Brother Fan, are you keeping well?'

'I should count myself lucky to be still alive, and not to have been killed by you!'

He too stared angrily at Trinket. Then he glanced up and down the alley, and led

Trinket and Doublet quickly inside, closing the door firmly behind them. They crossed the courtyard, and entered the main hall. The Triads of the Green Wood

Lodge were assembled there' Li Lishi, Tertius Qi, Father Obscurus, Gao Yanchao,

Butcher Qian. Trinket was clearly the very last person they were expecting to see. After all, they held him responsible for the deaths of Helmsman Chen,

Brother Feng Jizhong, and now Whiskers Mao (who, though not officially a Triad, was a well-respected member of the River and Lake fraternity). Father Obscurus, never one to restrain his impulses, took hold of Trinket and shook him.

Trinket's first thought was to try and escape. But Apothecary Xu and Fan Gang had already blocked the way. It was Doublet who saved the situation by firing her Russian pistol at the ceiling, causing a lot of noise and a great cloud of smoke. Obscurus (whose fur-trader father had been shot by the Russians) started with fright

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and let go of Trinket. Doublet grabbed hold of Trinket and pointed the pistol at the Triads'

'Do you want to know the truth or don't you" she cried.

In the end, they agreed to hear her out. Doublet explained the entire sequence of events, beginning with how Trinket had saved them all from certain death the

night of the bombardment of his house; to how the Helmsman had been killed, not

by Trinket, but by Feng Xifan and Zheng Keshuang; to the treachery of Feng Jizhong, for which he had merited death; right down to the recent saving of Whiskers Mao from the executioner's sword.

Doublet was no storyteller, but this made her account all the more credible and convincing. Soon the Triads were on their knees and begging their Lodge Master's

forgiveness-foremost among them the impetuous Father Obscurus, who boxed himself

on the ears.

Next it was Trinket's turn to give his version of events, which was certainly a lot more entertaining than Doublet's, but not for that reason any more credible.

One way or another, the Triads were by now fully convinced of their Lodge Master's innocence, indeed of his heroism. A group of them huddled together conspiratorially and after a little while came forward with a request. They wanted to nominate Trinket as Chen Jinnan's successor, as the new Helmsman. They

went on to say that in order to convince the other Lodges of Trinket's true dedication to the cause, he would now have to perform a great deed. Trinket declined immediately. But nonetheless, he could not help being curious about

the

‘great deed’ they had in mind.

‘Lodge Master Wei,’ (the old title was back), ‘now that Satrap Wu’s rebellion has been put down, now that Taiwan has been taken by the Manchus, and the Mystic

Dragons have been crushed, the Manchus are looking more and more entrenched in

power.’

‘I know,’ said Trinket, secretly thinking to himself that with someone like Misty as Emperor, it was hardly surprising!

‘If things go on like this for much longer, the Ming Restoration will be forgotten. The people will accept the Manchus as their rightful sovereigns!’

‘I know,’ said Trinket again, secretly thinking to himself, ‘So much the better!’, which was a very un’Triad’like thought.

‘You are the only one who can stop this from happening! You must help us to sneak into the Palace and murder the Emperor!’

Trinket shook his head.

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‘In the first place, I can’t do it. Look what happened to Old Gui-you know what a fighter he was! In the second place, I won’t do it. The Emperor wanted me to wipe out the Triads and I refused, because I knew it would be wrong to betray my

friends. Now you want me to help you kill the Emperor, and I won’t do it, because it would be wrong to betray-’

He was about to call the Manchu Emperor his friend in front of the Triads, but stopped short. It was a good thing he did, or Father Obscurus would most probably have spontaneously combusted.

Take your time,’ said Fan Gang. This is a very big undertaking, and we quite understand if you need a day or two to think it over.’

‘Yes,’ Trinket hastened to reply. ‘Let me think about it.’

There was an awkward silence. They knew that Trinket’s heart was no longer in his role as Lodge Master, and he knew that they knew. They said their farewells.

Who’d ever choose to be Emperor’

Trinket returned to his Residence, and sat brooding in his study. At midday he

received a summons from the Palace. The Emperor wished to see him again.

‘What’s all this about Feng Xifan suddenly disappearing” asked Kang Xi.

Trinket wondered with some apprehension why the Emperor was asking him this question. How much did he already know’

‘Your Majesty, the evening Lord Feng disappeared, I was with Colonel Dolong and some of the guards. We stayed up late playing cards. I heard that Colonel Tai of the Vanguard Regiment had been looking for Lord Feng, and wondered what it was all about. Then the next thing I knew, Feng had vanished into thin air! You never know with these Taiwan rebels, when they surrender. They get up to all sorts of tricks. We should be on our guard. Allow me to investigate this matter, Majesty.’

Kang Xi smiled.

‘Very well. Find out as quickly as you can. I gave my solemn oath to these Taiwan people that no harm would come to them. It is extremely important that we find him!’

Trinket was in a cold sweat. Surely the Emperor could not have discovered that he was responsible for Feng’s death’

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‘By the way’ said Kang Xi, ‘did you have a good time at Gingko Lane this morning”

Trinket fell to his knees. He remembered noticing the gingko tree on the corner of the lane. So Kang Xi knew about the new Triad safe house. Obviously he knew everything.

‘Majesty, I would never betray you!’

Kang Xi sighed.

‘I know, Laurie, I know. They tried their utmost to persuade you, but you refused to turn against your old friend Misty. I know! But how long can you go on like this, with one foot in each camp”

‘Majesty, I even refused to let them make me the new Helmsman.’

‘I know that too.’ Kang Xi sighed again. He stared into space for several minutes, then spoke again, slowly’

‘I may not be one of the Great Sage Kings, but I do my best as an Emperor, I try to think of the well’being of my subjects. I certainly don’t think I’m any worse than most of those Ming Emperors. Do you honestly believe that the ordinary man

in the street would be any better off if the Triads had their way, and succeeded in bringing back the Ming”

In his own mind, Trinket was not sure. But he hastened to reply’

‘I know that life under the Mings was hard. I once heard a drum’ballad which went’

When the Ming kings ruled Ms land of ours, They made our life a living hell;
The

rich could always trade their land, The poor had but their sons to sell.

Majesty, you’re an excellent Emperor! Far better than any of the Mings! You’re as good as the Great Sage Onion! My word is my wand!’

Trinket was working some of his oldest lines.

‘Stand up!’ ordered Kang Xi. He himself began pacing up and down the study.

‘As you know, my father, the Emperor, was a Manchu. But my true mother, the Empress Kang, was by blood Chinese. Her family were Chinese Bannermen. They

weren’t really Manchus at all. So you see, I’m half Chinese myself. Why do they hate me so, the Chinese’ Why are they so desperate to have me dead”

‘Majesty, those rebels are not worth worrying about.’ Kang Xi stared at Trinket, and shook his head. He sighed yet again.

‘Who’d ever choose to be Emperor!’

He stared at Trinket, who was thinking to himself’ ;

‘Who’d ever choose to be me!’

‘Go on,’ said the Emperor. ‘Off you go!’

The Urchin Academician

Obviously the Emperor had a new informer in the ranks of the Triads. He had found someone to replace the late (and as far as Trinket was concerned unlamented) Brother Feng Jizhong. Trinket arrived back at his Residence, and racked his brains thinking who the new informer could be. But however hard he thought, he could not come up with a likely candidate.

It was all too much for him. He was being yanked up and down like a yo’yo, thrown like a ball from one side to the other, from the demands of the Emperor

to the demands of the Triads. It had simply gone on for too long.

If only he could turn the clock back, and revert to being a little urchin again, to fooling around all day and every day on the streets of Yangzhou. Go back to the good old days. If only he could simply cancel every title he had ever had, abolish every grand position he had ever held.

‘Mamma’s!’ he muttered to himself. ‘I won’t do this any more! I’ve had enough! This time Trinket’s going to quit, dammit!’

The minute he articulated these words, Trinket felt an indescribable sense of lightness suffuse his entire being, as if some huge weight had been suddenly lifted from his shoulders. He felt as if he could breathe again.

‘Yes! Time for Trinket to quit!’

This time he said it louder. It felt even better!

‘Quit! Quit! Quit being a big shot! Quit being a rebel! Quit being this, quit being that, and just be me!’

And then what? As Trinket began thinking what he would do once he had taken the plunge, once he had taken early retirement, one thing became crystal clear. If he ever wanted to be happy again, he’d better leave Peking and go back to Yangzhou.

Yes! The very thought of being back in dear old Yangzhou brought a big smile to his face. He sent for food and drink, and

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poured himself a big cup of wine as he started making plans in earnest.

‘Yangzhou ... But I’ll have to make sure that the Emperor can never find me, and that the Triads can’t put pressure on me. And what about the Princess! Would Her Highness Miss Hoity’Toity ever agree to move to the provinces and live with me in Yangzhou? Would she ever be willing to join me in a simple life of wine, women, and song? Not very likely, let’s face it. And what about all my other

darlings' They wouldn't be too happy about my opening up a whore'house down there. . . . Oh sod it! Who cares! I don't even med to open a whore'house. I've got plenty of money. I'll just take things one step at a time.'

That evening, his womenfolk (who had returned from their brief stay at the Palace) were amazed to find him in such excellent spirits, laughing and chattering away. He'd been so depressed of late. What could have happened to change his mood' They asked him straight out.

'Just you wait and see!' he replied mysteriously.

'Most probably you've found yourself another pretty girl to be Wife Number Eight!' muttered Green sarcastically.

There you go!' returned Trinket. 'All right. I wasn't going to tell you. But since you insist-'

All seven wives put down their chopsticks and sat there in silence waiting for him to continue.

'I've made a resolution!' announced Trinket, with a totally straight face. 'I've decided that it's a disgrace, after all these years, when I've been made a Duke of the Realm and a Grand Officer of State, and all that, that I still don't know how to read and write properly. So, starting from tomorrow, I'm going to turn over a new leaf. I'm going to be a student. You know' read books, write essays. I'm going to pass the exams, and one day I'll be Academician Wei!'

The seven Mrs Weis looked at each other and with one accord immediately burst out laughing. The one thing Trinket would never ever do (they knew him much too well for that!) was sit down and read a book-a single book! Never!

A Puddle tells All

The next morning Trinket had a visit from the Prefect of Shuntian Prefecture, the most senior of the local officials charged with maintaining law and order in Peking. The Prefect had received orders

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from the Palace to 'cooperate with Lord Wei' in ascertaining the whereabouts of

Feng Xifan. After a lot of long-winded sycophantic preliminaries, the Prefect informed Trinket that Feng's wife was pestering him for information about her husband, and that one of Feng's concubines, a young lady by the name of Orchid Scent, had meanwhile herself absconded, taking with her a sizeable haul of Feng family valuables.

The Feng affair was getting tricky, Trinket reflected. He regretted not having used a dose of Decomposing Powder to get rid of Feng Xifan's headless corpse. That corpse was still knocking around, and (separate item) the head to go with it. He would have to be very careful.

He cleared his throat noisily.

'If you want my opinion, most probably Feng is lying low in some tavern or whorehouse having the time of his life. Whoring and gambling. He's always been well known for that kind of thing.'

At that moment, one of Trinket's guards reported that Lady Feng's brother had called, with a large consignment of presents. Trinket gave instructions that the man was not to be received, and that they should refuse to accept the presents. The guard informed his master that the delegation from the Feng household had been far from polite, going so far as to insinuate that Lord Feng had been murdered and that Trinket himself was the most likely suspect. This guard had himself been one of the men entrusted with the business of 'switching' Feng for Whiskers, so he was in the know. And he also knew (as did Trinket) that people in general were well aware of the long-standing enmity between Trinket and Feng, which would have been motive enough for disposing of him. In everyone's mind, Trinket was the chief suspect.

Meanwhile, a plan was hatching in Trinket's ever fertile brain. He took the captain of his guard to one side, and whispered something in his ear.

'Come' he said, turning back to the Prefect. 'Let's you and I go and pay a little call on the Feng household.'

And so he and the Prefect (who had no idea what was going on) set off in a large palanquin carried by eight bearers, in the direction of Feng Xifan's Peking

residence.

Trinket's guards had already surrounded the place. Their captain reported'

'Sir, the sixty-nine members of the Feng household are all in the West Hall waiting to be called for questioning.'

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Trinket nodded. He set up his impromptu tribunal in the East Wing, with the Prefect seated in attendance below him. The first person to be brought before him was a woman of twenty-three or twenty-four, not a bad looking specimen. She

fell to her knees immediately, and in a rather coquettish tone of voice announced that she was Lord Feng's fifth concubine.

'Rise and be seated,' Trinket instructed her. 'Now tell me, darling, what's your name'

The Prefect was not too sure about the appropriateness of the word 'darling' in the present circumstances.

'Chrysanthemum Scent, sir,' answered the woman.

'Nice one!' laughed Trinket. 'I mean, nice name.' He sniffed the air around him.

'I thought I detected something sweet and chrysanthemum-like in the air.'

The Prefect thought to himself that Lord Wei was behaving more like a client in a whore-house than an investigating judge at a tribunal. But still. . .

'Tell me, sweetie,' (the poor Prefect's face!), 'I hear that one of your fellow concubines has gone missing recently'

'Yes, sir. Orchid Scent. She's a shameless hussy, that one.'

'And why haven't you upped and gone too, darling'

'Really!' muttered the Prefect silently to himself. This is going too far!

Chrysanthemum Scent, who was herself a little taken aback by the investigating judge's intimate tone of voice, instinctively responded with a cheeky, flirtatious little tilt of the eyebrows.

Trinket (after all it was probably going to be his last fling as an official, he reflected) was having the time of his life! Why, this was almost as much fun as being in a whore-house!

'Chrysanthemum, I wonder if you'd like to sing a song for me. It's called "The Eighteen-"'

But he thought better of it (the Prefect was definitely not the type to appreciate the none-too-subtle innuendo of his favourite song), and instead dismissed the woman with a generous gift of silver. As she was leaving, the captain of his guard came in and took up a position behind Trinket's seat. This was clearly some prearranged signal. After a few more perfunctory

interrogations, Trinket proposed a thorough search of the premises. When they reached one of the side bedrooms in the West Wing, the captain announced the discovery in a chest of a knife with traces of dried

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blood on it. Trinket handed the knife to the Prefect, who confirmed that it was indeed blood. One of the tribunal attendants identified it as the sort of knife used by stable'boys for cutting grass.

Trinket nodded. One of the guards came in with a pail of water, and sloshed it all over the floor of the room.

'What are you doing that for?' asked Trinket.

To see if the water forms a puddle anywhere. That way we'll know if the ground has been disturbed recently. It's a standard method used by detectives investigating a crime.'

Sure enough, the water formed a puddle immediately beneath the bed. They lifted the bedstead away, and began digging with pick and shovel. Eventually they uncovered a corpse-a headless, decomposing corpse, dressed in the clothes of a nobleman.

'Why,' cried the astonished Prefect, 'it's Lord Feng!'

'Are you sure?' said Trinket.

'Yes!' cried the Prefect. 'All we need to do now is find the head and we can make a positive identification.'

He turned to one of the attendants.

'Whose room is this'

They went to enquire. It turned out to be the bedroom of the concubine Orchid Scent, the one who had run away. And the young man who had run away with her was one of the grooms from the stables, who would have had easy access to such a knife.

The stables were searched and sure enough the severed head was found stuffed

under a feeding'trough. Lady Feng tearfully identified it as her husband's. The coroner came and delivered his verdict' that Feng Xifan had been murdered and then decapitated.

There was loud wailing throughout the Feng household, and word of the murder soon spread throughout Peking. The Prefect made out a warrant for the arrest of the stable'boy and the concubine, and was greatly relieved to have 'solved' the case.

The Way of the Prince

Armed with the Prefect's report, Trinket went to see Rang Xi.

'My congratulations!' exclaimed the Emperor. 'You are not only a great general, it seems you are a great detective as well!'

'I owe it all to Your Majesty! Any success of mine is entirely the result of your great kindness.'

'Even the substitution of one corpse for another''

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Trinket shuddered. He should have known. Nothing could be kept a secret from the Emperor. Kang Xi must have planted a spy in his household guard.

'Majesty! Forgive me!' Trinket fell to his knees. He could not think what else to say.

'Tamardy! Forget it! Why shouldn't you, anyway' At least this way the case is officially solved, and people won't ask any awkward questions.'

The instant Kang Xi uttered the 't' word, Trinket knew that all was well. He could not be really angry. He looked up and saw a smile on Kang Xi's face.

'Majesty,' he said, never slow to capitalize on an opportunity, 'may I dare ask you a favour' I would very much like to go to Yangzhou, to see my mother.'

‘Of course you must go! And you must bring her back with you to Peking. I shall make her a grand lady at Court. But before you go, there’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. It’s a new book I’ve just been reading, by a gentleman called Huang Zongxi. It’s called The Way of the Prince. It talks about the way to rule a country. It argues that the Emperor should be held accountable to his people. I absolutely agree with that. There have been too many tyrants on the Chinese throne. I know this man has been suspected of being an anti-Manchu element, and plenty of my people would like to get their hands on him. But I must say, I found what he had to say very interesting and sensible. There were some people who wanted to call him in and question him, but I told them to leave him alone. He is obviously a highly intelligent and thoughtful scholar. We need people like that!’

Trinket nodded, though quite why Kang Xi was telling him all this (when he was incapable of reading any book at all, let alone a serious treatise on the art of government written in high-flown classical Chinese), he had not the least idea.*

Having taken his leave of the Emperor, Trinket lost no time in packing his bags, assembling his family, and setting off for Yangzhou.

* Our esteemed author, in a note, has intimated that the still young Manchu Emperor was at this early point in his career already preoccupied with the need to win over the recalcitrant Chinese intelligentsia, of whom Huang was a prominent and widely admired member. He was merely using Trinket as a glorified message-boy, knowing full well that his comments would be relayed straight to the scholar himself.
Not Today, not Tomorrow, not Ever!

They made their way by land eastwards as far as Tongzhou, the northernmost point on the Grand Canal, and there they embarked on an official flotilla of barges going south down the canal. It was a long journey, taking them first through the big city of Tianjin, then to Linqing on the northern border of the province of Shandong, further south to the junction of the Grand Canal and the Yellow River,

and on to Jining in southern Shandong. They reached the small canal'side town of Siyang, some miles north of the county town of Huaiyin, in the northern part of Jiangsu Province, and moored their boats there for the night.

They spent the evening in high spirits, and had just finished their evening meal when the arrival was announced of the Four Gentlemen of the Resistance' Gu Yanwu, Zha Yihuang, Huang Zongxi, and Lii Liuliang. Trinket felt obliged to meet them, though he remembered finding their company exceedingly boring, and gave instructions that they were to be welcomed and served tea in the main cabin, while he went off to change into something more formal.

Gu, Zha, and Huang he had last seen in Yangzhou, when they were arrested by the obnoxious Prefect Wu Zhirong. On that occasion he had saved their lives. Lii he had never met before. As he entered the formal 'reception cabin' of the main barge, he saw that Lii was accompanied by two young men in their early twenties, who turned out to be his sons.

Gu Yanwu came straight to the point. There was an important matter they wished to discuss with Lodge Master Wei, but the official mooring at Siyang was not the place for such a discussion to take place. It was far too dangerous. There were too many eyes and ears. Could they prevail upon him to move a few miles downstream, to a more secluded spot'

Trinket agreed to this and explained his decision to the crew of the boat by saying that he and his distinguished scholar'friends were in the mood for a night of moon'watching and poetry'writing, and therefore needed a quieter and more romantic location. They set off in two boats, his womenfolk following in the second boat. (Su Quan had insisted that they be close at hand, in case anything untoward occurred.)

Once they were well and truly alone, Gu began by thanking Trinket once more for coming to their rescue in Yangzhou. They

It was Zha who spoke next.

'None of us believes the slanderous rumours about you, that you killed the Helmsman. We know you better than that. And we are expecting Great Things

of you
now!’

‘Great Things’ thought Trinket to himself. ‘Oh no! Here we go again! Please Lodge Master Wei, will you go and bump off the Emperor for us’-I’d better squash that idea as quickly as possible!’

‘You’re much too kind in your praise,’ he protested. ‘There’s really no need. It was nothing. As a matter of fact, I’ve finally decided that the time has come for me to retire. I was never much good at doing anything, I’m afraid, let alone Great Things!’

They all laughed. Understandably the gentlemen found the notion of this young whippersnapper ‘retiring’ rather comic.

Trinket had other surprises in store for them. First of all, on the subject of Huang Zongxi’s book, *The Way of the Prince*’

‘Oh, by the way, Mr Huang, I thought you might be interested to know that the Emperor’s just finished reading your new book.’

Startled glances were exchanged. Did this indicate that another Literary Inquisition (or to put it more bluntly, another purge) was on its way, like the one several years earlier that had started with the Ming History and had ended up wiping out several families’ Trinket hastened to reassure them.

‘As a matter of fact, the Emperor was deeply impressed by your book. He told me

so. He found it "very interesting and sensible". He said to me, "We need people like that!" And he’s told "them" to keep their hands off you!’

There were now expressions of relief and surprise.

‘All in all, I’ve decided that the Manchu Emperor is rather a good Emperor,’ continued Trinket. ‘Come to think of it, which of those Ming Emperors that we’re

supposed to be so keen to restore, was actually as good as him’ Name one. I can’t think of one myself.’

The Four Gentlemen looked at one another a trifle sheepishly. This was certainly

not the sort of thing one said in Resistance circles; but there was something disarming about Trinket’s naivety in matters political, which had the effect of making them unusually honest themselves. And if they once started to be honest,

they knew that Trinket was, in a sense, absolutely right. The Ming Imperial House had, for the most part, produced a string of disastrous rulers’ cruel, debauched, foolish, incompetent. In all sincerity they were obliged to nod their agreement with Trinket’s startling (and politically incorrect) conclusion. Kang Xi was not so bad after all.

‘So what I say is, the Emperor’s OK, and the Triads are OK. He wants me to wipe

out the Triads, and I said I won't. They want me to kill him, and I said I won't. The end result is, everyone's got it in for me. So what I say is, time for Trink to quit! Time to retire!

'Lodge Master Wei, we did not come here to ask you to kill the Emperor,' said Gu.

'Oh good!' cried Trinket. 'I'll agree to just about anything else! What do you want then, gentlemen?'

Gu went to the cabin window and looked out into the night. Having reassured himself that they were alone, he walked back to Trinket.

'We don't want you to kill the Emperor,' he said slowly and meaningfully. 'We want you to be the Emperor!'

There was a sudden crashing sound as the teacup Trinket had been holding in his hand fell to the ground and smashed into a dozen pieces.

'You . . . you're joking, aren't you?'

'We are certainly not joking!' protested Zha Yihuang. 'We have been debating this among ourselves for months now. Our cause is sinking fast into decline. People are beginning to forget about the Ming altogether. One reason, as you so rightly said just now, is that there were palpable excesses under the Ming regime, there were terrible crimes perpetrated against the people by certain Ming Emperors and their cohorts. But nothing will ever change the fact that the Manchus invaded our country, humiliated our people, and made us wear their pigtailed hats! And they are not Chinese, and never will be, when all is said and done. You are the man to save our cause, Lodge Master Wei! If you raise the standard of revolt and set yourself up as the new Emperor, the people will surely follow!'

Trinket thought he must be dreaming. He waved his hand from one side to the other.

'No! It's just not for me. I could never be Emperor. Not me! Never!'

'We're counting on you!' said old Gu. 'The Chinese people need you!'

'Yes,' added Lii. 'With you at their head, the Chinese people will surely be victorious and send the Manchu invaders packing once and for all!'

Trinket's heart was racing. The thought had never occurred to him, not in his wildest dreams. He stared into space for a moment. Then'

'But I'm just a street kid!' he said. 'I was born in a whorehouse. The only things I'm any good at are swearing and gambling! I don't even make a convincing general! I could never pull off being an Emperor! Never! It's not in my stars! And anyway, a fortuneteller once told me' if I was ever Emperor, I wouldn't last three days!'

Lii laughed politely. This was just the Lodge Master talking silly again. Besides, plenty of bad-mouthed, gambling ragamuffins had succeeded in becoming Emperors in China's past. Take the founder of the Han dynasty, for a start.

Trinket kept waving away the idea.

'Gentlemen, we are friends, and what I am saying is the truth. Believe me!'

He patted himself on the head.

Tamardy! I'd like to live another ten years! I'd like to eat a few more good meals, watch a few more good plays, look at a few more pretty girls, listen to a few more storytellers and ballad-singers-that's what I'd like to use this head of mine for! That's what I'd like to use these eyes and ears for! And if I let myself be Emperor, I'd lose it all! I know (and you know) that being Emperor is no fun at all! There's always something happening somewhere- in Taiwan, in Yunnan-a rebellion, a famine, you name it, the Emperor's got to fix it! No thank you! It's not a job I fancy at all. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever! And that's final!'

He had allowed himself to get quite heated. The Four Gentlemen exchanged glances' there was clearly no hope. Trinket was not a potential occupant of the Dragon Throne.

Well,' said Gu, after a long pause, 'we don't need to reach a final decision tonight-'

Suddenly they heard the sound of horses' hooves galloping up along the bank. In the stillness of the night, the sound carried loud and clear.

A Man can only be Who He Is

‘What are men on horseback doing here in the middle of the night’ asked Huang Zongxi.

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‘Could they be Imperial troops on night patrol’ ventured Lii.

‘Not making that sort of racket!’ said Zha, shaking his head. ‘I’ll wager they’re some River and Lake brigade or other.’

Now there were horses on the other bank too. The second boat (containing Trinket’s womenfolk) pulled closer, and both Su Quan and Doublet leapt on board.

‘I don’t like the look of these people!’ cried Su Quan. ‘I think we should all stick together.’

Trinket told her to bring all the women on board. The Four Gentlemen were not

really the womanizing type, he added, so females would be safe enough in their company. (Trinket seemed to be showing strange signs of acquiring Confucian scruples about the separation of the sexes, now that he was a [several times over] married man.) This last remark of his provoked an outburst of indignation

from the four men, and they clambered up on deck and withdrew to a discrete distance. The Princess and the others came on board.

They heard bamboo whistles blowing from both banks.

‘Triad whistles!’ cried Trinket.

Then a voice called out’

Trinket Wei! Come forward!’

Tamardy!’ muttered Trinket. ‘Seems I’m not Lodge Master any more, just plain Trinket Wei.’

Su Quan held him back.

‘Wait till I’ve found out what’s going on. I don’t like the look of this.’

She stepped out on to the deck.

‘Which of you is asking for Lord Wei’

She saw rows of mounted Triads drawn up in the dark on both banks, their heads wrapped in blue turbans, their swords drawn.

‘We are Triad Brothers!’ cried the leader of the group on the west bank.

Su Quan whispered to Trinket ‘Try out one of the Triad secret verses on them.’

Trinket stood in the doorway of the cabin and called out

When the Five Fathers divided a verse of poetry, No one knew that the heroes had it on their person.

‘Those are some of the old lines!’ cried the man contemptuously. ‘They mean nothing! Since Trinket Wei betrayed our cause and went over to the enemy, since

he killed his own Shifu, our beloved Helmsman, all the old secret verses and passwords have been changed!’

‘And who are you?’ cried Trinket.

‘Are you Trinket Wei?’ returned the other.

‘I am.’

‘Then I can reveal my own identity. My name is Shu, from the Transformation Lodge of Zhejiang.’

‘Brother Shu, this is all a big misunderstanding. Is your own Lodge Master Li here?’

‘Lodge Master Li is dead!’ cried the man bitterly. ‘He died in a fit of rage at your treachery!’

Cries were coming from both banks.

‘Kill him! Chop him up! Vengeance for the Helmsman! Vengeance for Lodge Master

Li!’

Various projectiles started raining down onto the boat. Gu and the other gentlemen put their Confucian scruples aside and went hurrying back into the cabin. Now darts and arrows were let loose at the boat, and finally a flaming arrow set the cabin roof on fire. Soon the whole boat was ablaze.

Trinket turned to Su Quan.

‘We must think of a way to stop this!’

Su Quan had an idea.

‘Mr Gu Yanwu is here with us!’ she cried, thinking that Gu was such a widely respected figure, his presence might bring a halt to the attack. But her voice was completely lost in the pandemonium.

‘Come on!’ cried Trinket to his womenfolk, ‘let’s all shout his name together!’
And they did.

‘Mister-GU-YAN-WU-is on board the boat with us!’

First some of the Triad shouting abated; then the darts stopped coming, and finally the man named Shu came forward and asked, somewhat incredulously ‘Is Mr Gu really on the boat with you?’

The next thing they knew, their still burning boat was being pulled to the bank, and they were all being helped onto dry land. Gu was greeted with the deepest respect, and profoundest apologies.

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An older Triad Brother came forward and bowed to him’

‘Sir, we beg you to forgive us for our rudeness and lack of respect!’

It was Trinket who replied’

‘I should think so too! Your behaviour was outrageous!’

‘I was talking to Mr Gu!’ snapped the man. ‘Not to you, you vile scum!’

The next second he had taken hold of Trinket, and was only stopped from harming

him by Su Quan, who stepped smartly forward and blocked him with her left palm,

then gripped his wrist and twisted it, pushing him forcefully backwards. The old

man quite lost his balance. Two other Triads rushed to his aid.

‘Steady!’ cried Gu. ‘Steady now! Let us not resort to violence!’

Gu took Shu aside, and began explaining things to him. It was only a matter of minutes before Shu came over to apologize to Trinket.

‘Don’t worry!’ said Trinket. ‘I was never in any real danger. Look!’

And he proceeded to execute one of the Hundred Flights escape routines he was so

brilliant at, tumbling, leaping, slithering through the assembled Triad ranks, vaulting onto a horse, galloping off down the bank, vaulting back onto the ground, and somehow (no one could tell how) finding himself back exactly where

he had been in the first place.

‘See’

The men were speechless with wonder at this extraordinary performance.

Soon after, they made their farewells and prepared to leave; Triads and horses were gone, as silently and stealthily as they had arrived. The older Triad had a parting word of advice for Trinket.

‘Lodge Master Wei, when you go home, ask your mother to tell you if you’re really Chinese, or Manchu. A man can only be who he is. You must never forget your ancestors!’

Gu and his friends also took their leave.

The boat still blazed on the water.

The Murdering of Trinket

Trinket stood there on the bank in a complete daze. The autumn wind soughed through the trees. Slowly the fire burnt itself out.

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‘What am I to do’ he mumbled.

‘We still have the other boat,’ said the ever resourceful Su Quan. ‘Let’s go back to Siyang first, and then make plans.’

‘I like that old man’s advice,’ said Trinket. ‘I think I’ll do that. I’ll go and ask my mum if I’m really Chinese or Manchu.’

‘Come on, Trinket’ put in Su Quan. ‘Don’t take what that silly old man said seriously. Let’s get going.’

But Trinket just stood there stock’still. Suddenly he yelled at the top of his voice’

‘That’s it! Enough’s enough! I’m quitting! I’ve had enough!’

His cry woke the baby girl, Little Double, who started bawling her head off.

Su Quan could tell that Trinket was genuinely distraught.

‘You’re quite right!’ she said. ‘Why should you go on’ There’s no future in it! There’s no fun in it! I agree with you. We all do. So go ahead. Just quit!’

Trinket beamed at her.

‘Do you mean it’ Do you all want me to quit’

Six of them nodded’ Su Quan, Fang Yi, Green, Zeng Rou, the Little Countess,

and

Doublet. The Princess was the only one not to go along with them.

‘Why can’t you wait a little longer’ she said, ‘till you’re a proper Prince’

Then you can retire. Anyway, I don’t think my brother will let you do it!’

‘Who cares what the Emperor says! I don’t any more. He’s just one of my brothers’in’law. If he doesn’t like it, he can lump it. If it comes to that, I won’t even be his "brother’in’law" any more!’

The Princess was smart enough to realize what that meant. She wanted to remain

Mrs Wei, and opted for compromise.

So now all seven of them were in agreement with Trinket’s retirement plan. He was a happy man at last.

‘They set fire to our boat’ he announced, ‘and now it’s completely burnt out.

What could be better! There’s no trace of us left. The local officials can report that we’ve been burned to death by bandits. And my "brother’in’law" can go ahead and forget I ever existed!’

They all clapped and cheered-except for the Princess, who remained silent.

So now they made their plans. Three of them (Trinket, the Princess, and Doublet)

would go ahead, in disguise, to the county

town of Huaiyin, and wait at an inn. Su Quan would set off with Fang Yi, Green,

the Little Countess, and Zeng Rou, back to Siyang, and collect whatever money and other necessary items they could from the remaining boats of their flotilla. They were to spread the rumour that Trinket’s boat had been attacked and set on

fire, and that everyone in it had burned to death.

One problem remained’ the crew of the boat that had burned. The men had seen all

too clearly that neither Trinket nor any of his wives had perished. They were still standing there trembling on the bank. Su Quan was for killing them all, but the Little Countess pleaded for them to be spared.

‘Very well,’ said Su Quan softly. ‘In that case, I’ll just have to pretend to kill Trinket myself.’

She drew her sword, and chased Trinket into the neighbouring forest. Presently they heard a blood’curdling cry from amongst the trees’

‘Help! Help! Heeeee-’

It was Trinket's voice, so convincing in its death agony that the Little Countess and Doublet looked at one another in alarm.

Su Quan emerged from the trees, having done the terrible 'deed', brandishing her sword ferociously. The boatmen duly took to their heels, terrified out of their wits, to report the untimely death of Lord Wei.

Doublet was still not sure. She went running into the forest. There she found Trinket, lying on the ground, motionless.

'Master!' she cried. Still no sign of movement. She was beside herself. She reached out towards him, when suddenly he opened his arms and threw them tightly round her.

This most definitely calls for a celebration!' he cried, and kissed her.

The eight of them (and the children) proceeded according to their plan, all travelling in disguise, until they finally reached the city of Yangzhou. There they met up with Trinket's mother, Spring Fragrance, who was persuaded to join them, and the whole party set off for the deep south-west and the scenic province of Yunnan. They took new names, and settled down in the delightful county town of Dali. Trinket was able to pass the rest of his days in idle pleasure, as he had always wanted to.

He had only one nagging regret. Somewhere deep beneath the hill behind Fort Albazin, at the spot on the secret map marked

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with those two strange signs depicting a Deer and a Cauldron, somewhere deep beneath Mount Luding, he knew there was still a fabulous buried treasure waiting to be dug up. But to dig it up would mean tampering with the Dragon Line that nourished the destiny of the Manchu Imperial House. And Kang Xi was still his friend . . .

Just like Yours!

One brief moment has been recorded from the last hours before Trinket finally disappeared into retirement. It happened on the very day that he arrived in

Yangzhou, with all of his womenfolk in tow. He went straight to the House of Vernal Delights to find his mother, who was overjoyed to see her son again. And

when she beheld his seven beautiful wives, she thought to herself

‘Well well, the little rake’s certainly got an eye for women! He really ought to open a brothel here in Yangzhou-he’d do well for himself, with an eye like that!’

Trinket, with no further ado, drew her aside into her chamber and asked her a question he’d been saving up for a very long time, a question that had been brought again to the forefront of his mind as he had stood watching the burning

boat near Siyang. The old Triad’s words were still ringing in his ears’ ‘A man can only be who he is.’ And who was Trinket’

‘Mum, tell me, who really was my dad’

Spring Fragrance Wei looked him straight in the eye.

‘How the hell should I know’

Trinket frowned.

‘No seriously, I mean, when I was in your belly-who’d you been doing it with’

‘I was a beautiful woman in those days, my boy. I had lots of different customers every day-I couldn’t possibly work out who it was!’

‘Were they all of them Chinese’

‘Well, let me see now, I had Chinese, I had Manchus, Mongols-’

‘No, I mean, did you ever have any foreign devils’

‘What kind of shameless slut do you take me for!’ came the angry retort. ‘Do it with one of them! With a big nose’ Not on your life!! Hot’piece popping tamardy!

If a single one of those great hairy

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Russians, or red’haired Dutch devils, had ever tried sneaking in here, I’d have booted them straight out the door!’

Trinket heaved a sigh of relief. At least that possibility had been ruled out.

His mother looked up. There was a twinkle in her eye. She seemed to have remembered something.

‘Wait a minute, though. I do recall, around that time, having a regular who was a Muslim. Very good’looking fellow he was, too. I sometimes used to say to myself, now my little Trinket’s got a fine nose, just like his-’

‘So you had Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims-what about Tibetans’ Did

you ever
have a Tibetan” asked Trinket.

A glow of pleasurable recollection lit up his mother’s face.

‘Why, now that you mention it, yes, of course I did! There was this one Tibetan Lama. Every time he came to bed he’d start chanting his sutra. And all the time he chanted he’d stare at me with this really dirty look. His eyes’d be just about popping out of his head. Saucy pair of eyes they were too-just like yours!’

EPILOQUE

The Never’Ending Quest

Historians of later times all tell of the Emperor Kang Xi’s Six Tours of the South, and claim that the main purpose of these visits was to inspect the state of local river conservation. But how do they account for the fact that the first of these tours took place the very year Trinket (that is to say, the Duke of Luding) disappeared’ And if it was just river conservation that he was inspecting, why go to Hangzhou’ And why spend so long each time in Yangzhou’ And

why send so many of his personal guards to search every brothel, every gambling

den, every tea’house, every bar-for Trinket’ And why, when this search proved fruitless, as it always did, was the Emperor always so down in the dumps’

The researches of certain other scholars (specialists in literature, and in that most trivial branch of literature known as fiction) have meanwhile established beyond any shadow of a doubt that the grandfather of Cao Xueqin, the author of

China’s most famous novel The Story of the Stone, was once a member of the Imperial Guard, and moreover actually served under Trinket’s command. As it turns out, Kang Xi later appointed this very man, whose name was Cao Yin, to be

Imperial Textile Commissioner in Suzhou and Nanking, and ordered him to take up

semi’permanent residence in the happy playground of the South. Alas, these eminent scholars, intent as they are on reconstructing the family history of China’s greatest novelist, do not seem to have understood the real reason Kang Xi had for making this appointment. We, of course, know better’ it was so that his man could be permanently on the spot to continue the never’ending quest for

Trinket.